

Omnia Podcast: Democracy and Decision 2024 | Democracy and Truth (Ep. 1)

Stephanie Perry:

Hello and welcome to a new season with OMNIA, the podcast on all things Penn Arts and Sciences. This season we'll be taking a close look at the state of US democracy in the context of the 2024 election. I'm your host, Stephanie Perry. Political nerd, executive director of the Penn Program on Opinion Research and Election Studies, and the Robert A. Fox Leadership Program and the manager of polling for NBC News. Over the next few weeks, our series will take on topics like the myths and realities of political polarization, how media is shaping our understanding of the issues and candidates, and how state voting laws have changed. And we'll even give you some post-election analysis.

I'm excited to be talking with faculty experts who will share insights into this chaotic and unprecedented presidential election season. In today's episode, we'll be sitting down with Sophia Rosenfeld for a discussion of some of the big questions at the heart of American democracy. Questions like, who do we trust when we make decisions about political issues and leadership? How do we arrive at a common understanding of truth and how do we govern without one? Sophia is the Walter H. Annenberg professor of history and chair of the history department. She's also the author of a number of books that take a historical perspective on the big ideas and fault lines that lie at the foundation of US democracy. Welcome to Democracy and Decision 2024 Episode One: Truth and Democracy.

A quick note before we begin. This interview was recorded a day after the presidential debate that took place on September 10th between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump.

Sophia, welcome. Thank you so much for joining us today. We very much appreciate you taking the time to talk about some of the work that you've done and hopefully how it can tie into this moment in time. It's a presidential year and a busy one at that. So can you just start maybe by giving a synopsis of the books that you've written and the book that you have coming out soon and talk about how that ties into this moment in time?

Sophia Rosenfeld:

Sure. Well, let me start by saying thank you very much for this conversation. It's a pleasure to be chatting with you and I'm happy to say a little bit about what I do. So I'm a historian, but I'm not the sort of typical historian of democracy that you might imagine somebody who writes about specific election years or about particular famous people. I'm interested in something a little different and that something a little different are the big ideas that, to my mind at least, undergird democracy. They're the ideas that are sort of in some ways so big that we don't talk about them very much because we kind of take them for granted.

And so I've been interested for much of my career in seeing if we can tease out what these concepts are with the idea that if we understand them better, we have a better sense of what we're doing when we say we're protecting democracy or deciding in favor of one course of action versus another. So as a historian, I've tried to see if we can in a way denaturalize some of the things that are absolutely fundamental to our sense of how the world works and see if that opens up new horizons. So it's both a backward-looking project, it's historical, but it's also forward-looking.

It's really about what can we do when we start seeing the political world around us a little differently than the way it's framed in the traditional kind of right-left categories of today's politics.

Stephanie Perry:

So in your book *Common Sense: A Political History*, you examine the faith that Americans have and the notion of common sense, which we can understand as the wisdom of ordinary people, knowledge so self-evident that is beyond debate. What is the attraction of this notion in the context of US democracy and our founding myths?

Sophia Rosenfeld:

Common sense is a funny category to begin with for historian because it's supposed to be something that has no history. It's something shared by everyone ostensibly. It's also supposed to be, as you just said, self-evident. It's something you just kind of know by instinct or because you've had an experience. If somebody says it's common sense not to put your hand into the fire, it's because either you've tried it and it didn't work out very well or it just seems obvious that you don't put your hand where something is really hot. So it sounds far from politics and yet common sense is all over politics.

If you've been following the news this week, you'll see that both Vice President Harris and former President Trump have called themselves common sense candidates and mentioned some of their policies as common sense. Common sense on gun control or common sense on the immigration question. So I'm interested in where did we get this idea and what has it done? And my hypothesis at least is that common sense was very useful to the emergence of democracy. It's all over the age of revolutions. Why? Because it suggested that people shared something, some kind of basic wisdom, not deep knowledge of things, but a kind of collection of truisms almost that they shared.

And that these could make them collectively able to treat the political sphere not as something esoteric and something secret or something you had to have years of study to a [inaudible 00:05:29] but it's something that was really possibly open to all people. And in many ways common sense has been an ally of democratic movements ever since women could claim, for instance, having common sense as a reason to be invited into political conversations. But there's also some risk associated with common sense and just to point to two maybe obvious ones, sometimes common sense just shuts down conversations.

If you say something is common sense, you say there is no other alternative. And it's often the more contentious the question, the more likely somebody has to say they have a common sense solution because it's really an effort if you say common sense gun control. What it really means is there is no alternative to what I'm proposing.

Stephanie Perry:

So how do you think the notion of common sense has changed over time in the context of politics?

Sophia Rosenfeld:

I mean it's a great question. The concept itself means something fairly stable since the 18th century. This idea of something we both share and that's self-evident and doesn't need a lot of deep study to ascertain, but it is used differently I believe once democracies are up and running. If it helps increase democracy when people are from the outside saying, "But we have common-sense, let us into this." It's one thing. But in a kind of populist politics, which has been one of the major threads of politics in the US, but also globally in very recent years. It can work the other way.

It can be a way of either shutting out other voices, anything else you say is nonsense, not an alternative opinion. Right? Nonsense is kind of its opposite or it can be a way of saying, "Let's forget about all the experts." If common sense isn't combined with other kinds of knowledge, you end up with a politics

often that says, as populists often do, "If you just trust the people and their instincts, we'd have no more fighting about this. We'd have solved this a long time ago." So it can be a kind of anti-political concept even as it's employed in politics and that's what I think we often see right now.

Stephanie Perry:

So is that how you see it working in discourse more recently?

Sophia Rosenfeld:

I think yes, it's been appropriated by a variety of kinds of leaders on the right and on the left over time. Ronald Reagan was especially interested in associating himself with common sense, but he was borrowing from Thomas Paine who was really operating from a very different political perspective than Ronald Reagan. And as I mentioned, it's something both parties will adopt when it suits their interests right now. But its chief ally at the moment isn't a kind of populism that can be described as anti-elite, but also anti-expert in many ways.

It's the person who says, "I don't care that scientists say the earth is warming. I went outside this morning, I live in X location and it was cold and snowy, so don't tell me how the world is. My common sense tells me that when it's snowy, we have just as much cold air going on as we ever do," kind of thing.

Stephanie Perry:

So what can or should counterbalance common sense in a healthy democracy?

Sophia Rosenfeld:

So I don't want to make a case that we should dismiss common sense entirely because I think it's an important balance, but it's part of a combination of different ways of knowing that the world needs sort of collectively. So expert knowledge remains important. It's important to balance it too with common sense, I think. That's something I try to explain more thoroughly in my work on notions of truth and also dissident points of view, which I don't mean every crackpot theory that comes up, but evidence-based dissenting views are also important challenges to common sense.

If we believe the sort of free speech principle that a healthy sphere of ideas is one in which a lot of ideas circulate and they in a sense do battle with one another in some kind of ideal form. Common sense alone doesn't solve much.

Stephanie Perry:

When I think about common sense in politics, I think about it sort of as the middle ground. Understanding that the work that I do in polling where we're focused more on how are these divisions made and through which demographics. I'd like your take on how common sense in this day and age when we have so much of, really because it's so politically polarized, what is the best use of common sense overall for our country and the world really as a whole?

Sophia Rosenfeld:

You point to something really important, which is that democratic politics don't work very well if there's no underlying consensus, and that consensus doesn't have to be about values in the broadest sense. We don't expect everybody to worship the same way. For instance, we don't expect everybody to make the same priorities, but for democracy to work, some low level shared truths are important, some basic

factual information, what's dangerous, what isn't. Some basic information about what's happened in the past, some basic description about the way the world is. And one thing that I think many of us are worried about today is actually that that's very hard to come by.

What gets called common sense is actually rather partial in populist politics. It's not a shared sense, it's what one political faction wants to call common sense. But somebody like Hannah Arendt, the great democratic theorist, I think was very right in saying that some low level common sphere is essential for people to be able to have debates. For instance, just to give a small example, we need to agree, is unemployment going up or going down? If everybody makes up their own numbers, there can be no policy debate.

If we agree that "Wow, unemployment's a problem right now," then we can have a very spirited and important debate about different approaches, what to value. But without that low level consensus, I would agree that what we'll see is what people are often calling now epistemic tribes or just a very fancy way of saying people who get their information and think they know things from very different ways and have different ground understandings of the world, and that's a real disaster.

Stephanie Perry:

What do you think technology is doing to that?

Sophia Rosenfeld:

I think technology has been very important. It's not just the technology though, because people had the same worries about printing in the 15th century. It has something to do with the economic and legal models around our technology. There's no inherent reason. For instance, our technology online works so differently than the world of say, book publishing. They work differently because we've modeled them in different ways. And for people who are used to vetted forms of information, of course the internet is the wild west. To use an old-fashioned metaphor.

That's part of its greatness. It is democratic and it allows everyone cheap, easy access to being their own media. But of course the downside has been a plethora of disinformation and misinformation and very little way for the average person to determine what's legitimate and what's not. Since vetting is almost non-existent. In fact, it's almost contrary to the principle of the way the internet works.

Stephanie Perry:

So, on that point, actually, let's shift to your book *Democracy and Truth*, where you examined the conflict about who gets to define what's true. That has become central to the politics at present. Historically speaking, who decides what's true in a democracy?

Sophia Rosenfeld:

That's the tricky question because of course we all say yes, truth is essential to a democracy, but who gets to say where it's found? What it is? That's been a sticking point for democracies from the beginning. So there's theory and there's practice. In theory, one of the arguments early on, back again to the 18th century and into the 19th century, was that democracies would have a relationship to truth that was very different than monarchies, where monarchies were secretive and used deception. Democracies originally called republics would be like open books. Everybody would be truthful with each other and truth would therefore prevail.

The only complication is that no one person or institution or method or agency was ever given a monopoly on truth. In fact, quite the opposite. Truth was supposed to sort of emerge almost

miraculously from a kind of back and forth between ordinary people, voters and experts of all kinds, both inside and outside of government. And there would be a sort of back and forth through different election cycles and we'd come to these kinds of basic consensus that would be fundamental to how politics would work. And now I probably won't surprise anybody by saying that isn't exactly how it worked in practice.

We've been fighting about what truth is from the very early days of the press, from the very early days of the US Republic, and there's always a risk, I think on two sides. One I've already mentioned is a risk of people saying, "We don't need any kind of experts. Common sense alone can tell us enough." And that's really this kind of threat of populism that's been resurgent in the early 21st century. But the other threat is pretty much its exact opposite and something people still talk about in relation to, for instance, the politics of the European Union, but seemed to be the way politics were really heading in the late 20th century.

Which is towards technocracy or towards kind of elite rule, which populism is of course a reaction against. But the idea that experts know best, that the world is extremely complicated, that it can't really... That ordinary people don't have much to say or know much about how things should best operate. Either of those is a risk in a world in which there's a competition over truth. The ideal though remains a kind of collaboration in which truth flourishes out of a lot of different people trying to find it, including universities.

Stephanie Perry:

Is that collaboration made harder by the fact that such a growing number of people in this country specifically have such a lack of trust in any institution?

Sophia Rosenfeld:

Absolutely, yes. It's a kind of chicken and egg problem at this point, right? People don't trust institutions and our politics becomes more and more divided, but the only solution to our divided politics is in some way for people to have more trust in institutions and in what constitutes truth. Yes, trust is a big part of this. We have to trust a lot to know anything. Because in our complex world, we cannot ascertain for ourselves what's happening in every corner of it, how things work. I don't know how much of the basic machinery in my house works. I don't know what's happening today in Uganda or in Finland or even maybe what's happening today in Baltimore. I'm not there.

I need somebody else that I trust in a sense to tell me what's true. So where do I find that information? Well, I have to have some trusted sources. In a world with so many different sources of information and so many of them personal, my aunt told me, "I heard somewhere, I read it online." Much of this, no gatekeepers have sort of checked if this information were accurate or where it came from. We end up believing many, many different things. And the more we believe different things, the more we don't trust each other because we seem to know different things. Trust is going to be very hard to reestablish in the world of knowledge. I think universities are very affected by this right now too.

Stephanie Perry:

So, your book *Democracy and Truth* came out six years ago. How has your thinking on where we are evolved in that time with respect to who or what we turn to as arbiters of the truth? How has that changed or if it has changed?

Sophia Rosenfeld:

I stand by most of what I said. I don't think that I've got the sort of picture of things wrong. I would actually say in some ways the problem is intensified. I wrote this book, *Democracy and Truth: A Short History* in 2018. It was meant to be a short book as the title suggests, and I wrote it quickly because it was really a response to 2016 in which an election here in the US and Brexit in the UK had spawned this idea that we were suddenly post-truth. Not only were people fighting over truth, they just didn't even care if it existed anymore. And people were, for instance, finding then candidate Trump and subsequently President Trump not exactly honest.

In the sense that most people were willing to admit that he lied a lot, but true in some other way, authentic, true to saying what was true, saying what was on his mind, cutting through the nonsense that other candidates were spewing. And for me, that really opened up this question, what is truth? How is it supposed to work in democracy? I'll point to three things that I think have changed since then. I think the sense of the problem of untruth both misinformation and disinformation since 2018 has intensified. One, because the technology has gotten better, AI, Deepfakes.

All the kinds of ways in which you can have, say a political candidate saying or doing things they never did. I think more candidates and parties in the US but also around the world have discovered how to harness this kind of sleight of hand. So there actually is more untruth coming from the top than there was even six years ago. And I think going back to this idea of epistemic tribes, that we are less trusting all the time of each other and of the sources from which we get our knowledge. So in some ways the problem is intensified, but I do think there are also some glimmers of hope as people address or try to find ways to address this problem too.

Stephanie Perry:

So the recent debate that Trump and Harris engaged in and that I think we all watched, there was a lot of fact-checking before, after, during. There were a lot of obviously different things said during that debate. How do you think the notion of truth, and then frankly bringing it back to common sense too, how do voters cut through some of what they're hearing and make an informed decision with the basis of your research?

Sophia Rosenfeld:

I appreciated last night watching the debate. That in fact the moderators did try occasionally to establish fact. And I think that's important. In some ways, the format of the debate allowed both candidates to at times say things that stretched some credulity, but there were moments that were very clear. So for instance, when Trump said in some places they just execute the baby after the baby is born in the discussion of abortion. It was quickly announced, "Look, there's no place in the US where it's legal to kill a child who's just been born. That isn't part of US law."

And obviously most of us were well aware that that was just a kind of fable or I don't know what it was exactly, but I think it's helpful for the public to be reminded. It doesn't always work, but when you can, to remind the public that some things are, in fact, fact. The one thing I didn't mention that's really changed since the last election of course, is what's known as the big lie about who won the last election. And the fact that that has had such staying power.

Stephanie Perry:

Was even perpetuated last night in the debate.

Sophia Rosenfeld:

Was even perpetuated last night. Suggests, however, that for all the fact checking, a certain comfort level with lying has entered our politics. And many people are willing to advance that lie even though there is no evidence for it. It was thrown out by courts. All kinds of different authorities have suggested that our elections are actually quite secure. But this evidence-based claim that the last election was not won by the person who became president has had remarkable staying power, and that has not actually happened previously in American politics.

Stephanie Perry:

And that's something that I think only affects the way that Americans understand what truth is. Because if, as you're saying, you're pointing out, we know that all of these conspiracies that they're lies, that the election was not fraudulent, but they're being put out there as truth then for the average American, what other choice do they have, I guess.

Sophia Rosenfeld:

The risk is a kind of normalization of untruth. And I think that's in some ways the biggest risk of the big lie. It normalizes untruth. And in a world in which if you can't trust even a quantitative exercise like counting up the number of votes, it suggests that what should control our politics should just be something like strength, who can exert their power over someone else. And that's really contrary to our democratic norms going all the way back to the American Revolution.

Stephanie Perry:

So are there any hopeful signs or directions that might be productive in approaching the problem of arriving at a common understanding of facts?

Sophia Rosenfeld:

I do think universities are an important bulwark in all of this, and I do think there are things that can be done. I don't think any of the things that I might mention is going to overnight solve any problems. But just to give one example, you mentioned the moderators last night. But in general, I think the press, the media have been more willing to point out what's actually a lie, much less delicate about it than they were, say six years ago. Not just saying the fact-checking will occur on page 10, but putting in a headline lies about X surround the elections in, say Venezuela. I think that's been an important help.

I think public awareness in some ways of the extent to which lying has entered our political sphere is important. Educators I think at all levels are more aware that they need to teach how to vet information to whether that's to middle schoolers or college students, and these are all positive signs. They're not going to be solutions unto themselves for sure, but it's also not something we can normalize. We have to find ways to continue to make sure that good information from statistics to scientific information, to historical information to geographic and demographic information, whatever sphere we're talking about, is the foundation for our modern democratic political lives.

Stephanie Perry:

Let's shift to your most recent book, which is coming out in the spring, *The Age of Choice: A History of Freedom in Modern Life*, which tells the long history of the invention of choice as the defining feature of modern freedom from the 18th century to today, including how the early modern world witnessed the

simultaneous rise of shopping as an activity and religious freedom as a matter of being able to pick one's convictions. So what led you to this topic?

Sophia Rosenfeld:

What led me to the topic of choice? Well, it's something we all do a lot. I mean, if you haven't picked off a menu of options of some kind so far today, you probably will before the day is over. I don't mean just in the restaurant sense, but all kinds of situations in which one is asked one's preference for one thing over another in some collection of objects. And I came to this project really in two ways. I think most of my books come out of some personal experience and out of some intellectual cause. And in this case, I was aware that I have trouble making decisions. Probably many of you do. You want a pair of sneakers, so maybe you go online and type in sneakers and then, "Oh dear."

Or you want to fly somewhere and unfortunately Expedia gives you 42 different routes at different times of day, and you think to yourself, "Well, I'm not sure which one I prefer, but I might have a different... I guess I'd rather go earlier, but maybe, if I think about it longer, I might rather go later and this one saves money, but it's a longer route." And you tie yourself in knots over this. So I was thinking about this as sort of one of the odd aspects of modern life, and it's something certainly people have written about in areas ranging from marketing to behavioral economics, but I was also thinking about the way choice is valued in our culture.

And if you start paying attention, which I started to at a certain point, you'll see that advertisements everywhere say make the best choice, make the smart choice, make the right choice, whether it's banking or healthcare or back to sneakers.

Stephanie Perry:

Now we have all the choices. So instant gratification is just that much easily accessible.

Sophia Rosenfeld:

Netflix, right? It's an endless array of possible entertainment options or anything else, but it's not just consumer culture. What's interesting to me, and this kind of ties back to where we were going before, is that democratic culture also stresses choice, not just choice in an election year. Here we are in a sense seeing Kamala Harris advertised choice last night, but even human rights ideals are usually based these days, not always, and this does not go back to the 18th century. This is really a much more modern idea. That having rights means having the right to choice. The right to choice in education, the right to choice in employment, the right to choice where you live or where you work or choice in spouse or partner or who you love.

These are often framed these days in very similar kinds of terms. And I got interested in how capitalist consumer culture, and if we want to call it sort of democratic human rights culture, have in a way merged around choice, even as we all are sort of aware that choice can be pernicious in different ways. It can be exhausting, it can be a trap when you say people make a good choice to people who don't have good choices. There are lots of ways in which choice exerts kind of negative power of our existences. And yet most political projects on the right and on the left are framed in terms of both enhancing the number of options and the number of opportunities to pick.

School choice, for instance, reproductive choice. Those are similar in some ways.

Stephanie Perry:

So what was the most surprising to you then when you were doing the research and thinking about writing this book?

Sophia Rosenfeld:

A number of things were surprising to me. I'll point to two. So one thing that surprised me, being a person who loves the enlightenment and age of revolutions as a subject, my first thought was that choice must have come sort of along with things like common sense, out of this kind of enlightenment cultural moment. In fact, the idea that what we do when we vote, something we're all going to be doing in about two months from when we're speaking today, involves going by yourself into a little booth, thinking about your personal preference, pulling the lever or pressing the button or whatever you're going to do for the person or persons that most match your private predilections and that you're going to do so publicly, but in this secret way is really a very modern development.

It isn't the global norm till the end of the 19th century, beginning of the 20th. Before that, choice meant something different. It meant the people would sort of collectively make a decision. Most of them wouldn't actually be voters since there were gender and race and property qualifications, but not just that they would... The idea was simply that people voted in a kind of collective way. There was acclamation for something. It took a long time for what's now taken for granted as the way we vote globally, the only standard. In fact, it too is a human rights standard. To come into existence, suggests that actually political choice was late in the game.

That other forms of choice, romantic choice, aesthetic or consumer choice, intellectual choice actually emerged earlier and that politics was a late development. I would almost say that it's a kind of unacknowledged second revolution in democratic life. So that's one thing that surprised me. And maybe equally so, I didn't start out writing especially about women's roles as choosers. I was thinking certainly about reproductive choice as one of the areas in which choice has become a kind of rhetorical go to. But the more I worked on this project, and it took a long time because I had trouble figuring out just how to do it.

The more I became aware that women were really interesting to look at in particular in this case. That in some ways they were the original choosers because they were associated with commercial culture and shopping from the beginning, which tainted both kind of women and shopping from the beginning. But in other ways women were long denied certain kinds of other choice-making including the political sphere, but in other spheres as well, even marital choice was usually to say yes or no, but it wasn't to kind of sort out the options themselves. Read Jane Austen and you'll know a little bit about that.

I became interested in the way choice was both tainted for women and aspirational for women, and how women's rights gradually as they became part of modern liberalism attached their star in some sense to the idea of choice. So that by the time we get to the 1970s and the era of Roe V. Wade, when pro-abortion groups, feminist groups are looking for a way to make the case for abortion, and this is really as much after Roe V. Wade as before, they think they found something relatively uncontroversial by coming up with choice. They say, "No, you don't have to like this. You don't have to do this. We're just offering you the same way we would in politics or in your sexual life or in your commercial life or your educational life some options."

Having the options means that you'll have dignity as a person, you'll be a freestanding person, an adult, and it also means that if you have this choice, subsequent choices will be easier to make because you, fundamental one is when and how you become a mother. And of course it didn't quite work out that way. It has not been an uncontroversial idea. And I sort of worked backwards from that to try to figure

out how women and choice became so entangled in one another, not so much to write the history of feminism, but rather to explore choice itself.

Stephanie Perry:

You mentioned tribalism before, and I wonder how you think that makes the notion of choice either easier or harder in today's climate.

Sophia Rosenfeld:

Right. We tend to not fight about should we have choices. We tend to fight about what those choices should be, which ones are legitimate. And I think we all agree across the political spectrum that some choices should be illegal, in fact. That you should not have the choice of buying a baby on an open market. That would be coercive for the people selling for instance. So it isn't a legitimate choice, and we all agree that choice in general is important.

Nobody wants to live in a world in which choices are severely limited, but between those two positions are a lot of possibilities. And the rules around choice are often as fought over as the choices themselves. Who gets to make the determinations? When? How? How attached are they to financial status? How attached are they to your life situation?

Stephanie Perry:

Or even just being a woman.

Sophia Rosenfeld:

Or just in the case of being a woman. Yes.

Stephanie Perry:

When you finally have the choice, maybe can you even make it yourself.

Sophia Rosenfeld:

Or is the choice something like career or baby? There are many ways in which... Is that a legitimate choice for instance? As we fight over everything else, I mean as our world seems incredibly politicized these days, even some topics that didn't seem political seem more political in the moment. Women, their reproductive lives, their healthcare seems to have become one of the biggest footballs out there.

Stephanie Perry:

You sort of answered this, but I'm going to ask it again just in case you have anything to add. So the book includes discussion of politics, but what emerged in looking at the history of choice and politics over the last 200 plus years?

Sophia Rosenfeld:

It's important as with the other categories I've been talking about, to try to be a little bit self-conscious about what we're doing when we engage in political life. I mean, most of us vote thinking, for instance, "I'm just going out there and doing this thing because this is how we do elections and I want the following outcome." But if you stop and think for a moment about the ways in which we vote, it's actually all a little bit odd. For instance, why do we go to a public place to do something secret? It's a

little bit of a strange setup. Why is the ballot arranged the way it is and it's different in different places? Why does it sometimes tell you the party people are affiliated with?

And sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes the names run in a different direction than in other places. I hope that somebody who reads any of my books or hears me talk about them, I don't want that person to come away with a new sort of prescription as to what our political life should be. I'm not making partisan arguments and I'm not trying to advance a very particular set of goals, even when I'm talking about women and choice. I am however, hoping that this is kind of food for thought, in that exposing some of the things that we do and that we think all the time and making you a little bit more self-conscious about them will lead us in a way outside of the kind of partisan talking points that are standard in our politics right now.

Stephanie Perry:

Recognizing it is your choice to make. You don't have to go any certain way or be coerced into one or the other track. It is really truly your way.

Sophia Rosenfeld:

Maybe you would reject all the choices and invent some of your own options. Or maybe you think twice about why we're so attached to menus all the time of possibility, whether they're ballots or actual menus at your local restaurant. I want people to, in a way, and maybe it's a kind of utopian goal, reimagine democracy in ways that don't conform to the particular talking points of the present.

So unlike, say a pollster, is interested in do you believe this or that in the ways that those questions have been defined for the present. I want to say, if you thought about this differently, would you exit from either of those options maybe? Maybe you'd have a completely different take on things. If you haven't thought about truth before and why it matters to politics.

Stephanie Perry:

You want it to be an open-ended question?

Sophia Rosenfeld:

I do. I really do. And I think choice is one of those places where we might actually come back and ask sometimes, do we really always want choice? And for instance, if you have four healthcare plans in front of you, and they're all immensely complicated, I say this from experience, and there are hundreds of contingencies. You'd pay 20% if you had an accident and you'd already spent this much and this year. Who the hell could imagine what the options are and what you really want?

But maybe if you had one really good one, you wouldn't care that you didn't have choice in your plans. One really nice one might actually give everybody more peace of mind and more security than those proliferating options. And if you have a thought like that as a result of reading this, I'll be happy.

Stephanie Perry:

Obviously, we've talked already about the emphasis that you've placed on the lives of women in this book. So can you talk about what it says to the current state of US politics that we're questioning the legitimacy of choice in an area that many voters thought was settled?

Sophia Rosenfeld:

Yes. This has been a shock of sorts. I think women of my generation did not anticipate that we'd be where we are today. Roe V. Wade, though it's always been contentious for sure, did seem to be settled law the way many important Supreme Court decisions have seemed to most of us to be settled, even as there was always arguing about the parameters. For instance, the questions like, do doctors have to have admitting permission in different hospitals? These were around the margins rather than the heart of Roe V. Wade. And I think one thing that has happened interestingly is that because the criticism of Roe V. Wade has come over the years, not just from the right, but also from elements of the left, feminists of color.

More radical feminists have also always questioned in various ways the framing of choice as the key issue around reproductive rights. I think we will see efforts going forward to reframe the debate around healthcare, for instance, essential healthcare around justice, reproductive justice around equity. Men and women can't operate in equitable ways if pregnancy cannot be controlled by one side of the male-female divide. Choice, while important in its moment, has not been a hundred percent successful as a framing device. And I think that opens up questions of a practical nature.

How better can we frame the future of women's reproductive health questions, but also questions about when we do and don't use choice as the central part of our thinking about women's lives.

Stephanie Perry:

So do you feel hopeful for the future?

Sophia Rosenfeld:

I'm dismayed by the fact that at present, women are being forced to travel and find resources that are ways that are actually extremely detrimental in many cases to both their psychological and their physical health. I'm heartened a little bit by the fact that even in very so-called red states, voters seem actually quite determined to hold on to this possibility. It is not a popular position to outlaw abortion entirely. We've seen that almost everywhere. People have very different feelings about up to what month and under what circumstances and whether you should need permission as a child or not.

Stephanie Perry:

But seven in 10 across the board always say it should be legal.

Sophia Rosenfeld:

But the idea that you could be raped or be having a miscarriage and you need to be basically at death's door before you can get an abortion, does not seem to sit well with most people and especially with most women. And that's across the political spectrum, and that suggests to me that most women are not going to be satisfied going forward to sit back and just let the dismantling of Roe V. Wade take its effects. The current situation is untenable, and I can't predict what will happen, but I see possibilities in reframing and reorganizing that will not make this issue just go away.

Stephanie Perry:

In so many ways, choice is certainly on the ballot this year.

Sophia Rosenfeld:

Choice is really on the ballot this year. It's both what we're doing when we elect someone and it's on the ballot, and that's not even just reproductive care. Even voters rights, when we talk about should you need an ID to vote, should polling places be open set numbers of hours? That's really about the mechanisms by which we make choices too. So if you start paying attention, I think you will see that choice dominates our culture in all kinds of ways.

We hold it up as a big ideal, and it often is, but we need to think more seriously about when it matters, which I think it does in the case of reproductive rights, most certainly. And when it doesn't and when it doesn't, is often around situations in which choice is disempowering rather than empowering.

Stephanie Perry:

Well, thank you so much, Sophia, for joining me today and having this conversation, and I very much look forward to your new book and to hearing about what comes next for you and how some of these themes shake out in this presidential election and this year and beyond.

Sophia Rosenfeld:

Thank you so much. Thanks for the terrific questions, and I too will be eager to see what happens over the next few months.

Stephanie Perry:

Great. Thank you.

That's it for episode one, Truth and Democracy. I hope you learned as much from Sophia as I did. Join us in two weeks for our next episode, The Voice of Democracy, where I'll sit down with Diana Mutz, the Samuel A. Stouffer professor of Political Science and Communication, and Director of the Institute for the Study of Citizens and Politics. The OMNIA Podcast Democracy Decision 2024 is a production of Penn Arts and Sciences in collaboration with the Penn Program on Opinion Research and Election Studies.

Many thanks to today's guest, Sophia Rosenfeld from the Department of History. Be sure to subscribe to the OMNIA Podcast by Penn Arts and Sciences on Apple Podcasts or wherever you get your podcast to listen to every episode of Democracy and Decision 2024.