

Democracy and Decision 2024 | The Voice of Democracy (Episode2)

Stephanie Perry:

Hello, and welcome to Omnia, the podcast on all things Penn Arts & Sciences. This season we'll be taking a close look at the state of U.S. democracy in the context of the 2024 election.

I'm your host, Stephanie Perry, elections enthusiast, Executive Director of the Penn Program on Opinion Research and Election Studies and a member of the NBC News Decision Desk Team.

In today's episode, we'll be sitting down with Diana Mutz to talk about political communication and the ways the media influences the public's understanding of government and politics. Diana is the Samuel A. Stouffer Professor of Political Science and Communication and Director of the Institute for the Study of Citizens and Politics. She's the author of a number of books that look at how people receive and interact with political views different than their own.

She's also been widely cited recently for her research into the 2022 midterms. The research found that the Dobbs decision, and views on abortion, affected congressional voting more than concerns about inflation. I'll talk with Diana to find out whether she thinks this trend may continue in the 2024 election.

Welcome to Democracy and Decision 2024, episode 2: The Voice of Democracy

Stephanie Perry:

Diana, thank you so much for sitting down with me today.

Diana Mutz:

Thanks for having me, Stephanie.

Stephanie Perry:

So you've been exploring the influence of media on the public's understanding of government and politics for over 20 years, and the media landscape has obviously changed during that time. And particularly in this current state of political polarization, what are some of the most important changes you've witnessed in how the public receives political information?

Diana Mutz:

Well, the changes, as you say, have been huge since I started studying political communication. And I think probably the two most important changes are, one, the amount of choice we all have. There are so many places we can go for political information. Back when I first started studying it, it was the three networks, a local newspaper, very, very limited sources of information. But I think even more important than the number of sources is that we now have heavily partisan sources to choose from. And that's really changed the way people obtain political information. Obviously, it leads to self-selection because people prefer sources that are in agreement with them to sources that might expose them to differing viewpoints. So we tend to all be exposed to different things in this fragmented medium, environment.

Stephanie Perry:

So you've done a significant amount of work exploring how the public interacts with political views that differ from their own, which seems particularly relevant in the context of our current state of political polarization. Can you talk about your findings and some of the concepts that have come out of your research on this topic?

Diana Mutz:

A long time ago, in the 1990s, I wrote a book called *Hearing the Other Side*, that was focused very much on people's networks for political communication. Who did they talk to? Did they have friends or neighbors who they knew were of differing political views? And then how did that affect them as well? And one of the really beneficial effects it has is it makes people more tolerant, it also gives them an awareness of what the rationales are for other people's political views. So it makes them capable of saying, "Well, I can see the other side is not something I agree with, but I can at least see where they're coming from." Nowadays, that is far less likely to happen. And I recently revisited *Hearing the Other Side*, and I have another book coming out that's a sequel to it, where I went back 25 years later and did the exact same study over again so I could see exactly what has changed.

And overwhelmingly, people are exposed to like-minded views in their media as well as in their interpersonal networks. It's interesting, because although people are reluctant to talk about politics, if they think they're in mixed political company, they nonetheless are talking about politics more than ever. We see far higher frequencies of political discussion, far larger networks of political discussants that people can tell us about. So on one hand, we're a kind of hyper politicized country right now, but the downside of being hyper politicized is that people's defense mechanisms and self-selection is in overdrive too. And what that means is even though they're talking more, they're hearing less of the other side.

Stephanie Perry:

So has media consumption changed, do you think, just because of technology and social media and the access and our country's need for this instant gratification pulse, or do you think it's more than that? What have you found in your most recent research with that?

Diana Mutz:

I think it's really just the availability of choice, human beings are drawn to those like themselves. That's nothing new. That's always been true. We've just made it a lot easier for people to do that by having so many different channels, if we're talking about television exposure, and by offering ones that are partisan. But social media, which is often blamed a great deal for polarization in the US, we actually don't find that it's nearly as bad as television in terms of reinforcing people's political views and increasing polarization. People are exposed to cross-cutting views at times via social media. It's not that people are out there wanting to discuss across lines of difference, they actually shy away from that. But when you're on social media, huge amount is just what you're watching other people do, and they're a small percentage of people on social media who do most of the talking and the rest of us just watch, but we do get a sense of what the other side is thinking from that as well.

Stephanie Perry:

So in 2018, you published some work where you introduced the idea of status threat as a force that drove support for Trump in the 2016 election. So can you talk a little bit about that study, and the term status threat, where that came from and what it means?

Diana Mutz:

I'm sure others had used the term status threat before, but I essentially constructed that concept to try to explain what happened in 2016. I don't know if you remember, but right after the election, everybody was talking about the left behind voter, and there was this push to interpret the election outcome as being about economics basically, that people in the manufacturing sector losing their jobs, or having a declining incomes, and so forth. And what I do at my institute is we run a long-term panel study, meaning, we know for whom people voted, as well as whether they actually voted using validated voting data going back from before Trump was elected the first time. So we can see whether or not these people have always voted Republican or a Democrat, or whether they're switchers that actually voted a different way last time. And the reason that's really valuable is because in the United States, voting is so habitual, it's only about 10% of the public that changes their mind.

So as a result of that, we're not explaining huge patterns out there, we're explaining a tiny percentage of the population's decision to change their vote. And what we found is that although you see these patterns with respect to education, which is what really prompted the idea of the left behind voter, it wasn't what was changing their votes. Yes, less educated people were more likely to support Trump, better educated people were more likely to support the democratic candidate, but it wasn't changing people's votes. And what's more, the period of time leading up to the 2016 election was not a time when we were losing manufacturing jobs, and so forth, in fact, we were gaining them. So it's very difficult to argue that these were pocketbook voters responding to being personally disadvantaged by the policies that preceded his election. But what I did find is that their sense that their group was not getting its fair share mattered a great deal.

So for example, we would ask men and women both how much did they think men were discriminated against these days, and how much did they believe women were discriminated against? And we'd ask people how much whites were discriminated against, and how much they received minorities to be discriminated against? And when we look at the difference between those two, it's the dominant groups who thought they were being discriminated against. That is traditionally dominant groups, like whites, like men, and so forth, they saw their status declining, they felt like they were treated as the bad guys now and discriminated against. And that change over time was what predicted switching, from voting for a Democrat to voting for Trump.

Stephanie Perry:

Have you followed the panel and done any of this analysis looking ahead to this year?

Diana Mutz:

Yes, we have. And in fact, I'm going to a meeting right after this, we're finalizing the October wave of the panel to precede the election so we can see who the people were, who switched both party identification, or switch votes without switching party identification, and so forth. And again, we're not talking about huge numbers of people, but they matter because the way our public is divided right now is very, very close, very competitive. And I think that's another thing that's gone on in the US as a result of this high level of politicization, and that is turnout is up. And I am different as a political scientist, at least most political scientists look at turnout as an indicator of the health of democracy, I just think that's really a mistaken idea. I think, a lot of times, people are motivated to vote because they're mad as hell and don't want to take it anymore. And as a result, it doesn't mean everybody's happy and democracy's working well when people are motivated to turn out to vote.

And so that's something I push back against. We saw this in the midterm elections in 2022, turnout was way up for a midterm election. And I think based on the analyses we've done, it's pretty obvious that that was due to the Dobbs decision and people's concern about abortion.

Stephanie Perry:

Yeah. So do you think status threat is still a driving factor for Trump's support in the election now?

Diana Mutz:

Absolutely. Now, whether those people were already Trump supporters by the last election and thus are going to just be persistent is one thing. It may not change votes the way it did in the past, but, yes, it's obviously still a factor. The other thing which I find really interesting, which appears to be a factor, we did some pilot studies this past summer to prepare for the fall survey, and one of the things that comes up a shockingly large percentage of the time, when we ask people which political groups out there they dislike the most, we're used to people suggesting groups like races, and like Proud Boys, and all kinds of different groups, or they dislike anti-gun activists, whatever the case might be, overwhelmingly, people told us they just plain hated extremists. Period. And often, they would say extremists on the right, extremists on the left, but frequently, they'd say extremists on both sides.

And we see a real change going on now where more and more people are not willing, when you ask them that first party identification question, are you a Republican, a Democrat, or an independent? They won't choose Republican, or a Democrat, they only choose independent, and an increasing number of people seem to be hating both parties. So it's not just polarization as in, "I like mine and hate yours," it's actually, "I hate them all. I'm just disgusted."

Stephanie Perry:

So have you found that if you... if you ask party identification, and then for independents, I'm assuming you ask a leaner question, a follow-up, asking which party do you lean towards, so have you found the number of true independents then has gone up?

Diana Mutz:

Well, it depends on how you ask the question. And I say that because in face-to-face surveys, typically, they don't even offer you the option of being a true independent, they just ask if you lean toward Republicans or lean toward Democrats. And what people tend to tell you reflects whoever they're voting for in that election. That's how they say they lean. Online surveys, on the other hand, often give people all three options because people can't volunteer that they're true independents when they're taking a self-administered survey. And as a result, we see more independents in online self-administered surveys, because they can choose pure independent as an option in a way that they couldn't before. But even when you keep the mode of interview constant, there's clearly more independents than we've seen in a long, long time. And what that reflects exactly, we can't say at this point, but we do know that the number of people who answered that first question without choosing Republican or Democrat is unusual, it suggests the two parties are not satisfying people.

Stephanie Perry:

So you mentioned that other political scientists see turnout as the sign of a healthy democracy. So what do you think about the state of democracy right now given that so many people distrust institutions, there is in-group and out-group. So how do you think that lends itself to the bigger picture?

Diana Mutz:

I don't see it as particularly healthy. And part of the reason for that... again, this may come across as unusual for a political scientist, because we're usually going around like cheering people on to get more politically involved, and vote, and so forth, I actually think we're at a point in the United States where politics is overly salient in people's lives. I think it was a healthier democracy when it was something going on in the background but not always front of mind. And I think the public reflects that in not liking the fact that politics disturbs their interpersonal relationships, it can cause problems in families, it can cause problems at work. We find that people are no longer interacting with people across party lines, and that's unhealthy in and of itself because it just feeds into greater polarization. So we really... I think it's great for politics to be salient, especially at election time, but we've lived through more than a decade now of politics being constantly salient, and a lot of people wish they could get back to their everyday lives and not have it be front and center. Yeah.

Stephanie Perry:

Has your research shown a difference in age groups the way that... what I'm thinking about here is when I talk to students and they talk to me about the fact that they don't necessarily find voting to be the most political thing that they can do, in fact, the word political, politics sometimes is triggering for them, in this Gen Z cohort. So I'm just wondering, in that way, have you seen that across generations, people are engaging differently with politics and not necessarily the traditional means of engaging with politics?

Diana Mutz:

It's a really good question. I have not done a lot of analyses over time by age, cohorts, and so forth. But one thing I do notice is that... this is from my undergraduate classes, so clearly, very anecdotal, but there's a tendency to be so anti-government, that they see the means to doing good in the world or in their country as being outside of government. And they see government as corrupt and as not a means of leading to the kinds of outcomes that they want. And I say this particularly in the realm of foreign affairs, because over and over what I heard was, "Oh, the US shouldn't get involved in anything anywhere. It'll just do more harm than good. Government can do no good." And obviously, I think that's too bad because, for one thing, we need bright people wanting to run for office and to be involved in politics, on the other hand, I understand how disgruntled they are, and yet the government controls a huge amount.

And I think going through independent organizations and so forth to try to make the change you want to see in the world is fine, it's just they don't have as much power as elected officials do. My dad had this saying that, "The people smart enough to run the country are too smart to run for office." And I certainly hope that's not true of Penn's students, but I know what he means.

Stephanie Perry:

So what do you think about the media and pollsters in the media intense focus on horse race? I know that's not something that is going to change in the cycle necessarily, it's the consistent and something that people want as a benchmark, but what do you think about that intense focus on just the numbers versus deeper issues and things that they could be talking about?

Diana Mutz:

Well, it's easy to wag our fingers at members of the public and say, "You should really be up-to-date on all these issues and know more than you do," but let's face it, that's just not how people operate. They have lives, they have families, and other things to worry about as well. They do tend to pay attention,

now and then, like debates and so forth, but it's not an ongoing way of life to constantly keep yourself politically well-informed. And frankly, I'm not sure it would matter that much if they did. And I say that in the sense that presidents have power but they don't have absolute power. And it's one thing for a president to go around promising I'll do X and I'll do Y, but what about Congress? What about the Senate? We have these other hurdles that are also part of the process. So it is not that easy even if you're very sincere about your campaign promises to follow through on those, unless they're things that you have executive power to control.

So yeah, we tend to think of the president as all powerful, but he or she is not, obviously. And I do think people understand the differences between the candidates. You're probably too young, but in the old days, people used to argue that the problem with American politics was there's not a dime's worth of difference between the candidates, that they're all just too mainstream. Well, look at what we have now, they are not the same, and it would be surprising for me for people not to see a difference between the two. I know there are no differences on a few issues, but on most issues, there are pretty clear differences. So it's not really that difficult for people to know who represents whose interests, and so forth.

Stephanie Perry:

We're hearing a lot about the importance of the economy, and many people are arguing it's the most important issue in this election, but you publish research that highlights the Dobbs decision, which overturned Roe v. Wade, and the research was around the 22 midterms. So do you think that abortion might be a bigger factor in this election, or do you think it could be the economy? What is your research showing and what are you thinking?

Diana Mutz:

Well, I think the media responds a lot to these questions that we ask of the public saying, "What's the most important issue for you in this coming election?" But without fail, people always say the economy, it's just something that comes to mind, and everybody obviously wants the economy to do well, not poorly. But what we found in our research is that, for one, people perceive the economy the way they want to perceive it. So for example, right now, we know there are massive misperceptions that employment is really high, and it is not. But if that serves your interest based on your partisanship, that's how people tend to perceive things. So one problem is people's perceptual filters are very much influenced by their partisanship. But even beyond that, what we found in 2022, and inflation was really high leading into the midterm elections, everyone said the Democrats were going to do very poorly as a result. But what happened, and we asked this in our pre-election study, we asked people who was at fault for the extremely high inflation that we were experiencing.

And overwhelmingly, Republicans said it was the Democrat's fault. Democrats said it was the Republican's fault. That was not surprising. What really shocked me though was 54%, I think, said it was both of their faults or neither one. Now, that suggests it doesn't have any political teeth in terms of benefiting one side or another if people don't think politicians are exercising control over it. It makes some sense in some ways because if you could control it, why would you not lower inflation? If you want to be re-elected, obviously, you would do that, if you could just pull the levers and make it happen. It's not that easy, it's not that straightforward. What we found in 2022 was that people's evaluations of the Supreme Court, which took a nosedive after Roe, particularly among those who are pro-choice, and also their positions on abortion, had really big influences on how likely they were to change from having voted for Republican before to a Democrat in 2022 congressional elections.

And when I say a big effect, I don't mean enormous, because as I said at the outset, we're only talking about a small percentage of people who ever changed their vote choice. And we saw people who were anti-abortion choosing... I mean, people who are anti-abortion switching in the direction of Republicans, as well as people who were pro-choice switching in the direction of Democrats. So both happened, it's just that there's a much larger percentage of people in the US who are pro-choice than who are anti, and as a result, it helped Democrats more than Republicans.

Stephanie Perry:

And abortion was obviously a big issue in 2022, and has continued. We've seen across states, voters taking action on that issue. So how do you think that will play into this November, if at all, and are there other issues or ideas you're looking at and interested in?

Diana Mutz:

I think it's still very likely to play a big role. I don't think this has been forgotten that quickly, because we are still hearing about all kinds of incidents that have occurred since Roe v. Wade was overturned. So people are concerned about it. I think they're also concerned about what a Republican administration would do and whether or not... I know from the mailings I'm getting... I'm being deluged right now with mailings from Trump, all pointing out his pro-choice position. And again, are people going to actually see him as pro-choice given what's happened? I can't tell you. But there are other issues, most of them I don't think have the same potential to change people's minds. For example, immigration, which Trump really saw as his ace in the hole, he wanted that to be a big issue. And while immigration views are very polarized by party right now, one of the things that was interesting that we saw in 2022 was that people perceive the Republicans as too extreme on immigration.

They may think immigration should be slowed, but they haven't forgotten the family separation during the Trump administration and that sort of thing. And so they're wary of the types of changes that appear, mean and heartless, and that sort of thing. So it may not be as beneficial to Trump as he thinks it is.

Stephanie Perry:

Thinking back to 2016 and how at this point in that cycle, I think, collectively, were exhausted. So, I'm thinking that was Trump against another woman. We were collectively exhausted by that race, by the candidates on both sides, what had been said, and this is very different, the runway is a lot shorter for Kamala Harris. So, what do you think about that, if anything, in terms of this cycle versus that moment in time?

Diana Mutz:

Well, I think in general, American elections are odd, if we look internationally, in that they're so darn long. And we do exhaust people, not just the candidates, but also the public. And I do think there might be something to be said for shorter election seasons, and that's something that we are accidentally having now. It's true, evidence shows people do learn things about the candidates over the course of our long elections, but would they perhaps pay more attention during a short period of time if it didn't go on and on and on? And I know for the press it's kind of a bonanza, there's a lot to cover, it's like a sports season, and so forth. So, there is some desire for it to last as long as it does. But I think with the primaries stretched out as long as they are as well, people have to start running two years in advance at least.

And I think that's exhausting for the public, not just for the candidates. And if there were a way to compress that, it might be preferable. One of the things that people said when they were encouraging Joe Biden to step down was, "Oh, no, it's too late, nobody could step in and successfully run for president now. It's just too late." And I remember thinking, "Well, they used to do it all the time because they used to not start until after Labor Day." And there may be something to be said for a shortened election season because you could compress it, you could get people perhaps to pay attention for a shorter period of time, it wouldn't lead to the kind of fatigue that you're talking about here. Particularly when you have candidates like Trump, I think people do get fatigued because there's a lot of playing off of one another.

When candidates make more extreme statements, and so forth, and hurl things at one another, it might lead to less desire to get people's attention by ratcheting up levels of incivility. And that is one of the problems for candidates to get through to the public, you got to get attention, and attention comes from incivility, unfortunately. That's one of the ways in which our media system is not great right now, in that there is so much competition for people's eyeballs that it's really the extreme things that get the most attention.

Stephanie Perry:

Yeah, that's right. So thinking about the undecided voters, that small segment of the population that you have mentioned a few times as the most important, and really, what we need to be paying attention to. So a lot of the rhetoric this year has been that so many voters who did not vote in 2020 now are supporting Trump, or that's what polling generally is showing if you dig into the numbers. So, is that what you found in your research, if you've looked, and just what would you say to that?

Diana Mutz:

We have not looked at voter registration per se, but we do know that a lot of people who did not vote in 2020 voted in 2022. So there were new registrations there, most likely. Again, it varies from state to state, whether you even need to register before election day. But will those people still turn out? Normally, we see a lot more interest in presidential election years, and that's why it was so surprising to see midterm turnout as high as it was in 2022. I have no crystal ball. I can't predict the future. I think people are working very hard at increasing turnout on their respective sides in particular. Who will be more successful? I don't know. I do think that the Democrats have a much better chance of enthusing the people who are likely to come vote for them now.

The Democrats did a smart thing, even though it was risky, as many people said, and even though, ultimately, Joe Biden had to make that call by encouraging this change, I think they have increased their chances of victory. They're certainly not guaranteed by any means, but they have increased them and they have increased enthusiasm for a younger candidate. Now, the talk about age is about Trump, not about Harris. So yeah.

Stephanie Perry:

So what would you say to the undecided voters who are listening perhaps in terms of what they should be consuming right now, where would you direct them to really understand where the state of the country is and what they think they should do?

Diana Mutz:

That's a tough question. One thing we don't lack these days though, are sources of information. So I would urge them to be careful about the sources of information that they consult, and if they are using

partisan sources to use... partisan sources on both sides, as well as sources that they consider to be pretty neutral or middle of the road. One of the interesting things we find in my attempt to revisit Hearing the Other Side, that study, is that when we look at people who don't have internet access right now, they actually look just like the people in the 1990s did, in the sense that they don't have such strong distrust of candidates and negative views of government. It's really our ability to get on the web and find a source that we like that reflects our own views that is driving a lot of this.

And again, it's hard to take choices away from people once they have them. And now that we have all these information sources, I doubt any of them are going away. But when it comes to feeling like we can talk to one another about politics, because we're all getting the same information, we don't have that ability now. And that's why it really drives people to do their own independent research rather than talking to those of differing views in order to make their choices. So it's quite difficult to know what you're consuming and where it came from. I think, certainly, the whole eating cats and dogs played to that particular kind of reaction, is like, "What? What's happening here? And how did this get out there as a meme on the internet," and so forth. So people are more skeptical, and they should be.

Stephanie Perry:

In updating Hearing the Other Side, what else surprised you, if anything?

Diana Mutz:

I was really surprised that people's print news consumption had changed so radically. And by that, what I mean is that, first of all, their local papers are gone for the most part, that is either they don't exist or they're not getting them anymore. They're using national news sources much more than they used to. That's my colleague, Dan Hopkins, work suggests, that that's the case as well. And then beyond that, they're obviously consulting far more partisan sources, but it's all online. So the print sources that we use are online print sources, and that makes it very easy to get whatever you want. So we think about TV as, "Oh, it's become so partisan," but actually, print has experienced an even more radical change because there are online partisan sources for print news as well.

Stephanie Perry:

Right. You're making me wonder if somebody would've read the different newspapers if they came to them in hand to read versus now, "I'm going on the internet, I'm only going to the one place where I always go for this source." Exactly.

Diana Mutz:

That's right. Yeah. And local newspapers were pretty balanced middle of the road. So there were sources of news that people regularly received potentially on their doorstep back then, and as a result, they heard varying perspectives on issues.

Stephanie Perry:

And all elections are local too. So thinking about it in the context of that, getting your information from somewhere that is local to you and the people in your community versus this national-

Diana Mutz:

Right. They are overwhelmingly getting national news. And again, not only does that mean they're not getting much local information, it also means they're getting more partisan information, because it's really at the national level that we see the partisanship not so much at the local level.

Stephanie Perry:

So on the point of extremism and thinking about how... if both sides are thinking about the other side as extreme, what of these topics, themes, issues,-What is going to drive voters, do you think, to the polls this November, versus not feeling that they want to vote because of the extremism and the political polarization in our country?

Diana Mutz:

I think whichever candidate evokes calm and moderation will do better this year. Because I do think people show signs of being tired of extremism, of being tired of the salience of politics in their day-to-day lives. You can't drink a cup of coffee without someone thinking they know your partisanship. So people are done with this kind of thing. We have classic theory in political science, median voter theory, which suggests that people who are seen as more middle of the road are going to get those people who are not extremists. And extremists are going to turn out to vote regardless, that's a given, but the people in the middle are the ones that really matter in the outcome of this coming election. And as a result of that, I think the moderation, the tone of moderation that Kamala Harris is talking these days... I mean, granted there are going to be extreme ads and so forth, we all know that, but Kamala's tone versus Donald Trump's tone are not the same right now. She comes across as more calm and more conciliatory than he does.

I think that's more attractive, probably, to people in the middle. But as you say, the horse race shows things neck and neck, and I don't think that kind of coverage is necessarily bad. Because what we know is that when we think it's going to be a close election, we're much more likely to turn out to vote because we feel it's more likely our vote could make a difference. And boy, if you live in Pennsylvania, you're really convinced that you can make a difference, because everybody talks about Pennsylvania even among the battleground states as potentially the most important.

Stephanie Perry:

Yeah. Well, thank you very much, Diana, for taking the time to sit and talk today.

Diana Mutz:

You're welcome.

Stephanie Perry:

That's it for episode 2: The Voice of Democracy. I hope you found Diana's point of view as useful as I did.

Join us in 2 weeks for our next episode: The Fight for Democracy, where I'll sit down with Matthew Levendusky, Professor of Political Science, to talk about the realities vs. the myths of political polarization.

The Omnia Podcast: Democracy and 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 & Sciences on Apple Podcasts or wherever you get podcasts, to listen to every episode of Democracy and Decision 2024.