NOTE: This transcript was generated using an automated transcription service, and may contain typographical errors.

**Civics 101**

**Episode: AP US Government and Politics Prepisode**

 [00:00:00] Civics 101 is supported in part by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:00:04] All right Hannah, you there?

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:00:07] I'm here.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:00:07] Alright. There are 15 million high school students in the U.S. and every single one of them is facing the challenges of learning from home. Every single school district is trying to figure out the best ways to teach them to support them and to grade them. SATs are on hold. ACTs are on hold as well. But days from us recording this, three point four million students are going to be taking a test that is not administered by their teacher. They're going to be taking one of the 38 AP Advanced Placement exams. They're gonna take from home. Online.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:00:45] And what is usually a three hour exam that students have preped year or at least a semester for is going to be 45 minutes. And one of those courses is AP U.S. Government and Politics. You and I have had the benefit of meeting [00:01:00] many, many wonderful AP gov teachers at conferences and events over the last few years. And I've always had this insatiable, almost morbid curiosity about this super challenging class. What's taught in it? What's the exam like?Could I pass it?

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:01:16] Do you think you could?

**Nick Capodice:** [00:01:17] Oh, absolutely not.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:01:20] This is Civics 101. I'm Nick Capodice.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:01:22] I'm Hannah McCarthy.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:01:23] And today we're doing a special episode on the AP U.S. Government Politics Exam with a focus on this year's take home test. Monday, May 11th, four p.m. Eastern. I spoke with three AP gov teachers who told me what the questions are like on it, the foundational documents that are required reading for the course, and finally, just some tips for taking it this year.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:01:45] Hold on before you get into this specific exam this year. What does Advanced Placement mean?

**Nick Capodice:** [00:01:53] Yeah sure! These are classes that you could take in high school that sort of roughly mirror an undergraduate college course. [00:02:00] They are, frankly, challenging. The exam at the end of the year is scored on a scale of one to five. And if you get a three or higher on it, you could earn college credit. This could save you money and time at college, an AP score can also help you apply to college. It could help you get a scholarship. But it is a depth of political study that I never had.

**Ryan Werenka:** [00:02:22] High school kids that are taking AP, U.S. government and politics class, mom or dad or whomever, you know, they have they're having dinner while we're, you know, social distancing and we're all cooped up, you know, and they start having these philosophical questions. Maybe they're watching the news. You know, these kids can chime in with the answers and say, well, no, actually, it says no. Constitution says this. My name is Ryan Werenka. I teach AP, U.S. government and politics at Troy High School in Troy, Michigan. And I'm excited to say that I was accepted to be an AP reader for this year. So I haven't read the exam yet. But I have taught AP, U.S. government and politics for many, [00:03:00] many, many years and have relationships with readers and have a pretty good understanding of what they're looking for.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:03:05] What are readers?

**Nick Capodice:** [00:03:07] These are several hundred teachers who read and score the exam. And since they teach their own classes, they are not given the test in advance as they could give their students a bit of an advantage. The questions on the exam are a big old secret.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:03:20] So how are they going to take the test this year?

**Nick Capodice:** [00:03:24] Well, in a non Corona world, students across America would normally sit for about three hours and take this exam and it had multiple choice sections and about four FRQs, which are free response questions, essays, basically. But that's not how it's gonna go down this year. Multiple choice is gone. It's going to be in its entirety two free response questions in 45 minutes.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:03:47] Two questions. What kind of questions?

**Ryan Werenka:** [00:03:50] Here's Ryan again.

**Ryan Werenka:** [00:03:52] Yep. So the first free response question is the the argument essay, and that'll be 60 percent of the exam. And then the second one is the concept application question, [00:04:00] and that will be 40 percent of the exam.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:04:03] Right. Take me through these. Let's start with that argument essay.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:04:07] You got it. As an example, here's last year's world. The United States Constitution establishes a federal system of government under federalism. Policymaking is shared between national and state governments. Over time, the powers of the national government have increased relative to those of the state governments. Develop an argument about whether the expanded powers of the national government benefits or hinders policymaking.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:04:28] Good Lord.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:04:29] Develop an argument. And the students have to use evidence from specific documents to back up their claim. And they explain why that evidence supports their thesis and respond to a hypothetical opposing perspective. I know I'm sounding wordy

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:04:43] Yeah, you kind of do. But at its core, these are not just skills for taking a test, right. These are massively helpful, critical thinking skills like make a claim. Back it up with evidence. Consider other sides to an argument.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:04:59] Yeah. If we could just. Do [00:05:00] this for everything.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:05:01] So what are the documents that they have to know?

**Nick Capodice:** [00:05:04] Ok. Here's Jim Kelly. He teaches AP Gov at Timberlane Regional High School here in New Hampshire.

**Jim Kelly:** [00:05:09] There are a list of than nine foundational documents the College Board gave all of us at the beginning of the year that we needed to focus on. Nine.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:05:16] Are you ready for this list, Frodo? Of the nine?

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:05:18] That ring is not gonna throw itself into the volcano.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:05:21] Here we go.

**Jim Kelly:** [00:05:22] One, the Declaration of Independence.

[00:05:24] The Declaration will be a triumph. I tell you, a triumph.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:05:28] Of course, the greatest breakup letter ever written. An ordinance of secession. A master class in political philosophy.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:05:35] It didn't just create us. It laid the foundation for popular sovereignty. That is a term that means the government is created by people and its job is to serve those people.

**Jenifer Hitchcock:** [00:05:45] The declaration I mean, I see the declaration as a 'why'. I teach it as, you know, like it frames the Constitution. It tells us what animates us.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:05:54] This is the inimitable Jennifer Hitchcock, by the way. She teaches AP Gov at Thomas Jefferson High School for [00:06:00] Science and Technology in Alexandria, Virginia. She is also a reader. She has dozens of wonderful online classes on YouTube. They are one of the best resources I have seen out there to prepare for the test.

**Jenifer Hitchcock:** [00:06:11] If we're thinking of like the essence of what it is to be in a democracy. And like, you know, I, I, I personally question to what extent are we a democracy? Like, that's my enduring question for life, just like, are we really.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:06:24] OK? On to number two.

**Jim Kelly:** [00:06:25] Two, the Articles of Confederation.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:06:27] Our first rule book.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:06:29] Yeah, our first constitution, and something frankly, we are thinking a lot about in the age of Corona, powers of the states and governors versus federal powers and presidential powers in times of an emergency. The Articles of Confederation gave enormous powers to the states with a very weak federal government.

**Jenifer Hitchcock:** [00:06:47] So I give the Articles short shrift.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:06:50] But that doesn't mean you have to.

**Jim Kelly:** [00:06:52] Three the Constitution of the United States.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:06:54] Yeah.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:06:55] Yeah.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:06:56] But if you're looking at the Constitution and you want to know what specifically [00:07:00] to focus on before you take the test, Jim had some advice.

**Jim Kelly:** [00:07:03] I strongly recommend going back into the constitutional clauses that I'm sure students have gone over with teachers if they haven't yet. You know, even just a quick Google search of most important or key constitutional clauses would be very important. Go through, review those and even make like to call them notes with clause and explanation of clause amendment, an explanation of amendment. Go right back through that. I think that's very important. Take a look at different actions that Congress takes different responsibilities of Congress. And, you know, just being clear that even though it seems like common sense, I don't think it's it's a bad idea to go back and brush up on some of those, like common sense concepts that you might know.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:07:46] I'm not going to make a joke about a sanity clause. So let's get on to number four.

**Jim Kelly:** [00:07:51] Four Federalist number 10.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:07:53] All right. We've got our first Federalist Paper. One of the 85 essays that are written to convince New York, and then later the whole [00:08:00] country that the Constitution should be ratified.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:08:03] Yes Fed Ten is one of the most famous ones. It is by James Madison and it is all about factions. That is the magic word. Factions. Large groups. They've got different interests. And the two big ones that he was referencing were property owners and non property owners,

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:08:19] A.k.a. rich people and poor people.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:08:22] Yes. And this paper calms the fears of wealthy people that the non wealthy will make all the decisions because they're in the majority. Right. Because unless we give everyone the same exact amount of money, Madison says that factions are unavoidable. He says, "Liberty is to factions what air is to fire."If you're a free republic, it's going to happen. But the fact that there are several factions that compete, that's what's going to keep us clear of tyranny in the United States.

**Jim Kelly:** [00:08:53] Five, Brutus 1.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:08:55] OK. I have a vague sense of Brutus one but to be honest, I'm not super [00:09:00] familiar with it.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:09:01] Yeah, Brutus 1. All about it. I did not learn it in school. I had never read it. And it is wonderful. It is an anti-federalist paper. And the cool thing is it came out a few weeks before the first federalist paper. Brutus, which is a pseudonym of an anti federalist, he laid out all of the arguments for why the Constitution should not be ratified, said the federal government proposed within it was too powerful. The states were too weak. Brutus one is an argument for a confederation style of government, not a republic. And Brutus says that previous republics like Greece and Rome, they ended up in tyranny. So why should we try it here? And because it came out earlier. It's like a setup. It's like the setup for the spike of the Federalist Papers. Hamilton, Madison and Jay's 85 essays are a response. Eighty five responses to the concerns of Brutus.

**Jenifer Hitchcock:** [00:09:53] For me in particular, Brutus can go almost anywhere. And I think that [00:10:00] almost gets short shrift, like we talk so much about the Constitution. You know, Brutus opens the door to so many different routes. He opens the door to declaring that perhaps, perhaps, perhaps, perchance our founding fathers were elitists. He opens the door to, oh, my gosh, wouldn't it be great if we had participants, more participatory government? I almost use Brutus as an outline in my own class. My kids will go through and annotate. Here's his argument. And then we come back and say, what did the founding fathers say in response? Like what was, like each federalist paper is a response to Brutus. It's the cleanest, most comprehensive argument against the Constitution.

**Jim Kelly:** [00:10:41] Six Federalist number 51.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:10:44] I know this one. This is Madison again, this is the federalist paper that defends a government with separated powers consisting of three branches that check each other at every turn. It's the one where Madison says that if men were angels, [00:11:00] no government would be necessary.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:11:02] It is also about factions and the fear of an overpowerful majority. He says, quote, Society itself will be broken into so many parts, interests and classes of citizens that the rights of individuals or the minority will be in little danger from interested combinations of the majority. I'll cut that.

**Jim Kelly:** [00:11:19] Seven. Federalist number 70.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:11:22] Finally, Alexander Hamilton comes out, right?

**Nick Capodice:** [00:11:27] Yes, we've had a lot of Madison now. But Hamilton's Federalist 70 is the one that supports a strong executive branch. Quote, Energy in the executive is the leading character in the definition of good government, end quote. And Hamilton argues for a unitary executive. That is that the president is in charge of the whole executive branch, the whole shebang. It prevents against legislative encroachments.

**Jim Kelly:** [00:11:51] 8, federalist number 78.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:11:54] This is your favorite.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:11:55] I do like this one. And it's Hamilton again, because it's about the powers of the judicial branch. Some [00:12:00] of Hamilton's points are that the judicial branch has, quote, no influence over either the sword or the purse, end quote. He argues that lifetime appointments of federal judges secure justice. And finally, in federalist 78, he outlines the process of judicial review that federal courts are the ones who should determine if laws are constitutional or not. This is a principle upheld in the delightful court case, Marbury v. Madison, 1803.

**Jim Kelly:** [00:12:27] And nine. Letter from Birmingham Jail by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr..

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:12:32] Letter from a Birmingham jail. Something written in the mid 20th century is a foundational document.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:12:39] I know, right? I was taught that document in English class, it was about like how to make an argument, not a civics class. Dr. Martin Luther King was arrested on April 12th, 1963, for parading without a permit in Birmingham. And a group of eight white clergymen from Alabama wrote a statement titled A Call for Unity. Letter from [00:13:00] a Birmingham jail is a response to that statement and his arrest. And it is a bedrock document for civil rights and for the idea of nonviolent protest. It is a foundational document because it lays out a reasoning and a process for the people to push back against unjust laws. There are dozens of excellent lines from it. Whenever you look for summaries on it every teacher says just read it. You just got to read the whole thing. One great line is, "We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor. It must be demanded by the oppressed."

**Jenifer Hitchcock:** [00:13:38] You know, it's funny, when they came out and said that they were going to put this onto their documents, I think a lot of people were flabbergasted and they saw it as a historical document or, ah, you know, a piece of rhetological argumentation. And I understand where they're coming from. But there are so many just amazing corners of that document that [00:14:00] I just want to sit in and think about. Once the kids see that, it allows them to walk into making connections with other groups, both then and now. You know, like I want to talk about how this connects to Black Lives Matter. I want to talk about how this connects to the Port Huron statement. I want to talk about how this connects to, you know, the environmental movement. Like, how are we using this as a way to delegitimize groups that are external to power structures.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:14:29] So I'm presuming that these students know these documents really well. By the time they take this test, can they, like, reference them? Can they have them out in front of them?

**Nick Capodice:** [00:14:40] In previous AP exams, you had to have that all memorized, it had to all be in your noodle. But due to the tests being taken at home, it is an open book test. You can have these documents at hand. However, Jenifer had some strongly worded advice about this.

**Jenifer Hitchcock:** [00:14:56] I know that I'm telling my own my own friends. My my [00:15:00] my best friends and education, my students this year that I want them to turn everything off, like don't have a cell phone out, don't have your books out. It's just it's a distraction. And you won't you won't be able to turn a corner in twenty five minutes with all of that stuff there. It really is just can you create a claim, give evidence that supports that claim and gives great commentary that will connect your evidence back to whatever position you've taken on the prompt.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:15:30] Those minutes are going to go by fast. Jennifer filmed herself taking a practice exam under the new rules for this year.

**Jenifer Hitchcock:** [00:15:36] I laughed on the camera last week, so I was like, it is way more stressful than it looks, especially like when you're doing it live. My handwriting fell apart. I mean, I was just like, oh, my God, everyone's judging everything that I'm saying. Like, they're like, that's not what that said. It's it it sounds a lot easier than it is.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:15:58] You do, though, want to have whatever notes [00:16:00] and outlines you yourself have prepared with you. That is a must.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:16:03] We talked a lot about the first essay here. Not much about the second. What is it called?

**Nick Capodice:** [00:16:08] It's a concept application question. It's 40 percent of your grade, 15 minutes.

**Jim Kelly:** [00:16:12] So the concept application question presents the students with an authentic scenario and assesses their ability to explain the effects of a political institution, behavior or process, and then transfer their understanding of course concepts and apply them in a new situation or scenario.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:16:29] For example, last year's concept application question was fascinating. It was about a hypothetical super conservative religious group and their constitutional rights regarding challenging part of a tax law. Ryan Werenka had some tips for this, which also can kind of apply to the argument question as well.

**Ryan Werenka:** [00:16:46] I think I picked up at a an AP teacher seminar was a little acronym that was APBS. It's not what you think, right? It stands for answer the prompt and be specific. You know, if we're [00:17:00] doing that, it's giving us a very specific thing. Let's make sure that our answer is relating back to what the prompt is asking us. And then provide specific information.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:17:08] APBS

**Nick Capodice:** [00:17:09] Answer the prompt. Be specific. Last year's essay about the religious group. The first question was describe in action Congress can take to address the concerns of the interest group in the scenario. So so Congress could pass a law. So describe it. Congress could pass a law reversing the Johnson amendment. Answer the prompt, be specific. Another handy acronym Ryan told me about is RSVP.

**Ryan Werenka:** [00:17:36] Where RSVP is, restate the language of the question in your answer and vanish the pronouns. They did this. Who did that? What? Make sure you... The Supreme Court decided this. Or James Madison wrote that. Or Alexander Hamilton was really bad at duels. I think those are the things that are going to help an AP reader to know this, that you know your stuff, that you know [00:18:00] your content and you know how to apply.

**Jenifer Hitchcock:** [00:18:02] One of the things that I see is that kids will use things like legislature a lot. Or courts. You as the writer have to do all the heavy lifting to show me that, you know, that the state legislatures are the ones who have the authority to redistrict and draw maps. If you say legislature, I have to do too much inference right. Like I'm like, which legislature? Because it ain't gonna be Congress. Pronouns are like the Devil's Playground. Just don't use them. Don't say he. Don't say she. Don't say they don't say it. Like repeat, repeat, repeat. Proper nouns are preferable. Active voice and past tense is preferable. Just clear crisp statements. Very factual statements. Short to the point. Get it done.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:18:47] Jennifer give me another tip on this one. Whenever you see the words original constitution.

**Jenifer Hitchcock:** [00:18:53] That is like a red flag, like red flag goes up and you should know immediately. We're talking 1789. [00:19:00] No constitutional amendments. You have to think about what the framers arguments were. Don't get bogged down on what we've what we've evolved to.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:19:10] And second and Jennifer framed this specifically as an equity issue because access to technology and Wi-Fi is a big problem in the country, especially now. But she said if you can take the test on a computer with the keyboard, if you don't have one, if you know someone who's got one, borrow it, write down the password to log into the computer on a piece of paper, leave nothing to chance. But if you can't. If you don't have access to computer, do your best on the phone. And also, if you prefer, students can write their answers on paper and upload photographs of them. But they're only given exactly five minutes to do that. So whatever your plan is, practice it beforehand. So you're not stressed out because one universal thing that all three teachers told me was not just good luck, but you've got this.

**Ryan Werenka:** [00:19:59] All the students [00:20:00] that are taking this on, I know this is a challenging time and a challenging class, and this certainly hasn't made things easier. But you guys are rock stars. You are are a good example for all of us. And I wish you the best of luck.

**Jim Kelly:** [00:20:12] We know how stressful this is. So we get it. But we also know that you guys are gonna do awesome on the exam this year and just go for it and do the best that you can.

**Jenifer Hitchcock:** [00:20:24] To all of my new friends who are taking this course with me. I wish you the very best of luck. And to my class of 2020, my Colonial's, my heart is with you as you sit down for this and you walk straight into the doors of where our future is trying to solve all of these issues with us, for us, all of those things.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:20:44] It is an intense class and it sounds like a really intense exam. Whether you take this test or not, these concepts and these documents would give anyone a fantastic education on [00:21:00] 'us.' America is about arguments. It's about discussions with evidence and rebelling and resisting and compromising and refusing to compromise.

[00:21:15] Yeah, we call our show the basics of how our democracy works. And I'm just grateful to have taken a peek behind the curtain of Civics 202.

[00:21:34] That’s that for today, this episode was produced by me, Nick Capodice, with you Hannah McCarthy thank you

H: Our staff includes Jacqui Fulton, who says soverignty is just a popularity contest

N: Erika Janik is our executive producer and could cut a three hour test into seven minutes

H: Maureen McMurray took her AP with a quill fashioned from a turkey feather and never stops talking about it

N: Music in this episode by Moore and Gardner doin’ this jaunty rag you hear right now, also by Uncan, Tone Ranger, Ikimashu Oi, Blue dot sessions, Broke for Free, gladrags, Inequalis, sara the illstrumentalist and the artist pick that’s never risky, Chris Zabriskie

H: Civics 101 is supported in part by the corporation for public broadcasting and is a production of NHPR, New Hampshire public radio