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**Adia Samba-Quee:** [00:00:00] Civics 101 is supported in part by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:00:06] You're listening to Civics 101, I'm Hannah McCarthy.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:00:09] I'm Nick Capodice.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:00:10] This show is often about understanding a law or a political event or process something written down and codified.

[00:00:17] But the truth is, a lot of the time in the US we do things because that's just the way we do them. That's the norm.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:00:27] So these are things that aren't formal laws, but we still expect people to abide by. Like there's no law that says you must not cut in line at the grocery store, but you just don't do it.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:00:37] Exactly, because if you did, you'd be a jerk. You'd also be setting a bad precedent. You'd be teaching people the wrong lesson, the way I think of it, as if everybody started cutting in line at the grocery store, the simple act of paying for your food would dissolve into chaos. And the same goes for democratic norms.

**Susan Stokes:** [00:00:54] It's not written down rule that is usually often kind of taken for granted and not even noticed as a rule, until it's violated.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:01:04] This is Susan Stokes. She's a professor of politics at the University of Chicago and director of the Chicago Center on Democracy.

**Susan Stokes:** [00:01:11] So, you know, to give an example, it sort of goes without saying in general that the that the outgoing president will attend the inauguration of the incoming president. And I'm not sure we would have even thought of that as a norm. We wouldn't have thought hard about why that is helpful or why it is anything more than just like showing up at an event until it now is about to be to be violated or not to be followed.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:01:39] So these aren't written, but they're customs and traditions like it is customary to address other members of Congress with ridiculously flowery language to not insult a U.S. ally. It's customary for a president to release their tax returns and it's customary for elected officials to eventually accept the results of an election.

**Susan Stokes:** [00:01:58] What does that do for us? Well, [00:02:00] it's part of a kind of peaceful transition of power that is part of the very definition of democracy.

[00:02:06] It turns out to be incredibly important.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:02:08] Norms like fancy congressional language during debate that keeps people polite and respectful and let's procedure flow.

**Nancy Pelosi:** [00:02:15] Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I thank the gentle lady for yielding and congratulate her on her extraordinary leadership.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:02:21] It's basically a step above common courtesy and not punching below the belt. But not all democratic norms are like that.

**Susan Stokes:** [00:02:28] A lot of these norms actually do help keep our system going. They do help us have a system in which you kind of channel what might be a violent confrontation, conflict into peaceable You mechanisms for adjudicating differences. So, you know, democracy is not about everybody agreeing. It's about shifting from a potentially violent arena to a peaceable arena.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:02:58] So democratic norms help us maintain courtesy, keep things on schedule and keep the peace. Basically, these are all the little traditions that stitch a functioning democracy together. But I do see a glaring problem here, Hanna. We rely on a lot of these norms, but they aren't laws. It is perfectly legal to ignore them.

**Susan Stokes:** [00:03:20] You know, to put proper names on it is bad for Democrats and it's bad for Republicans. It's bad for anyone who is invested in a kind of ongoing system in which they can compete for power without risking violence and achieve power. If they have, you know, if they have good ideas and are able to get people to vote for them. So I do think that there should be a very strong bipartisan support for for strengthening these norms.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:03:49] Are democratic norms ever made into law?

**Susan Stokes:** [00:03:52] Well, I think we're learning we're learning getting a kind of crash course right now in the 14th Amendment and post [00:04:00] civil war rules that were written into the Constitution that were sort of meant to deal with the aftermath and create incentives for it to avoid another sort of violent breaking apart of country and a leaders acting in a kind of treasonous manner.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:04:18] In other words, what might have been considered a democratic norm before the civil war. In this case, office holders engaging in sedition or rebellion became a constitutional law.

[00:04:28] After that, norm was violated, which could potentially happen again, if not through a constitutional amendment, then maybe in U.S. code, especially if norms are violated in frightening ways. Like a rebellion. Yeah, like that. In the meantime, these democratic norms that stitch the fabric of our government and politics together should probably still be followed. There's nothing else keeping them alive.

**Susan Stokes:** [00:04:53] What you don't want is a period of our history in which norms are challenged and shattered. And you have a whole generation of young people thinking, well, those really aren't norms. And therefore, if some leaders don't follow and they. Can't be very important, they can't be we should cast them aside, you know, it's naive to think that those norms are anything real.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:05:11] That does it for democratic norms on Civics 101, you can listen to all of our episodes at Civics101podcast.org or wherever you get your podcasts.