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

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:00:05] I want to run a super quick experiment on you, Nick.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:00:08] Alright. Let me have it.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:00:13] For this to work, let's just say that you are either a Republican or you're a Democrat. OK?

**Nick Capodice:** [00:00:17] Hypothetically, okay, yeah.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:00:20] You're moving into a new neighborhood and you're looking at two different houses. One is next to a person who shares your party affiliation. OK? Your neighbor is the same party as you. The other house is next to someone who identifies as a member of the opposing party. The houses being otherwise alike in dignity, which one do you pick?

**Nick Capodice:** [00:00:46] This seems like you're pulling one over on me. But of course, I would like to live somebody who shares my party affiliation and beliefs.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:00:53] Ok, now let's throw a third house into the mix. But this house is next to an unaffiliated [00:01:00] voter. Someone who identifies as an Independent- they don't have a party. Does that change your pick?

**Nick Capodice:** [00:01:10] Yeah. Honestly, it does, because I feel like I could learn something from that person and thus about myself. Why do you ask?

**Samara Klar:** [00:01:21] If there's one thing that Democrats and Republicans seem to agree on, it's that Independents are the best.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:01:26] This is Samara Klar. She's an associate professor of political science at the University of Arizona. And I bring this question up because Samara made this discovery while researching her book on Independent voters.

**Samara Klar:** [00:01:39] When we ask them who they want to live next door to? Who they want to work with? People, you know, if they're given a choice between someone from their own party and someone from the other party. They'll, of course, choose somebody from their own party. But if we add the option, "What about living next to an Independent?" Well, that's what they really want. People really like Independents.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:01:55] By the way, because I really want to hammer home the American love [00:02:00] for Independent voters...It isn't just that we want to live next to them. We want to date them.

**Samara Klar:** [00:02:07] I ran an experiment with my co-author, Yanna, where we showed people a series of faces. They were computer generated faces. They weren't real people. These were sort of robotic, formulaic faces. And we would randomly tell people that the face was either somebody who was a Republican, or a Democrat, or an Independent. And we would ask people to evaluate these characters that they were looking at. And we found that this- there's a broad consensus across all partisans that Independents are more physically attractive. Independents are more likable. And Independents are more trustworthy. And again, these were- this was an experiment. They were randomly assigned partisanships. And frankly, neither of them were particularly attractive- if I'm gonna be totally honest with you.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:02:49] All right. Wow. So Americans really love Independents.But I want to know what is an Independent? And is it even possible to have no party affiliation? [00:03:00]

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:03:00] Right. There is a degree to which the Independent voter feels almost like a myth. Like trying to pin down something intangible. Well today, we are going to try to pin down the un-pin-downable. This is Civics 101. I'm Hannah McCarthy.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:03:16] And I'm Nick Capodice.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:03:18] And first thing first, what is an independent voter?

**Jacqueline Salit:** [00:03:21] So this a constituency, or a community of voters, that are enormously distressed with the status quo. That are willing to move all over the spectrum without regard to political correctness or party loyalty.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:03:38] This is Jackie Salit. She's the president of Independent Voters dot org. She became an Independent, in the 1970s, after being raised in a very progressive, left leaning family. And she still identifies with a lot of that ideology. She just doesn't see the Democratic Party as being the vehicle for it.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:03:56] So when Jackie says "move all over the spectrum" does she means [00:04:00] swing voters? Like we think of swing states that can go for one party or the other? Is that the thing that makes an Independent an Independent?

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:04:06] Well it can. You might call a true swing voter a pure Independent. Right? A voter who isn't just not registered with the Democratic, or Republican Party, or some third party- but who truly votes for the person over their party affiliation. They can vote for a Democrat, or a Republican, or a Libertarian, or a Green Party candidate- whatever.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:04:30] Are there really, though, even voters out there who vote Democrat one year and Republican the next?

**News Anchor:** [00:04:36] Show of hands, how many of you have at times voted for Republicans and at times Democrats? All of you.

**Independent Voter:** [00:04:44] I really wish I could pull a number of things from a number of candidates to create an ideal candidate.

**News Anchor:** [00:04:48] In 2016 she supported Marco Rubio, but this time around-.

**Independent Voter:** [00:04:53] Tuesday I am going to be voting for Pete.

**News Anchor:** [00:04:55] Independent voter, Chris Davis, supported Trump in 2016, but now [00:05:00] he's leaning towards Joe Biden.

**Independent Voter:** [00:05:02] I am always on the fence until I make the decision.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:05:05] Do Independent swing voters actually exist? Yeah.

**Jacqueline Salit:** [00:05:10] Obama's margin of victory over Mrs. Clinton in 2008 came from Independent Voters. His margin of victory over John McCain came from Independent Voters. And then flash forward to 2016, Independent Voters swung towards Trump. And you had that kind of really fascinating and very misunderstood, in my opinion, phenomena of something like- I don't know- it's estimated 9, 10, 11 million Americans who had voted for Obama and then voted for Trump. Which you can't account for in, strictly speaking, ideological or partisan terms.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:05:50] The swing vote is a major element of the Independent ethos. But for an Independent like Jackie, and the work that her organization does [00:06:00], reform of the election system itself is paramount. Being a true Independent means dissatisfaction with the limitations of a two party system.

**Tiani Coleman:** [00:06:10] In 2016, we actually saw a pretty big phenomenon in the candidacies of Gary Johnson and Jill Stein, who also... I think... earned the support of quite a few Independents. It was not just Libertarians and Green Party members, but a lot of Independents also chose to go that direction if they didn't want to go with either Trump or Clinton.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:06:32] This is Tiani Coleman. She was actually in the interview with Jackie and I. Back in the early aughts Tiani was actually the chair of the Salt Lake City County Republican Party. And now she is the president of the New Hampshire Independent Voters. So 2016, you've got these Independent voters who are eyeing Jill Stein and Gary Johnson and putting their support behind them. But of course, ultimately, those campaigns and candidacies tanked. Part of what really happened was that people could [00:07:00] see that the system wouldn't allow them to express a vote for a third party, or for someone else other than someone in the two major parties, because we have created a system where people fear the other party so much that they won't take a risk on a third party candidacy. Because they're afraid that by voting third party they might actually, in effect, end up helping to elect the person that they most do not want. So, part of the- what we're trying to do as Independents is change that system. So that people are able to truly express the choice that they want without the system, kind of, telling them they only have one choice or two choices.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:07:44] This is especially an issue for Independent Voters in the primary. Ina lot of states you can't even vote without declaring a party affiliation. And this idea of wasting a vote, Samara Klar says that is the reason why Independent candidates do not succeed.

**Samara Klar:** [00:08:00] And [00:08:00] there's this sort of nightmare scenario that the party you prefer is going to lose by one vote. And it's because you gave your vote to the Independent Party who you knew was never going to win in the first place. So that really tends to drive people apart...and that...that...that hurts Independents.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:08:16] Take Bernie Sanders, for example. He's the longest serving Independent in Congress and he's already filed to be an Independent candidate in the 2024 Senate race. But he's running for president as a Democrat, just as he did in 2016.

**News Anchor:** [00:08:31] So I guess my question to you is, do you... do you consider yourself a Democrat?

**Bernie Sanders:** [00:08:36] No, I'm an Independent. And I think if the Democratic Party is going to succeed- and I want to see it succeed- it's going to have to open its doors to Independents. Who are probably... there are probably more Independents in this country than either Democrats or Republicans.

**Samara Klar:** [00:08:51] And he had to spend a lot of that primary trying to convince people he was electable. They weren't going to waste their vote. He was an electable guy. But he didn't run as I did as an Independent. I think that was really key. [00:09:00] He ran as a Democrat. When we see these sort of Independents leaning characters- Bernie Sanders is one done. Donald Trump is certainly one. I mean, he doesn't have a very partisan background. He's donated to Democrats. It's not really clear if he's voted in the past. We don't really know what his political background is. These people who are... who tend to be Independent, they succeed when they run as a Partisan. They don't succeed when they run as an Independent.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:09:25] Ok. OK. All right. Huh. This is just like when you've got an Independent voter, who ultimately feels that pressure in the voting booth and concedes to one major party candidate or the other. Because we are a two party system and to win you got to pick a side.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:09:40] So yes, that's true. Most voters do eventually pick a side. Still, Samara says that ever since we started measuring how many Independent voters there are in the United States, the number has been climbing.

**Samara Klar:** [00:09:51] The percentage of Independents has increased dramatically. 2016, to my knowledge, was the first election year where a plurality of Americans identified [00:10:00] as Independent even in the week following up to the election. Which is really unusual. Normally as a presidential election approaches most people will tell a survey researcher which party the identify with. That's the period of time where you're most likely to identify with a party. You've been thinking about it a lot. You've decided who you're going to vote for. If you don't identify as a partisan in the week before the election then you never will. In the week before 2016, we still had more Americans saying, "no, no, I'm an Independent".

**Nick Capodice:** [00:10:32] To what degree, though, was that just voters feeling like they really didn't like either option for a presidential candidate?

**Samara Klar:** [00:10:38] Now, partially that could be because Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton were both historically disliked by their own- by their own voters. These were two candidates that really did not garner a lot of enthusiasm from most mainstream Democrats and Republicans. But it also could be that we had reached this unprecedented level of fighting bitter vitriol attacks. [00:11:00] I mean...I have a book on Independent Voters with with my co-author Yanna. And what we found is that over time the percentage of sentences in presidential debates that convey insurmountable conflict increases exponentially every year. Presidential debates become more and more about fighting and attacking each other than about actually debating policy issues. And these are the kinds of signals people are getting when they're looking at the TV to figure, out "What is a Democrat? What is a Republican?" and they see all this fighting and they say, "well, that is not me".

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:11:34] Now, I should be totally clear, the majority of people who Samara and her co-author identified as Independents, did admit to leaning Republican or leaning Democrat. And that was ultimately the way that they voted. Identifying as an Independent does not mean being non-ideological. There are liberal Independents and conservative Independents and moderate Independents. But on that point, Jackie Salit, [00:12:00] it brings it back to the system itself.

**Jacqueline Salit:** [00:12:02] And my experience is from talking to Independents across the spectrum is that the decision to identify yourself as an Independent is an act of non-compliance with the system in like ninety eight-percent of the elections? Those are the only choices. So if you want to vote, you have to vote for either Democrat or Republican. But even beyond that, frankly, in a two party system like ours, in a system which is so controlled at the top by the parties in every way, at the electoral level, at the policy level, at the national dialogue level, at the level of rules, etc. and so forth for set forth for so many Americans to be saying, well, I'm not part of that. I'm an Independent, I think is a political statement of great importance, actually. [00:13:00] Frankly, I think it's of greater importance than who anyone decides to vote for in any given cycle. And I think that is the process and that's the moment that we're living through. And I think it's a very big test of the country. I also, by the way, think it's a very big test for progressives who, in my opinion, can oftentimes be less than fully responsive to that statement of noncompliance.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:13:37] So even if it is kind of semantics, like even if it's symbolic to declare yourself an Independent, that's symbolism does actually mean something. It's signifying to political scientist and activist groups and candidates that you are fed up with the partisanship. So then I have to ask, why is there not a capital by Independent party [00:14:00] if across the spectrum Independents can agree with noncompliance? Why not form the Independents Party with a platform all about being free to choose whomever you want?

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:14:10] Well, for one thing, there are parties in some states that call themselves the Independent or the Independence Party. In the case of the New York Independence Party, which Jackie helped to found, the platform is in fact reform. So this is the kind of true independent voter-minded party that you are talking about. But word to the wise, there are parties like the California Independent Party that are conservative leaning on abortion, gun rights, same-sex marriage. And then there's the Alaska Independence Party. And that's all about states rights and has this kind of libertarian bent. Many people who identify as Independents actually accidentally register with these parties and don't realize they've become affiliated with the party. But anyway, back to your question. Why not forming national [00:15:00] reform based party?

**Jacqueline Salit:** [00:15:02] Here's some different ways that I think about this. First of all, I don't think at the moment.

[00:15:10] I don't think that independents as a whole are looking to aggregate themselves into a third party. I think what's happening with independent voters right now is that they're swinging all over the place.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:15:24] Basically

[00:15:24] Jackie brings it back to the unpredictability that independents represent. Independent voters don't necessarily want to establish themselves as this unified voting bloc. They also don't want to eliminate the party system entirely. The independent identifier represents weariness with hyper partisanship and a desire for more than two options.

**Jacqueline Salit:** [00:15:49] Look, I think in general, if you asked independents, you know, should we ban political parties in the United States of America, most independents would say no. But I think independents would like [00:16:00] to have more choices. They'd like to not be restricted in the political process. And they would like to see a culture change that does not enforce the idea that at the end of the day, there are only two parties. There's only two ways of thinking about things. There's only two choices. And that's where you have to live. I think I think independents experience that as completely out of step with what is happening in actual life.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:16:32] This idea of what is happening "in actual life" is, I think, a really useful lens for understanding an independent voter. Samara made this point about partisanship versus the average American. And the reason why she and her co-author might be encountering more and more people who identify as independent.

**Samara Klar:** [00:16:52] What we found is that there's a real stigma against being a partisan. I mean, if you turn on the news, you listen to the radio while you hear [00:17:00] are angry Democrats and angry Republicans, particularly in Congress, yelling at each other, fighting with each other, unable to have any sort of compromise.

[00:17:09] Most Americans aren't like that. They're actually pretty nice people. They want to get along with their neighbors and they don't want to be associated with that kind of anger and that kind of vitriol. So as we see the sort of stigma against partisanship increase, more and more people say they're independents. And there's actually a sort of a sort of what we call social desirability bias could have seen as more socially desirable to say you're independent because people then don't associate you with all these things.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:17:36] So do you think, Hannah, that this rise in the number of people who identify as an independent is maybe a sign that lots of Americans prefer functioning relationships and healthy communication to bitter partisan arguing at the Thanksgiving dinner table?

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:17:51] As the co-host of Civics 101,

[00:17:53] I have to believe that.

[00:18:01] Civics [00:18:00] 101 is produced by me, Hannah McCarthy, with Nick Capodice and help from Jackie Fulton. Erica Janik is our executive producer. Maureen McMurry would never be part of any political party that would have her as a member. Music in this episode by Chad Crouch, Diamond Ortiz, KieLoKaz, Spazz Cardigan, Chris Zabriskie and Wild Light. You can find loads more resources, including educational materials and transcripts at Civics101podcast.org. Special thanks to Chad Peace of the Independent Voter Project for all of his help on this episode. Civics 101 is a production of NHPR, New Hampshire Public Radio.