

NAME

C101 - How you can help save our democracy

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DURATION

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9 SPEAKERS

Rebecca Lavoie

Nick Capodice

Hannah McCarthy

Raj Vinnakota

JFK Archive

Christina Phillips

Mustafa Santiago

Kim Whele

Cheryl Cook-Kallio

START OF TRANSCRIPT**[00:00:00] Rebecca Lavoie**

This episode of Civics 101 was recorded in front of a live audience. For more information on the event, check out our show notes.

[00:00:07] Nick Capodice

And we are going to begin. And to begin, I have to invite onto the stage the person without whom Civics 101 would not exist. Hannah McCarthy came to New Hampshire Public Radio after a career as a reporter for New York magazine. Oh, there she is. You came out before the introduction was done. Hannah worked at death, Sex and Money at WNYC. We have co-hosted the show since 2018. She is the best colleague I've had in my entire life. Everything I can do, she can do better. Backwards and heels. Which to my chagrin, Ginger Rogers never actually said no. Yeah. So, ladies and gentlemen, it's true. I didn't know it either until I started writing this thing. Hannah McCarthy, the creator of today's episode. And should we get going?

[00:00:56] Hannah McCarthy

I think so, but there's someone else we need out here.

[00:00:58] Nick Capodice

There certainly is. The most, you know, the most important part for today? Our senior producer, Christina Phillips. Ladies and gentlemen. Oh, yes. Yes yes yes, yes.

[00:01:11] Hannah McCarthy

Shall we begin? You good? Christina. Yeah. Hello, everyone. I am Hannah McCarthy. As Nick mentioned.

[00:01:27] Nick Capodice

I'm Nick Capodice. And before we go a step further, I want everyone to know that what you're going to see and hear today is not a pre-produced display of incredibly realistic holograms. We are, in fact, flesh and blood corpos standing on the stage. And what is going to happen is happening the moment it happens and not a moment before.

[00:01:50] Hannah McCarthy

I'm Hannah McCarthy.

[00:01:51] Nick Capodice

I'm Nick Capodice.

[00:01:52] Hannah McCarthy

And this is Civics 101. You are listening to it. And for the first time ever seeing it. Thank you for being here, I welcome you. You know, Nick, they say that you should do this thing when you're, like, conceiving of a podcast. You're supposed to sort of envision the person that you're making the podcast for. So, like, what do they look like? Yeah. You know, what do they eat for dinner? What do they do for fun? What kind of music do they listen to? What kind of clothes do they wear? Can you picture someone?

[00:02:21] Nick Capodice

Yeah, yeah, I always do. When I write episodes I like, the person I'm picturing is usually wearing, like, a floral print shirt with, like, a gray cardigan and a headband. And maybe her parents were deeply involved in politics, and she's fond of listening to show tunes. That's my, like, fantasy audience member yeah, when I'm talking.

[00:02:38] Hannah McCarthy

To someone, I feel like I can see them right now. Yeah, like I can see it, you know? I can. I can really see.

[00:02:44] Nick Capodice

The imagination is a powerful thing.

[00:02:45] Hannah McCarthy

Yeah. So this is actually relevant to today's show because this episode is all about you, the listener, the audience member. It's about you as you are right now, a human being in today's America, a person who has the capacity for something that could very well alter the course of history, both yours and your community.

[00:03:13] Nick Capodice

Hey, have you heard of the phrase overpromise and under-deliver?

[00:03:17] Hannah McCarthy

Um, no, I never have. I'm a millennial, and I studied theater in southern Vermont, so I was really taught to dream.

[00:03:25] Nick Capodice

Yeah I was nottaught to dream. Yeah. All right, so what are we doing here today, though? Like, what are you getting at?

[00:03:29] Hannah McCarthy

What I'm getting at is civics.

[00:03:32] Nick Capodice

All right.

[00:03:32] Hannah McCarthy

Shocker I know. I like to keep people on their toes.

[00:03:36] Nick Capodice

I'm going to hear you out. But this is interesting because this is something we never actually do on the show. We have never defined civics. It's the name of our show. But, like, what does it mean?

[00:03:47] Raj Vinnakota

Civics, at its core, is about educating people so that we can learn how to govern ourselves.

[00:03:55] Hannah McCarthy

That was Raj Vinnakota. He's the president of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation. Also, importantly, Raj spends his days looking at how civic education works in America, and it's his job to figure out how to make it better.

[00:04:12] Raj Vinnakota

This is about making sure that we, as a citizenry, can engage in the most important act in our society self-government. Some people call it democracy, other people call it a republic. Other people call it a constitutional democracy at its core. It's about doing the work of deciding, of coming to consensus and engaging in our communities for the benefit of all.

[00:04:40] Nick Capodice

Raj said self-government? Yeah. Do we? Self-governance. We know we are governed by the government. That is not self-governance.

[00:04:51] Hannah McCarthy

Is it, Nick? That is a really good question.

[00:04:53] Nick Capodice

Well, you wrote it, Hannah.

[00:04:54] Hannah McCarthy

I did. Um, so 11 score. And 17 years ago, a bunch of guys got together and wrote the union's second constitution.

[00:05:06] Nick Capodice

What do you mean by the second constitution?

[00:05:09] Hannah McCarthy

The first one did not work out very well. The Articles of Confederation. Have we all heard of that? The Articles of Confederation. Nick, why didn't the articles work out?

[00:05:19] Nick Capodice

I actually knew this one. Lots of reasons. Many of you know them here in the room. Anybody in the great state of New Hampshire may be interested in this one. Number one, the Articles of Confederation made taxes voluntary, and.

[00:05:34] Hannah McCarthy

Naturally, everyone volunteered to pay their taxes.

[00:05:37] Nick Capodice

Hilarious. They didn't at all. So without taxes, the federal government couldn't fund itself or pay back the enormous debt to the European countries who helped us out during the Revolutionary War. Also, there was no uniform currency under the Articles of Confederation, so the federal government had its own money and the states had their own money. So trade was really hard. Can you just picture that?

[00:06:00] Hannah McCarthy

Yeah.

[00:06:01] Nick Capodice

Oh, I've seen the notes. They're beautiful. Oh, yeah. Like Rhode Island's can't go back to that. Go back to that.

[00:06:07] Hannah McCarthy

Um, and, you know, it wasn't just really hard within this country, right? It was really hard trading with other countries when we have all of these forms of currency, which makes it hard to establish yourself as a country on planet Earth.

[00:06:20] Nick Capodice

Yeah. And states, individual states had their own individual foreign policy. What a mess. If you think the Constitution is hard to amend right now, and it's very hard and very hard to do, try amending it with the articles rules. It needed unanimous state consent to amend the articles. And when it came to laws like if you had a federal law, nine out of 13 states had to agree to it for it to be a law to be passed. Good luck with that.

[00:06:45] Hannah McCarthy

So basically what we're describing is an original form of government with a super weak central Government that left most of the power up to the states. Why did we do that?

[00:06:57] Nick Capodice

Why did we have a super weak central government? We had been burned pretty badly before. Yeah.

[00:07:04] Hannah McCarthy

Go on.

[00:07:06] Nick Capodice

If you all remember where we came from, we were 13 British colonies and we were fed up. So we fought a war. And that war was so we didn't have to have a king. And we're going to make sure that it never happens again.

[00:07:20] Hannah McCarthy

You know what that sounds like, Nick? What's it sound.

[00:07:22] Nick Capodice

Like? Mccarthy.

[00:07:23] Hannah McCarthy

It sounds like we wanted to govern ourselves.

[00:07:27] Nick Capodice

All right. Okay. Self-governance. All right. Okay, I'll give you that one. Except we found out when you leave everything pretty much up to the states, they just act like their own little countries. And that kind of diminishes the whole idea of the union, the united part of the United States of America.

[00:07:43] Hannah McCarthy

Still, the framers then staged a coup when they realized their mistake. They rewrote the Constitution kind of in secret self-governance, though that was still paramount representation. They debated that for a long, long, long, long time. The big thing about our government would still be the will of the people. So yes, the federal government would be more powerful under this new constitution, but states would still get to pick who got that power and it would not be a king.

[00:08:17] Nick Capodice

So that's what you mean when you're talking about self-government under the current constitution?

[00:08:22] Hannah McCarthy

That is what I mean. And the absolutely crucial piece of that puzzle, of course, is all of you. You are tasked with deciding that is Raj, the man who we heard from earlier. That is Raj's point. So what is civics? Civics is in part, understanding what it means to live in a precious and quite precarious state of self-governance. How do you do that? Raj breaks it down into three steps.

[00:08:53] Raj Vinnakota

Okay, so what does that require us to do or said differently? What is an effective citizen? Well, back in 2019, I helped to lead a project that actually focused on this issue, and we came to a consensus definition of what it means to be an effective and engaged citizen. And there are three categories to this. The first is that effective citizens are civically well-informed. What does that mean? It means that you understand how your government functions, the historical underpinnings for why we got to where we are. You get your information from multiple and diverse sources, and you have the skills to be able to discern, differentiate among fact, opinion, misinformation and disinformation.

[00:09:37] Nick Capodice

That is no short order. We have talked about this on our show. A lot of times it's difficult to combat mis and disinformation. It takes a lot of work. So what are the other two categories?

[00:09:48] Raj Vinnakota

The second category is that you are productively engaged for the common good. The obvious part of this category is, of course, you vote. In addition to that, however, you also engage in your community. You volunteer, you mentor, you run for office, and then finally, you have the skills to be able to engage in thoughtful civil discourse, even with people with whom you don't agree.

[00:10:10] Hannah McCarthy

So what Raj means is you show up.

[00:10:13] Nick Capodice

Yeah, but I do want to come back to the civil discourse thing. Oh. We're gonna. Okay. Because what does that even mean? Right? That is one of the most commonly used phrases, and it's grown more and more every year that I live in this world. It's used more and more. What is civil discourse? But I have to start with saying this. These things that Raj is mentioning, they are not easy.

[00:10:35] Hannah McCarthy

It's interesting that you say that because I feel like I remember someone saying that, you know, we Americans, we don't do things because they're easy.

[00:10:43] JFK Archive

But because they are hard.

[00:10:46] Nick Capodice

Well, that was the moon, Hannah.

[00:10:48] Hannah McCarthy

And other things.

[00:10:48] JFK Archive

And do the other things.

[00:10:51] Nick Capodice

Fair enough.

[00:10:52] Hannah McCarthy

You know what, Nick? Though? You are right. Former President John F Kennedy was mostly talking about the moon, and so civic engagement should be a breeze in comparison to the moon. Okay, so there's one last step, right? Raj has a third step.

[00:11:10] Raj Vinnakota

The third and final category is that you're committed to democracy in America. And this commitment is based upon notions of trust. You trust your government. You trust your institutions. You trust your neighbor. Even if he or she did not necessarily vote the same way that you did. And then you have a commitment and a hope about the direction of the country. So as you can see, this is a much broader definition of what an effective citizen is. It's not simply about understanding the Constitution. It's not simply about voting. But it's much more than that. It is literally working and governing ourselves and having the knowledge, skills and capacity to do so.

[00:11:52] Nick Capodice

Do you want to get back to what he said about trust? And I'm serious here. Anybody in this room who has been neglected by another person or another institution knows how difficult that trust is.

[00:12:03] Hannah McCarthy

Yeah. So I actually I agree with that. I think the trust element is a little bit closer to the moon in terms of how achievable, but we have flags that say that we can get there. American flags on the moon I'm talking about American flags on the moon. It's like a metaphor. Oh, yeah, I got you. Okay, so that's what civics is. Civics is about you. All of you accepting and fulfilling the quite weighty responsibility that we specifically fought for. We are in charge of ourselves. We're in charge of educating ourselves, knowing where we are, what happened here, who is in charge of us and why, and what they're able to do. Voting, community service, running for office, behaving and conversing in a civil way, which I really want to talk about.

[00:12:58] Nick Capodice

So like like 30s, I just need you to stop for one bit.

[00:13:01] Hannah McCarthy

We're in the middle of a show. So this is part of it.

[00:13:03] Nick Capodice

You know, go with it. This was this was written down weeks in advance. This is the point of the show when I go from being sort of the lovable, uninformed prompter to being the foil, the.

[00:13:12] Hannah McCarthy

Role you were born to play. Yeah.

[00:13:13] Nick Capodice

So here's where I'm going with this, because I already said civics is hard. But we didn't talk about why civics is hard. Why do people fail to volunteer for community service? Why do people fail and they do so frequently to behave in a civil way? I know there's a lot of reasons, but I'm going to hazard the big one. The biggest of all is they don't have time for that.

[00:13:34] Hannah McCarthy

That's fair. But we're journalists, right? Like we can't make assumptions. So we should ask people. Actually, we did ask people. Christina. Hello.

[00:13:43] Christina Phillips

Hi.

[00:13:44] Hannah McCarthy

Okay. So, Christina, before the show, we asked the audience to fill out a little survey. Thank you all for doing so. And my understanding is that you have the answers to that survey.

[00:13:54] Christina Phillips

Yes. I am holding these answers from our audience in our hands. All right. Do you want to hear the question that we had? Yes. Audience. Yes, please. So what do you think makes civic participation a challenge for you or people you know, if you happen to be one of those people that's so civically engaged that you don't even have any challenges.

[00:14:13] Christina Phillips

All right.

[00:14:14] Nick Capodice

So what did people say in this one?

[00:14:16] Christina Phillips

All right, so we've got shyness, um, too much judgment around one's opinions from others, fear of being judged. People are so overextended and stressed with their everyday lives that sometimes they either forget or are unable to fully participate in civic life. I hear that apathy and a lack of awareness of how our systems work. And then we've got time, or lack thereof, time. Commitment. Time and time.

[00:14:49] Hannah McCarthy

Yeah, that's. That's fair enough. Thank you. Christina. Okay. So audience we see you. We get it. And we are not the only ones who see you and get it.

[00:14:58] Nick Capodice

Time is precious.

[00:15:00] Mustafa Santiago

And I get it.

[00:15:01] Hannah McCarthy

This is Mustafa Santiago. Ali Mustafa is someone who has devoted his entire life to civil service, both in the government and out.

[00:15:11] Mustafa Santiago

I've been working on social justice issues since I was 16. I was lucky I came out of a family, you know, that was very focused on civil rights and workers rights.

[00:15:20] Nick Capodice

Mustafa, you interviewed him. You talked. He worked at the EPA, right?

[00:15:24] Hannah McCarthy

Yeah. The EPA, the Environmental Protection Agency.

[00:15:28] Nick Capodice

So we do this thing sometimes with initialisms and acronyms. We're not sure if the audience knows what we're talking about. So we try to make it feel natural. So if I say like AARP, you know, the American Association of Retired People, like we do that all the time. It felt natural, right?

[00:15:42] Hannah McCarthy

So Mustafa was at the EPA for 24 years before he left.

[00:15:48] Mustafa Santiago

I worry about it every day, and I have to take some responsibility for myself. I resigned. I was the highest ranking federal official who resigned when President Trump came in. I knew I had a responsibility based upon the oath that I took. And when I raised my right hand to do everything I could for my country, and I did not feel that I would be able to do that.

[00:16:07] Nick Capodice

And just a reminder for anyone who may have forgotten. While running for office in 2016, former President Donald Trump promised to mostly dismantle the EPA to help the federal budget.

[00:16:17] Hannah McCarthy

He did, and I shared this information about Mustafa to make something very clear. This is an individual who is deeply, deeply devoted to serving his country enough to pivot if he is concerned that he will not be able to. And we cannot all be like Mustafa.

[00:16:36] Mustafa Santiago

And I understand. Trust me. You know, folks trying to put food on the table, trying to keep the lights on. Save a couple of dollars. You know, that's priority.

[00:16:44] Hannah McCarthy

It's just like my friend Ollie has said to me, um, no, Hannah, I did not read that Supreme Court opinion that you sent me. I have a job.

[00:16:54] Nick Capodice

That's a really decent one. Always, always got the decent points. You and I and Mustafa, we have the time to really care about this because it is our job. But other people can't devote their whole lives to it.

[00:17:07] Hannah McCarthy

I'm going to argue that they can.

[00:17:10] Hannah McCarthy

Really.

[00:17:11] Nick Capodice

Gantlet thrown.

[00:17:13] Hannah McCarthy

In a way. Okay, so let's take voting.

[00:17:16] Nick Capodice

Take my voting, please.

[00:17:18] Hannah McCarthy

That's not all the jokes should make it in. I think maybe.

[00:17:21] Hannah McCarthy

We can edit that one out in post. We acknowledge that.

[00:17:23] Nick Capodice

My Henny Youngman references should just get.

[00:17:25] Mustafa Santiago

Them right out. Well, for me the act of voting is incredibly important, but not enough. You need to be an educated voter.

[00:17:32] Nick Capodice

All right. Can we quickly talk about why we're supposed to be educated voters? Because honestly, people say that all the time, but I'd like you to break it down.

[00:17:41] Hannah McCarthy

So think about what happens when someone is elected. Think about what they get when we put them in office.

[00:17:49] Mustafa Santiago

You know, these folks actually have a huge amount of power over our lives, right? They have power that impacts both economics and housing and transportation and the environment and climate and so on and so on and so on. So we've got to carve out a little bit of time and read and then be able to make the best decisions possible.

[00:18:09] Nick Capodice

Can I ask the audience a quick question?

[00:18:11] Christina Phillips

Yeah.

[00:18:12] Nick Capodice

All right. Show of hands. Honestly here. Have any of you in this room ever been in the voting booth on Election Day with your phone, googling a candidate because you didn't do the research first? Oh. Thank heavens. Yeah. Wait, you.

[00:18:28] Hannah McCarthy

Well.

[00:18:30] Christina Phillips

I just want to say, as the voice of the audience, a lot of people raise their hands for what it's worth for everyone at home. Yeah.

[00:18:35] Hannah McCarthy

You know, we're all humans. Human. Let me say this, Nick. Okay. I am not just trying to convince you that we should be as engaged as we should be. I am not just trying to convince all of you. I am also trying to convince me. Okay, so here's how I think about it. And here's how I think you should think about it. Nick, what do you do before you make a big purchase? Like you're going to buy a car, right?

[00:19:00] Nick Capodice

I see where you're going. I do research beforehand.

[00:19:03] Hannah McCarthy

Like you probably do a lot of research. You probably do it before you show up at the car dealership.

[00:19:08] Nick Capodice

Full disclosure I have never been to a car dealership in my entire life. I learned to drive when I was 39. I don't think I'll ever own a new car, but that's just me. But if I did, if I were the kind of responsible human who could buy a new car, I would, you know, do my research before I went to the dealership.

[00:19:26] Hannah McCarthy

Why is that?

[00:19:27] Nick Capodice

Because a car is a major investment. I'm going to use it most days of my life. I'm going to drive my kids around in it. I'm going to have it for years, I hope. I want to make sure that it won't break down and cost a boatload of money.

[00:19:40] Hannah McCarthy

Okay, so you do your research to try to make sure that you're investing wisely. You want a car that is safe, reliable, trustworthy. A car that will do what you need it to do, or at least what its ads promise to do. A car with a good track record. A car that won't become a burden on your nation or your wallet.

[00:20:06] Christina Phillips

You know.

[00:20:07] Hannah McCarthy

Yeah, yeah. And you have a lot of options. You have a lot of choices. At least you hope that you make the right choice. So you do your research, and if you're really smart about it, you also ask around.

[00:20:19] Mustafa Santiago

You know, there are a lot of people who are asking for our vote. So we need to be at the opportunities where they are to ask them the questions about where do you stand on this and what is your track record look like on these types of things, and then make the best decision for you and your family. But let's not just give anyone our vote without doing our own due diligence, because there are huge ramifications.

[00:20:43] Hannah McCarthy

I think, especially in New Hampshire, people understand that. People understand talking to people, getting to know people before they cast their vote. There are huge ramifications in choosing something that will affect your daily life, the well-being of your family, your ability to smoothly move through things without constant nasty surprises. And I'm not talking about cars anymore, Nick.

[00:21:04] Nick Capodice

I think that's been abundantly clear for several minutes.

[00:21:08] Hannah McCarthy

The point that I'm trying to make is that most of us, honestly, we do research constantly, not just about cars. We research the food that we're going to buy and eat. We research, you know, our own health. Hello, WebMD. We research education and housing and employment, all of which could at some point be supported or undermined by the people for whom we vote. So people can tell me that they don't have time to get to know their candidates. But that's not what they're really saying.

[00:21:41] Nick Capodice

What are they really saying?

[00:21:43] Hannah McCarthy

What they are really saying is they don't care.

[00:21:49] Nick Capodice

No. You're telling me that everyone in this room who raised their hand, including us, these good people don't care.

[00:21:55] Hannah McCarthy

I don't think that this live audience of a Civics 101 show is representative of the American populace.

[00:22:02] Nick Capodice

But that's fair. And that's probably true. But I think a lot of people, and I dare say most people do care a lot about who is in charge, who is making decisions and what those decisions are.

[00:22:13] Hannah McCarthy

I totally agree with you.

[00:22:15] Nick Capodice

You do? I thought that was going to be a much tougher argument.

[00:22:19] Hannah McCarthy

Okay. So I do think people care about who's in charge, but it's not the same thing as caring about your car or your job. I mean, when there are so many decisions that we make that really do matter. We can feel the positive or negative impact of those decisions that we make. Think about like how your choice in the voting booth stacks up against that. Why would we put the same care into that? Why? You know when your choice is one of millions, when the system is often actively set up to dilute some choosers and overpower other choosers, when that choice that we make disappears into this opaque and mysterious world of secret meetings and billion-dollar deals and uniform haircuts, why would you care?

[00:23:07] Nick Capodice

You have basically just convinced me, Hannah, that being an educated voter does not matter at all.

[00:23:13] Hannah McCarthy

I am going somewhere with this and I'm going to try to get there after a quick break.

[00:23:40] Nick Capodice

We're back. We are on a little journey of Hannah's making today. She is trying to take us to a new plane of civic life in America. And Hannah, before the break, you basically were like, why would anyone feel like they matter in American democracy? And honestly, that made me very sad.

[00:23:56] Hannah McCarthy

I'm going to bring you down even lower before I lift you back up.

[00:24:00] Kim Whele

I think that we're on life support as a democracy. This is.

[00:24:04] Hannah McCarthy

Kim Whele. She is a constitutional law professor and author of several books, including What You Need to Know About Voting and Why. And Nick, This Is Why You Should Care.

[00:24:16] Kim Whele

Constitution is just a piece of paper with job descriptions. If it's not enforced, the piece of paper doesn't mean anything.

[00:24:23] Hannah McCarthy

And what is the way? Sometimes the only way that most of us here in this room can help to enforce the Constitution of the United States.

[00:24:33] Kim Whele

The only thing left is the ballot box and that's it. So that's part of why, I mean, it's an imperfect system, but it's all we have.

[00:24:41] Nick Capodice

Yeah, but, Hannah, that imperfect system is, I think, to your point, that is the reason why so many people become disengaged.

[00:24:49] JFK Archive

But why, some say the moon.

[00:24:51] Nick Capodice

Some politicians might as well be on the moon.

[00:24:54] Kim Whele

We all have job descriptions when we have a job. And if you show up late eight days in a row, you might get fired. Even if you do great work when you show up, or if you start taking money out of the cash register. And why are you fired? Because the company wants to stay in business and they can't. If no one's manning the desk or if money's going out of the car, the government is the same way.

[00:25:14] Hannah McCarthy

I know that it might not feel like it, and I understand why, but we everyone in this room, we are the employers. Okay. And if you, the boss, want this system to exist, you want operations to continue, but you feel like the employees are kind of tanking it and you're just going to, like, lie back and wait for the operation to fail. You need to remember who is in charge.

[00:25:40] Kim Whele

Around 50% of eligible voters vote. You imagine if that were 60% or 70% or 80%. I mean, everyone has said if we grab one person, get them voting, politicians are going to have a harder time ignoring individual Americans in favor of dark money and corporate money and politics. So it's going to make your vote matter more if there's a tsunami of civic participation.

[00:26:00] Nick Capodice

Is that statistic true - like only 50% of Americans vote?

[00:26:04] Hannah McCarthy

I mean, it varies in 2020. Two thirds of eligible voters showed up, but that was huge. That was the highest rate since 1900.

[00:26:15] Nick Capodice

So for over a century, only about half of us showed up.

[00:26:19] Hannah McCarthy

I mean, usually somewhere between half and like 60%. The 1940s has had a decent-ish turnout. Low 60% range. All right.

[00:26:29] Nick Capodice

So World War two. Beginning of the Cold War.

[00:26:33] Hannah McCarthy

Yep. And then the 1960s was also about the same as the 1940s because it's.

[00:26:37] Nick Capodice

The 1960s, you know, the civil rights era.

[00:26:40] Hannah McCarthy

And then it was super high. Between 1840 and 1900, like over 80% a lot of the time.

[00:26:47] Hannah McCarthy

Yeah.

[00:26:47] Nick Capodice

Antebellum, Civil War, 14th amendment, the Gilded Age. These are major moments in history. These are major inflection points. Are we in one of those right now, do you think?

[00:26:58] Hannah McCarthy

Um, I don't know. I'll let the people decide. But yeah, Nick, people show up when they're concerned and they convince their friends to show up. People who are concerned about the same things as you. And it does make a difference if enough people who care show up because they prove that they're caring actually matters. And Nick, we do not yet know what people are going to call this era of American history. But we do know that when it really matters, people show up. And when they do, they prove that we still have a system where we matter.

[00:27:38] Kim Whele

It's not every country where even in a democracy that seems like a democracy, where you really do have a government that is accountable to the people, that is not all in bed with, you know, power brokers and money gangsters. I mean, that is it's a real privilege. I mean, you could be maybe you're a religious person that you believe in a higher power. I feel like I'm blessed, and it's a gift to have been born and have my children born in this country. And it's honoring that gift. It's honoring that privilege that not everyone on the planet has to make sure that we have those freedoms. You have to participate in your democracy, even if you're not going to see the impact tomorrow collectively over many, many races and many, many millions of people. It's the only way. There's no alternative.

[00:28:28] Nick Capodice

So getting back to the whole caring thing, Hannah, as in, like, why would I care about the system if the system doesn't care about me? The answer is basically, you have to make the system care about you by showing that you care by, like, bending it towards your justice and.

[00:28:43] Hannah McCarthy

No buts about it. That's hard.

[00:28:46] Christina Phillips

That takes.

[00:28:47] Cheryl Cook-Kallio

Effort. Democracy is not a spectator sport. It takes constant vigilance. And that's hard for people. And so often what I say to people is you can't do everything, but you could do something.

[00:29:00] Nick Capodice

I know that voice. I know she's been on several episodes of Civics 101 over the years.

[00:29:05] Hannah McCarthy

True friend of the pod. This is Cheryl Cook-Kallio, an all star of civic participation in America.

[00:29:12] Cheryl Cook-Kallio

I taught for 40 years in a community in which I grew up. I have held elected office. I was a city council member and was termed out after eight years. And I currently sit on the Alameda County Board of Ed. As the president, I have been politically active since I was 17 years old.

[00:29:29] Nick Capodice

I'm a huge fan of hers, but I do not think we can all be Cheryls.

[00:29:32] Hannah McCarthy

No, I don't think so.

[00:29:34] Hannah McCarthy

But how do we show up for ourselves in civic life? Right? If you're feeling down and out, what do you do? You have to locate your community and work with them to get what you want and what you need. Here's the trick, though, Nick. How do you find your community? I hazard that it's all about how you speak to other people.

[00:29:57] Cheryl Cook-Kallio

I think civil discourse for me, and the way I explain it to my students, is that you can have your opinion based on fact and based on evidence. You just can't make up your opinion. So you can argue. For example, one side or another of a Supreme Court case, as long as you can point to evidence and say it's there, but an argument to create a situation where your argument is, well, that's just the way I feel. And that's my opinion, it's not civil discourse.

[00:30:23] Nick Capodice

So for Cheryl, civil discourse is about facts.

[00:30:26] Hannah McCarthy

Isn't that interesting?

[00:30:27] Nick Capodice

Yeah.

[00:30:28] Hannah McCarthy

And facts. Facts can be a whole lot more complicated and way less exciting than feelings. But that is the point.

[00:30:40] Cheryl Cook-Kallio

There's nuances involved, and it's the same thing on a city council. It's the same thing on a school board is that if you patiently listen to everyone, chances are you're going to find a commonality. And once you find that commonality, you can figure out how to move toward that consensus.

[00:30:57] Nick Capodice

So she said, consensus. Where did we where have I heard that word before today?

[00:31:01] Raj Vinnakota

At it's core, it's about doing the work of deciding, of coming to consensus and engaging in our communities. For the best of all.

[00:31:11] Nick Capodice

It's the funniest thing. I could swear. Like I could hear Raj like ghostly speaking to me.

[00:31:16] Hannah McCarthy

It was like clear as a bell.

[00:31:17] Hannah McCarthy

I could hear it too, he said.

[00:31:18] Nick Capodice

That is like consensus is a big part of what civics is you know.

[00:31:21] Hannah McCarthy

Mhm. Let's see if people actually think that's possible. Christina. Yes.

[00:31:27] Christina Phillips

Hello. Voice of the audience here. So we asked our audience think of someone in your life that you disagree with politically. Is there a political issue, local or national that you think you could agree on and what is it?

[00:31:43] Nick Capodice

I am very excited to hear this because I actually think it's possible.

[00:31:47] Christina Phillips

Yeah. Okay. So here we go. Yes. Inflation, imperialism, the working class being abandoned. Money and politics. Term limits for Congress. We have an episode on that.

[00:32:00] Nick Capodice

Never gonna happen, is it?

[00:32:01] Christina Phillips

No. I mean, I think you should listen. I think you should listen. All right. Um, character and dignity matters. We agree. All of us should leave a positive legacy to be remembered. Make the world a better place than how we found it. Love that. Um. And helping others with disabilities. These are some things that people have decided they could find consensus, even with someone that they really don't agree with.

[00:32:24] Nick Capodice

That's like a good lead up and like that's a helpful. Like, that's a helpful thing that so many people thought that consensus could be found. But what do you do once you actually establish consensus? What's the next step? Okay.

[00:32:36] Hannah McCarthy

So this next step, this is dependent on real civil discourse like facts, actual facts, respect, patience a capacity and ability to compromise. So keep that in mind. If you find yourself rolling your eyes at the following scenario.

[00:32:55] Cheryl Cook-Kallio

When you sit down at dinner with your parents at night, they want you to be safe. They want you to get a good education. They want you to have choices whether you go to college or trade school or community college. They want you to have choices. If they were honest, they would tell you they want you to have many grandchildren and a little closer. And they're no different than my family and what I want for my children.

[00:33:15] Hannah McCarthy

So you find the consensus everyone cares about their family. There are certain commonalities. Once you find the consensus, you have to think about the divide.

[00:33:24] Cheryl Cook-Kallio

You are dependent on coal manufacturing. Your parents, probably their livelihood, is somewhat either directly or indirectly tied to coal production. In our community, we're trying to stop trains from going through Alameda County that are carrying coal because the environmental impact, we could not be more opposite on those two issues.

[00:33:44] Hannah McCarthy

Okay, so coal that's a big one is a big divide. So there's the divide right. Take the divide. Take the consensus and put them together.

[00:33:53] Cheryl Cook-Kallio

And if we could tap into that and figure out how to make sure that people can work jobs that will take care of their families. That's the issue when you're trying to shut down coal is what are you going to substitute that job with so that the people that have those jobs can actually still maintain a working class, you know, middle class environment, right?

[00:34:13] Nick Capodice

I think I get Cheryl's point. The question is, what are you really fighting for when an issue matters to you? And sometimes, like maybe even a lot of the time, the answer is safety and security for me and my family and my friends, my community. So if you want to shut down coal to protect the environment. But what about, you know, the people who live there, you need to protect the people who will lose their jobs. Easier said than done.

[00:34:40] Hannah McCarthy

And in fact, and I know usually not done at all. It's just not done. But we make a choice, and someone else has to deal with the fallout of that choice. But I do think maybe that's the point of consensus. It is not about getting something done, because we can get things done depending on whether or not Congress votes. But it's about getting something done correctly, about getting something done right without hurting the thing that you agree on with other people. You might vote for someone who says they'll fix a problem, but you got to follow up on that. Like you have to stay on them.

[00:35:18] Cheryl Cook-Kallio

It's not just about doing it when you vote. It's all about showing up, and it's all about showing up throughout the duration between elections. To say to somebody who's running for office, I'm important.

[00:35:30] Nick Capodice

So Cheryl's saying, like, you gotta hound em, you gotta hound your official.

[00:35:33] Hannah McCarthy

They do work for you. Remember that little boss thing I was talking about? So Cheryl tells this story. She's at her state house with a bunch of teachers. These are government teachers visiting their legislators.

[00:35:45] Cheryl Cook-Kallio

We ended up seeing 8 or 9 legislators that day, which, having been in a coalition among city council members. And I'll tell you, to get to that many legislators in a day is huge to get them to see you. So we're sitting at lunch and I turned around and I said, how many of you have ever contacted an elected official?

[00:36:05] Nick Capodice

Oh, wait. Quick show of hands here. How many of you here have contacted an official? Woo! Give yourselves a round of applause.

[00:36:13] Christina Phillips

For the audience at home. That's way more people than I would have ever.

[00:36:16] Hannah McCarthy

I think that's the majority.

[00:36:18] Nick Capodice

I think there was about 94% of people. But to be fair, we do have the third largest legislative body in the world.

[00:36:23] Hannah McCarthy

Yes.

[00:36:24] Christina Phillips

And I think our in-person audience is probably civically engaged, fully engaged. But I'm impressed.

[00:36:29] Nick Capodice

So hats off to all of you. Because, you know, for me, cold calling isn't really my favorite thing to do to just call up. I once called the white House line and I was on hold for like an hour, and I was like, what am I even going to say? What if he picks up?

[00:36:42] Hannah McCarthy

I'm hi, what? Do you like anyone?

[00:36:47] Hannah McCarthy

So, okay, this is really interesting because so many of you raised your hands. When our guest, Cheryl asked her group this question here was the answer that she got.

[00:36:56] Cheryl Cook-Kallio

The only two people in that group that raised their hand was a former student of mine that became a teacher and my colleague, she and I co-coached a competition civics team. That's it. And I looked at them and I said, why not? And one said, well, they're busy. I said, what do you think they're busy doing? They're supposed to be busy serving you. Their job is to listen to what you have to say. So whether you do this by sending an email or calling an office or seeing them in a town hall meeting, their job is to listen to you. And somebody said, well, you know, it's easy for you. You've been an elected official. And I sat there for a second. I mean, stunned, pretty stunned. These were mid-level government teachers. These were people that had been teaching for 15, 20 years. And I said, I looked at them. I said, how do you think I got to be an elected official?

[00:37:49] Nick Capodice

Wait. So Cheryl said she became a government employee by talking to the government.

[00:37:54] Hannah McCarthy

And she picked up the phone, made a call to tell her lawmaker what she wanted. And then Cheryl realized that she could make way more of a difference on the inside.

[00:38:03] Cheryl Cook-Kallio

So it was because I picked up that phone first that I ended up in the situation I'm in now. It's not the other way around. And they were pretty stunned. So one of the teachers when I'm talking about this with this group of teachers, they said, well, I don't want to bother them.

[00:38:17] Hannah McCarthy

So Cheryl says, do you think that a lobbyist ever thinks that to themselves?

[00:38:22] Cheryl Cook-Kallio

A lobbyist wants them to vote for prescription drugs or not vote for prescription drug prices? Do you think they ever worried about whether they were spending too much time in that Congress member's office? Never, never is the answer to that.

[00:38:36] Nick Capodice

That is a really good point, but I am feeling a little like chicken or egg in all this.

[00:38:41] Hannah McCarthy

Yeah. Yeah.

[00:38:42] Nick Capodice

So do lawmakers cater to special interest groups because they're more important than us? Or do special interest groups make themselves more important than us? Because they're the ones who actually show up at their house and we don't.

[00:38:54] Hannah McCarthy

Well, we can't really know the answer to that question unless we put in as many hours as lobbyists do.

[00:39:08] Nick Capodice

We're going to take a quick break. Hannah, you've been making something very interesting, maybe even compelling. You've been making some tremendous points.

[00:39:50] Hannah McCarthy

Thank you.

[00:39:51] Nick Capodice

You're welcome. But for the sake of argument, and you always tell me the devil doesn't need an advocate. But for the sake of argument, let's say you and all these wonderful civic people that we have heard from have not been convinced at all.

[00:40:05] Hannah McCarthy

That would hurt, actually.

[00:40:07] Nick Capodice

But like I need there's like a Supreme Court decision like, I need something to hang my hat on, right? I need something to hold on to in the cold, icy waters. Right.

[00:40:17] Hannah McCarthy

All right. All right.

[00:40:18] Hannah McCarthy

You want something to hold on to?

[00:40:19] Nick Capodice

I want something to hold on to.

[00:40:20] Hannah McCarthy

Maybe I can give these people just a little bit more to hold on to, because that is fair. Okay. That's fair. Like everything I've been saying. Sort of blue sky stars in the eyes. I understand that because.

[00:40:33] Mustafa Santiago

Now let's be honest. Inside the federal government, it is a bureaucracy, right?

[00:40:37] Hannah McCarthy

Mustafa Santiago Ali again. So I concede the government, elected officials, the law. It can all feel really out of reach. So for something to hold on to, how about somewhere to start?

[00:40:53] Mustafa Santiago

Can you make change? Oh, most definitely.

[00:40:55] Hannah McCarthy

Civics does not start in marble halls. The power and the capacity of the people to and for self-governance starts with the people. Community starts with the people. Consensus starts with the people. Coalitions start with the people. You want to be empowered in this democracy based, constitutionally federated republic. It's a mouthful. It takes a lot of work. Okay. But I do want to leave you, the people with something to hold on to. And you know what? More work is the last thing we need.

[00:41:33] Nick Capodice

Yeah. So is this the part where Jim comes out with the t shirt cannon with, like, the.

[00:41:38] Hannah McCarthy

No. This is the point where I say if you want to be an effective citizen, if that matters to you, if you want to see your needs and your values reflected in your world, just do your thing.

[00:41:51] Nick Capodice

Do your thing.

[00:41:52] Mustafa Santiago

I always just ask the question, what's your blessing? What's your gift? And then just take that and just be authentic with what you're doing.

[00:42:00] Nick Capodice

Your blessing. Is that like your talent? Yeah.

[00:42:03] Hannah McCarthy

Exactly. Like a talent. Okay. For example. Right. Mustafa told me this story. Someone who really likes writing and really likes drawing and feels like they're pretty good at it, and they also really care about the environment and educating people about the environment.

[00:42:17] Mustafa Santiago

The other day I met this guy who was like 77. He was like, yo, check out this graphic novel that I did. And I was just like, this is so great because some folks won't listen. People are not going to read a scientific report, probably, but they'll check this out and then that can inspire folks.

[00:42:36] Nick Capodice

But that one actually really speaks to me.

[00:42:38] Hannah McCarthy

Finally.

[00:42:40] Nick Capodice

Because I have read books, I have listened to music, I've seen theater, I've seen pieces of art that help me understand the world or care about the world, or care about problems in the world.

[00:42:50] Hannah McCarthy

Yeah, like you can make something that brings people in that helps them understand something. Or you can take your skill, the thing that makes you unique and special. And you can actually, Christina, can we do question number three?

[00:43:03] Christina Phillips

I'm way ahead of you. Okay. So question number three. And this is something by the way I think about all the time just randomly and just in my bed thinking about it, you find yourself on a deserted island with a bunch of people. You know, you have to build a life from scratch. What's your role?

[00:43:21] Nick Capodice

That's why you asked this question.

[00:43:23] Hannah McCarthy

Yeah, yeah.

[00:43:24] Christina Phillips

All right. So I'm going to give you a couple of roles that people have identified okay. Food gathering and prep the cook.

[00:43:31] Hannah McCarthy

Okay. So as we're getting into this, what I'm trying to share with you is there are ways in. Right? There are ways toward civic engagement. So a cook, you can start a community garden that truly brings people together. And it also offers a food source for your community, for people in need. You can volunteer at your local soup kitchen, take your skills and bring it to people. One that I'm particularly interested in. School lunches are not always the most delicious thing in the world. Find out what your local public school is feeding your kids. Go to school board meetings and say, hey, I care about nutrition. I care about what we're eating in schools. And here's what I suggest we do. Things happen in schools when people show up to school board meetings. Trust me.

[00:44:14] Christina Phillips

All right. You want another one? Yeah. All right. I'll be an engineer, making sure we have clean water and a hygienic society.

[00:44:21] Nick Capodice

That's fantastic. I actually care about this one. I have a dear friend who works for an organization called Engineers Without Borders. It's been around since 2000. It's like Doctors Without Borders, but it's engineers. It's people who build infrastructure in communities that need it. And it doesn't have to be in another country. It can be here, it can be in New Hampshire. It can be wherever you live. Creating infrastructure is crucial in some places. Really need it.

[00:44:44] Christina Phillips

All right. We got another one, which is a nurse.

[00:44:47] Nick Capodice

Okay, I have this one. I'll take this one. So I'm working on an episode right now called us versus healthcare. It's how America measures up against the rest of the world when it comes to how we provide health care for people. And I don't want to. I'm giving away this episode. But in a ranking of the top ten developed nations in the world. You know, America came in 10th place out of ten when it comes to the cost of health care and the quality we get and how long we live. Anyways, she was telling me the guest I was interviewing was telling me that if somebody is living in a state or is living in the United States and they're not documented and they break their leg, or they cut off a finger and they go to the hospital, they must be treated because of emtala, which I'm sure some of you are familiar with the law that says an emergency room has to treat you if you're hurt. Doesn't matter if you have money or not. However, that person will get a bill. Okay? Unbeknownst to me, there are massive organizations called Fqhc's Federally Qualified Health Centers that provides medical care on a sliding scale. And it does not matter who you are or how much money you have. This guest said to me, tell people you know to volunteer at work for and let other people know about these federally qualified health centers because it will change the rest of your life if you go to one versus an emergency room and.

[00:46:02] Hannah McCarthy

Other people's lives.

[00:46:03] Nick Capodice

And other people's lives. Absolutely.

[00:46:04] Christina Phillips

And I'll say it also for those of you who, like me, are not a nurse but have experience with emergency medical services, first aid, first responders, consider, you know, a search and rescue, consider storm effort, storm recovery. Where do they need people to help people find a place to stay? Or, you know, to check in on people who might not have air conditioning or heat, those kinds of things. So those are a little bit more low lift. But I have another one which is bringing a group together to gather resources. Now, that sounds like a fundraiser to me.

[00:46:34] Hannah McCarthy

Yeah, yeah, we know all about that at public radio.

[00:46:37] Christina Phillips

And also, I mean, like, it doesn't have to be fundraiser, but, you know, you could be somebody who in your local community, there's so much federal funds and state funds that can get distributed to local communities. And they need people who apply for that. Like, you don't get it unless you apply for it. If you're somebody who's really good at getting a group together to gather resources, you might be really good at helping to get the information to write a grant. You might be good at organizing people to go after money that your community might need. So consider that. And then we've got another one. I would be a deputy or second in command, a leader, but also a supporting role.

[00:47:15] Nick Capodice

Like a Will Riker.

[00:47:16] Hannah McCarthy

That's delightful. Yeah, yeah.

[00:47:18] Christina Phillips

I mean, I had to thought about this one, which is, um, poll workers, maybe not this election, but next election. There are people who have been working the polls for years, and there are people who have so much experience. They always need people who they can give that experience to.

[00:47:34] Nick Capodice

Is there anybody in here who has worked in the polls?

[00:47:36] Hannah McCarthy

Oh, yeah.

[00:47:37] Christina Phillips

How many of you would like a deputy or a second in command? You can train up to take over for you? A little bit of help.

[00:47:43] Hannah McCarthy

That would be nice.

[00:47:43] Christina Phillips

Yeah, yeah. So those are just a couple of ideas for the deserted island. Yeah.

[00:47:48] Mustafa Santiago

There's all these different types of things that you can do or I've, you know, been so blessed to work with so many younger people who have now created their own organizations and are just adding their own flavor to it. And I'm just like, yes, you know, I'm standing on the sidelines Cheering. I'm like, give us more, give us more, give us more. So the sky is the limit. So whether you want to work for business and industry, which there are some really great ones that are out there if you want to work in the nonprofit world, you know, I've been blessed. I've created my own business, I've led nonprofit agencies, I work for the Hip Hop Caucus. So I had a chance to work with all these amazing artists and entertainers. It's up to you. And there are so many folks who are now saying, you know what, I'm not going to wait for change to happen. I'm going to be a part of change, and I'm going to help to move that moral arc that Doctor King once talked about toward justice.

[00:48:46] Hannah McCarthy

So many of us live two lives. We have a job, we go to work, we do things for a set amount of hours. We get paid, and then when we're done, we go home to be by ourselves or with our families, our partners, our friends. Civics is this third thing. Um, it actually comes from the Latin civis, which has several translations. But my favorite is person in the town. It is where we get the word city, where we get the word citizen. Person in the town. So civics is not just the first Tuesday in November. It is not every two years when you step into a voting booth or, you know, for years. For many Americans, you are always, always a person in the town. And civics is at its heart simply reminding yourself of that.

[00:50:02] Hannah McCarthy

I thank you so much everyone. That was our show.

[00:50:07] Nick Capodice

Thank you everybody.

[00:50:08] Hannah McCarthy

Thank you. Uh, this this episode of Civics 101 was recorded live at Southern New Hampshire University. Thank you. Southern New Hampshire University.

[00:50:23] Hannah McCarthy

It was made by me. Hannah McCarthy. By You Nick Capodice by you, Christina Phillips by our executive producer, Rebecca Lavoie, who could not be with us today by all of you. Our audience without whom we could not make this happen. Music. In this episode by Epidemic Sound and Chris Zabriskie. Civics 101 is a production of NHPR, New Hampshire Public Radio.

END OF TRANSCRIPT



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