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**Civics 101**

**Primaries and Caucuses**

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

**Nick Capodice:** [00:00:04] Let me run a little thought experiment by you.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:00:08] Alright, run it on by

**Nick Capodice:** [00:00:08] This one comes from Bruce Stinebrickner.

**Bruce Stinebrickner:** [00:00:10] I'm Bruce Stinebrickner, I'm a professor of political science at DePauw University.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:00:15] He told me to imagine it's the first game in the World Series.

**Bruce Stinebrickner:** [00:00:18] And there's going to be, let's assume it's going to be the Yankees, which is often the case with respect to the American League.

[00:00:25] Derek Jeter!(clap clap clapclapclap)

**Bruce Stinebrickner:** [00:00:25] And let's assume they're going to be playing the Dodgers. So it's an old Yankees Dodgers World Series.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:00:33] Ah the old Yankee Dodgers World Series.

**Bruce Stinebrickner:** [00:00:36] I don't think the Yankees organization, New York Yankees, are going to hold a vote among all the Yankee fans in the country to decide who's going to be the starting pitcher for the first game. And they chose Nick. They chose you. That would be ludicrous. And yet that is the analogy of what gets done in the presidential selection, nomination process.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:01:04] I'm Nick Capodice, the worst pitcher in the world.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:01:06] I'm Hannah McCarthy, and I'm slightly better at it.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:01:08] And today on Civics 101 in our presidential election series, we're talking about primaries and caucuses. The elections before the elections. The unique way we choose nominees. Yes, it may be ludicrous for baseball, but in politics, it's called democracy. So first off, when you choose a candidate's name in a primary or caucus, you're not technically voting for that candidate.

**Domenico Montanaro:** [00:01:35] Well, when it comes to a primary process, you're actually voting for a delegate. I'm Domenico Montanaro. I'm senior political editor and correspondent at NPR.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:01:45] And those delegates, about 4700 for the Democratic Party and 2400 for the Republican Party, they go to the convention and that's where they pick the official nominee.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:01:55] And the person that the delegates vote for at the convention, it's who the public voted for.

**Domenico Montanaro:** [00:02:00] It's based on the public's vote, but they're actually not required to be fixed to the public vote. Some places do require some of them to be fixed. So if somebody and oftentimes they wind up being that way anyway, because the candidates submit a slate of delegates. In other words, they submit the names of the people who they would want to be at the convention for them. And they do that to guarantee that those people don't wig out on them and, you know, go in and vote for somebody else.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:02:33] Most of the delegates are called pledged delegates who will on the first ballot at the convention vote for the candidate that picked them. But the Democratic Party has this fun thing called superdelegates. There's about 700 of them.

**Domenico Montanaro:** [00:02:48] A superdelegate is an elected leader or party official who gets a vote in this process. The Democratic National Committee has selected who those people would be. So if you're a member of Congress, you're a senator or governor. And also, they have these sort of higher level superdelegates who are former elected officials and dignitaries like former President Bill Clinton, for example. He would get a vote. Jimmy Carter. He gets a vote.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:03:17] So the Republicans don't have superdelegate.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:03:19] They do not. Hannah, I know you're gonna go into conventions in great detail in your episode, but just for a bare understanding, the delegates all vote at conventions. Whoever has a 51 percent majority gets the nomination. If there isn't a 51 percent majority, then they have to have a second ballot. The 2020 election is gonna be the first time that superdelegates do not get to vote on that first ballot.

**Domenico Montanaro:** [00:03:40] Their votes, however, would count on a second ballot. That could make things very, very dicey and interesting when it comes to a floor fight at the convention. If it comes to that.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:03:50] Ok. That is what we're choosing in a primary or caucus. But what is the difference between the two?

**Nick Capodice:** [00:03:56] OK. Here's Bruce again.

**Bruce Stinebrickner:** [00:03:58] So you're very question wants me to distinguish between caucuses and primaries as two different instruments in the nomination process. And that's fine. I can do that and I will. But the bigger point is, by world standards, either caucuses such as which occur in Nevada or Iowa or primaries which occur in New Hampshire and California in New York. Either of those is simply a remarkable political phenomenon.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:04:25] And he did explain the difference, but he wanted to make something very clear to me at first.

**Bruce Stinebrickner:** [00:04:30] But don't. But don't ignore it. Don't ignore my friend. How unique either is if you introduced the most restrictive caucus system that's used in the United States in one of these 10 states, if you move that to Britain or Canada or Japan or India, other functioning democracies, it would be a democratic revolution.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:04:51] Why?

**Nick Capodice:** [00:04:52] Because nobody else does it this way. Primaries have been proposed in some countries and some positions around the world are subject to primaries, but not president or prime minister and almost nobody else caucuses.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:05:05] So why do we? Is this just the way that we've always done it?

**Nick Capodice:** [00:05:08] No. This is a relatively new phenomenon in America. The way things used to be, Party elites selected our nominees for president. Yes, regular voters choose who's going to actually be president, but they couldn't choose who would be on the ballot in the first place. And at this time, we have to mention our old standby, the early part of the 20th century, the progressive era. I mean, we're talking progressive politics. You know where we're going, right Hannah?

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:05:37] Take me to the Badger State.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:05:38] You got it. Always with the Wisconsin! In Wisconsin in the early nineteen hundreds corrupt party bosses were, they were picking all the local candidates. And so reform-minded progressive politicians start to pass legislation that the people should have a say in the nominees. And as we know, states are laboratories of democracy. Florida starts to have its first. Primary in 1901. Wisconsin has a primary in 1905. And by the 1960s, we got 14 states who have primaries. And while those primaries gave momentum and public support for candidates, by and large, the party still picked the nominee.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:06:19] But then we get to 1968.

**Lauren Chooljian:** [00:06:28] In 1968, the Democratic Party changed the rules, you know about this?

**Nick Capodice:** [00:06:33] You do know about this.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:06:34] I do know about this.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:06:35] What was going on in 1968?

**Lauren Chooljian:** [00:06:39] Vietnam.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:06:41] This is Lauren Chooljian. She's an NHPR reporter and she's a co-host of the podcast Stranglehold.

**Lauren Chooljian:** [00:06:46] Democrats had nominated somebody who didn't perform as well in the primaries.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:06:53] That somebody who won the Democratic nomination was Hubert Humphrey by the way. Humphrey did not win a single primary. He got 2 percent of the national primary vote. He had just focused his campaign on states that didn't have primaries and he won the nomination.

**Lauren Chooljian:** [00:07:08] And of course, there are a lot of things. I mean, Robert Kennedy got killed doing this. I mean, there's a lot going on. Basically, what happened was in after the 68 convention, Democrats were like party bosses have run this game for a long time. It was party bosses who up until 68 chose the nominees, even if they performed well in the primary, the party bosses could say, "eh" do whatever they need to do, like strong arm people to make that happen. Well, in 68, as you may have known, a lot of people protest in Chicago, the DNC in Chicago, because they're angry. They're angry with government. They're fed up.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:07:50] And protests were happening outside of the convention, but there was chaos inside. There was fighting amongst delegates. Dan Rather got punched in the stomach.

**Lauren Chooljian:** [00:08:08] And so the Democratic Party was like, OK, we cannot have middle aged, middle class white men determine who picks our nominee for president. The real people out there need to have more of a say. So that switch was huge. And then the Republicans that would, the Republicans then go along with this rule change as well, I should say. And that is why we have people like Jimmy Carter in 1976,.

[00:08:33] The Democratic nominee for president of the United States.

**Lauren Chooljian:** [00:08:37] Who had no clout, no connections to party bosses, was like hardly known by anybody. He was like just the governor of Georgia at this time. He like was involved a little bit in national politics, but not a lot.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:08:47] And Carter goes on to campaign like crazy in Iowa. New Hampshire sweeps them both in 1976 and becomes president.

[00:08:53] We went out early and not many people cared who I was. We had to shake hands with everybody at the Portsmouth shipyard. And everybody that came, I had to explain who I was and what I was running for.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:09:07] All right. So primaries and caucuses have been around for a while, but they didn't really mean much until recently.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:09:14] Yeah, and now the difference. Here's Bruce Stinebrickner again.

**Bruce Stinebrickner:** [00:09:18] Caucuses. Caucuses are different from primaries in that primaries are state government run elections. The state government of New Hampshire runs the New Hampshire primary. The state government of California runs the California primary. Caucuses, such as in Iowa, Nevada. Those caucuses are run by the party organizations of the states. So they are not official government elections.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:09:49] We have a primary here in New Hampshire.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:09:50] We do. We have a very special one which we are gonna get to

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:09:53] How many states do primaries or caucuses?

**Nick Capodice:** [00:09:57] Hoo! Not only are the rules and methods different in every state. There's no federal law about primaries and caucuses. The rules can change every election. In 2016, 14 percent of pledged delegates came from caucuses, but in 2020, it's going to be around 5 percent.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:10:13] Why are states dropping caucusing?

**Nick Capodice:** [00:10:15] Because caucuses, frankly, take a lot more work than a primary for the party and for the voters. We're now down to only six states who do caucuses. You must you just simply must look up how your state runs its primary or caucus. Some states only let you vote in the caucus if you're registered as being affiliated with the party. Some states don't. Some states have same day registration. Some states take you off the rolls if you haven't voted in a certain amount of years. You just gotta look it up.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:10:40] I think I got it. Caucuses are run by parties in a state, primaries by the state government. They both choose delegates for the convention. And every state is different.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:10:54] You got it.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:10:55] But what actually happens in a caucus?

**Nick Capodice:** [00:10:57] Ok, for this one, let's go to the first nomination contest in the country.

[00:11:04] People, if you choose to try to find one more person caucus and we allow more time.

**Kate Payne:** [00:11:12] Something I didn't really anticipate or fully understand until I came up here was how fraught the process can be for some people, like some Iowans really just don't like having to be yelled at when they're trying to vote.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:11:36] This is Kate Payne. She works for Iowa Public Radio and she's the co-host of the podcast Caucusland. A caucus is not filling out a bubble in a voting booth. A caucus is held in a school or a library or meeting hall. All across the state. And they take hours. And big surprise, the Republicans and the Democrats do them completely differently.

**Kate Payne:** [00:11:56] So for the Republicans, they use a secret ballot. So sort of writing down a candidate's name on a piece of paper or tossing it into a hat kind of idea. So surrogates will get up, defend their candidate folks, write down their names. Democratic caucuses are where a lot of back and forth and the political tug of war happens. So folks have seen, you know, those videos of dozens or hundreds of people yelling at each other in an Iowa gymnasium somewhere.

[00:12:28] What are you doing to make sure you invited people come over to John Edwards? People I know. I'm going to talk to each one of these candidates. John Edwards is the right man for president. We're going to get them over. Clinton supporters? Oh, yeah. What are you doing to make sure the Biden people come over? Kidnap most of them. You know what? A lot of times chloroform works, when you knock em out and drag em over...

**Kate Payne:** [00:12:48] That is a Democratic caucus. So at a Democratic caucus, the candidates surrogates will get up, defend their choice, and then it's up to all of those individuals in the room to then choose their candidate physically stand, you know, and some corner of the room with their candidate's supporters.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:13:11] So they're standing in corners of the room. But how do they winnow down the field?

**Kate Payne:** [00:13:17] So each candidate has to get at least 15 percent of all of the folks in the room. If they don't, then those supporters have to realign. They have to choose a different candidate.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:13:29] And Kate told me that is the beauty and the horror of the Democratic caucus. You're not hiding behind a secret ballot. You're taking a literal stand.

**Kate Payne:** [00:13:39] Individual Iowans defending their choice to other supporters. Sometimes their, you know, family, friends and neighbors defending their choice and trying to get other people to come over to their side. So that's that back and forth, hashing out argumentation about which candidate is better prepared, what are their policies, really? It's that interaction that is essential to the caucuses.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:14:16] And then eight days later, we drive into our own home state for the New Hampshire primary, which, according to the state law of New Hampshire is, "the first contest of its kind." This is what Stranglehold the show that Lauren hosts with Jack Rodolico, this is their rockin theme song, by the way, is all about. New Hampshire being first in the nation.

**Lauren Chooljian:** [00:14:39] FITN is like a hashtag and a lifestyle around here for like the political class.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:14:43] If you live in New Hampshire, you can physically shake the hand of just about every single presidential candidate because the New Hampshire primary gets so much press.

**Lauren Chooljian:** [00:14:53] Now, this is seems crazy, but New Hampshire has a very low number of delegates, so each should not rationally get the amount of coverage and media presence that it gets for its contests, because in the grand scheme of things, the amount of delegates that are coming for New Hampshire versus the amount of delegates in California, Texas. It's like not even comparable. However, because we are first Iowa's the first caucus, but because we are the first primary, Iowa and New Hampshire get an incredible amount of media attention. That then makes it seem like they get all this momentum going into the rest of them. And it makes it seem like we are much more important than many of the other states because it's the first real chance that candidates are going in front of real voters. And it's the first time we, as Americans are saying, oh, this is what our neighbors in these states are thinking. But the reason why New Hampshire is like, yeah, we're first, even though Iowa is the first contest, is because we're the first time people are actually going into a voting booth and making it a choice.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:15:50] Okay. So now I have to ask, I know Iowa and New Hampshire are first, but what does that actually affect? You know, how often does it determine the nominee?

**Nick Capodice:** [00:16:02] Since about 1960 New Hampshire has picked the nominee for the Republicans in all but three elections, Democrats much less often. But Lauren told me that a win in New Hampshire or in Iowa can be a fast track to the White House. And she gave me the example of Bernie Sanders in 2016, who won in New Hampshire. And without that win, he might not have lasted as long as he did in that campaign. And this is all because we are first.

**Alvin Tillery:** [00:16:30] Ah yes. The first mover advantage.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:16:34] This is Alvin Tillery. He's a political science professor at Northwestern University.

**Alvin Tillery:** [00:16:38] So they are. They are the first two states in the the nominating system, and they have a ton of power to shape the way in which subsequent states consider who's a viable candidate. And so that's why they're so important. Some people say that the dilemma with Iowa and New Hampshire is that their populations, you know, don't mirror the the nation.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:17:06] And when Alvin says Mirror of the nation, he's referencing the fact that Iowa is the sixth whitest state in the union. New Hampshire is the fourth. And while the United States is about 60 percent white, those two states are about 90 percent. Which brings us to this question.

**Alvin Tillery:** [00:17:25] If you lose in Iowa and New Hampshire, I don't know, for racial or gender reasons. Will the national media proclaim you a loser before you get to a place like South Carolina or California where you're much more likely to find support? And so, you know, there's been a debate about whether or not those two states should remain should keep their their their order.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:17:52] So why do we keep doing it this way? Why can't we have a national vote?

**Nick Capodice:** [00:17:57] That's exactly what I asked Lauren.

**Lauren Chooljian:** [00:17:58] Because New Hampshire and Iowa won't give it up, dude.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:18:03] Honestly, I can't. You just can't. Can't everyone agree that this is not truly a Democratic process?

**Lauren Chooljian:** [00:18:08] No, they can't agree. Which is what what I just explained to you. They like people in New Hampshire, like we want to be first, Iowa people want to be first. They don't want that. You know why they don't want that, for the most part is because a lot of people believe the nationalized primary then just becomes a TV primary. Then you don't have to, as a candidate, go and face voters, you know, one on one and be like, what's your question about like, what's your big issue like? Oh, it's health care. Let me give you my plan. Oh, you want Medicare for all? Well, here's why I do or don't believe in that. Or like you don't like Obamacare? Well, neither do I. Like those. You know, they're not. This is per the argument of these people who believe that a national primary would be bad. Their argument is like, then it's not real. Then it's not...then the real people don't really have as much power because then this campaign is going to be held in, you know, airports where they're like, I'm here in Nevada, but I'm not really I'm just like stepping off an airplane then I'll fly somewhere else, or it's it's, the campaign is done in commercials, you know, and then it becomes a cost thing. And then, you know, somebody who can't raise a lot of money doesn't even have a shot because they can't pay for the major ad markets in California or whatever.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:19:06] I can't forget Bruce's insistence that this is the most small 'd' Democratic nominating process in the world. But it seems like New Hampshire and Iowa just have a lot of power. Has anyone floated potential alternatives to this.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:19:23] A few things have been floated, like everybody has the primary on the same day, but also maybe doing a rotating first in the nation primary. So like every four years, there's a different set of states that goes first. And while that doesn't have a ton of momentum to change right now, there are some things changing about how we do primaries and caucuses. We can just opt to not do them at all.

[00:19:50] That's President Trump discussing his Republican challengers for president just moments ago. Several states are canceling their GOP primary elections and Kansas is one of them. The president says he had nothing to do with that.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:20:02] As of this moment, four states have canceled their GOP primaries. There's probably more to come. All those delegates will automatically be pledged to Donald Trump. And this is not unprecedented. In 2012, the DNC canceled 12 primaries during Barack Obama's re-election. But one difference is that in 2012, there weren't any serious significant challengers to Obama. And Domenico Montanaro said that this year there are.

**Domenico Montanaro:** [00:20:26] And that's a big reason why they're canceling primaries. They don't want to embarrass President Trump if there winds up being a significant chunk of the vote that goes to somebody else, like a Mark Sanford, the former governor of South Carolina. They don't want to have that kind of embarrassment, that media storyline, and eventually potentially hurt the president's chances of re-election.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:20:54] Before we go. Brady Carlson, author of the fantastic book Dead Presidents, is going to take us through one of his favorite presidential elections in U.S. history. What do we got today, Brady?

**Brady Carlson:** [00:21:04] Today, we're looking at the election of 1820, which at least on its face, was one of the most predictable and least suspenseful elections in American history. Here's the short version. James Monroe runs for re-election unopposed and wins.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:21:21] Nobody? Nobody opposed him. Just one candidate on the ballot.

**Brady Carlson:** [00:21:25] Just that one.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:21:26] Just for the.... You gotta put somebody up there, you know, just for appearances.

**Brady Carlson:** [00:21:30] You'd think, right. But this seemingly dull rubber stamp of an election actually has a lot more to it than it seems at first glance. So when I was reading president books as a kid, the way I understood 1820 was that James Monroe was just so popular that the country began what is sometimes called the era of good feelings. And so they re-elected him nearly unanimously in the Electoral College, nearly unanimously because one elector cast his vote elsewhere so that George Washington could have the singular honor of being the only president elected unanimously. Here's, though, how it actually played out.

**Brady Carlson:** [00:22:08] James Monroe was president at a time when the early American political parties were dying out. There were the Federalists who wanted a stronger federal government like the second president, John Adams, and Alexander Hamilton of musical fame. They were opposed by the anti federalists who were mostly also called Republicans in their time and are known best today as Democratic Republicans.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:22:30] Terrible branding, first of all.

**Brady Carlson:** [00:22:32] Yeah, agreed.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:22:33] I know generally where Democrats and Republicans stand on issues, specifically social issues today. But what were those two big parties about?

**Brady Carlson:** [00:22:41] Well, very broadly, the Federalists were mostly based in the north. They represented industry and cities and they wanted stronger ties with England. The anti federalist Republicans were more southern, more rural. They wanted closer ties to France instead of England, and they were much more skeptical of the federal government. The key here was that the anti federalists had support in the most important state in the country. Virginia In the first 36 years of the U.S. presidency, a non Virginian was president for only four years. There were three Virginia presidents elected back to back. They were called the Virginia Dynasty, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and James Monroe. The Republican Party was growing and growing. The Federalists were declining to the point that by 1820, there wasn't enough of a party left to even field a presidential candidate. So when the Electoral College met, nearly all the votes went to the only guy in the race. And in Massachusetts, one of the electors who voted for Monroe was John Adams, one of the original leaders of that opposition Federalist Party.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:23:43] I did not know that former presidents could be electors. Stubborn old John Adams cast his ballot for the opposition party?

**1776:** [00:23:51] "Will someone shut that man up? NEVERRRRR!"

**Brady Carlson:** [00:23:54] And you see why there's this idea that this was the era of good feelings. But was it? I mean, 1820 was the year without a contested election, but it was also the year Congress had to engineer what was called the Great Compromise to head off this growing regional tension about slavery and whether or not to expand slavery as the country was expanding. And even in the very lopsided Electoral College count, there was a hint of opposition or dissatisfaction in the air. There was the faithless elector from New Hampshire called William Plumer, a former U.S. senator and governor. And later he would be a founder of the New Hampshire Historical Society. Well, he had reservations about casting his vote for Monroe, but it wasn't because he wanted George Washington to be the only president elected unanimously. That story I'd read was not true. He wasn't a huge fan of the Monroe administration. And while he knew he wasn't going to change the outcome of the election on his own, he thought he had a plan to make his protest vote count.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:24:52] So let me have it. Who did he cast his protest vote for?

**Brady Carlson:** [00:24:57] He voted for John Quincy Adams, who was Monroe's secretary of state. And his thinking was, this is a guy who someday should be president. So he was kind of floating Adams name to the political class, kind of hinting about who they should back in the next election in 1824. And as it turned out, much of the political class did get behind Adams in that election. But by then, the idea of having a bunch of powerful elites choosing each successive president for the rest of the country was not very popular. And there was a war hero, an aspiring president out there called Andrew Jackson, who decided to launch his own populist movement to stand against the political classes. He eventually and very pointedly named that movement the Democratic Party.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:25:44] So this extremely boring election with only one candidate and one political party essentially leads to a complete new era of U.S. politics.

**Brady Carlson:** [00:25:54] Yeah it's kind of the opposite of E Pluribus Unum, you know, out of many one. In this case, it was out of one many.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:26:01] Brady, thank you so much.

**Brady Carlson:** [00:26:02] My pleasure. Thank you.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:26:09] That's Brady Carlson, author, host of All Things Considered on Wisconsin Public Radio. That'll just about do it for today. We'll keep coming out every two weeks as long as you keep listening. Today's episode was produced by me Nick Capodice and you Hannah McCarthy thank you.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:26:24] Our staff includes Ben Henry and Jacqui Fulton. Erika Janik is our executive producer and reminder that it's pronounced Nevada, not Nevada.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:26:32] Maureen McMurray has no delegates, but she gets a lot of media attention.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:26:36] Music in this episode by Music in this episode by Blue Dot Sessions, Chris Zabriskie, Audio Hertz, Meydan, Lee Rosevere, The Grand Affair and Junior85

**Nick Capodice:** [00:26:44] And we say it once, but we'll say it again. If you're a teacher and you ever want to use any of her shows in your classroom, drop us a line. Visit us at civics101podacst.org/info for various and sundry supports.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:26:54] Civics 101 is made possible in part by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and is a production of NHPR.