

# [***Opinion: It's precisely the wrong time to tune out the news***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B91-4S91-DY7V-G03G-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; America is in danger of "sleepwalking into a dictatorship," [*according to*](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/liz-cheney-tells-cbs-news-sunday-morning-that-the-u-s-is-sleepwalking-into-a-dictatorship/) former Republican Congresswoman Liz Cheney.

This somnambulant stroll towards the cliff is self-induced. Instead of being invigorated by the prospect of defending our democracy from a candidate who already tried to overturn an election and is now campaigning on a frankly [*authoritarian*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/elections/2023/04/21/trump-agenda-policies-2024/) platform, it seems that many Americans are exhausted. But this is precisely the wrong time to be tuning out ***politics*** and [*the news*](https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/01/09/tuning-out-americans-on-the-edge-of-politics/).

Some are exhausted by the prospect of a 2020 Biden-Trump rematch and overwhelmed by the tide of threats the world faces right now. The pandemic made other folks reassess their focus in life, away from work and civics and toward family and less contentious activities.

Their disgust with American ***politics*** only grows when they see profiles in cowardice and cynicism like this week's display from Republicans. After calling out a crisis at the southern border, the House GOP, at the behest of former President Donald Trump, refused to back a bipartisan bill that strengthened border security and provided a new round of support for Ukraine against Russia's ongoing invasion. Constructive problem-solving is derailed by these bad-faith stunts.

Yes, there is something despairing about the endurance of hyper-partisan "alternative facts" unrelated to reality - like [*two-thirds*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/15/politics/entrance-polls-iowa-caucuses/index.html) of Iowa GOP caucusgoers believing that President Joe Biden was not legitimately elected. Seeing Republican officials adopt Trump's election lies as a litmus test for party loyalty is sinister and chilling by any objective standard.

But Americans' exhaustion with ***politics*** and news is being fueled in part by a cynical strategy. Indicted Trump Svengali Steve Bannon once infamously described it as [*"flood(ing) the zone with s-t"*](https://www.cnn.com/2021/11/16/media/steve-bannon-reliable-sources/index.html) - you overwhelm people's ability to keep up with all the outrage. You don't try to convince, but to confuse.

Endless culture war clashes, right-wing assaults on democratic norms and associated [*violent threats*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/07/politics/threats-us-public-officials-democracy-invs/index.html) become part of the background noise of ***politics***. Normal people start to tune out. More and more citizens begin to see the political sphere as something ugly, dangerous and indecent. But their withdrawal from civics and ***politics*** has the effect of ceding the public sphere to extreme partisans who don't mind wading through the mud to get what they want.

Social media platforms exaggerate this dynamic. Typically, their algorithms tend to amplify the most extreme confrontational and conspiracy theorist voices. This compounds the rhetorical arms race and undercuts our sense of shared reality. The most extreme voices (as well as trolls and bots) suck up the oxygen, and they've learned that they can intimidate many fellow citizens into falling in line or staying silent. Foreign adversaries push their own disinformation designed to divide us further, like Russia's attempts to boost talk of a second civil war inside the US.

What makes all of this particularly dangerous to our democracy right now is the fact that more Americans are tuning out the news. Some are doing this under a self-help rubric, reflected in calls to limit their [*"news diet."*](https://www.successconsciousness.com/blog/inner-peace/the-news-diet/)

These folks extol the virtues of not watching or reading the news, given how much of the news we face is bad: from ongoing assaults on democracy to the horrific terrorist attack in Israel on October 7, to the antisemitic outbursts it spurred on college campuses and in Western capitals, to Russian President Vladimir Putin's cold-blooded invasion of Ukraine.

But tuning out the news does not change reality. It does not make you safer or more secure. In fact, we are safest when we confront reality and take action. But that requires reasoning together from a common set of facts. And that's what is under assault when a combination of cynicism and confusion causes people to question whether facts are real at all.

This all comes at a time of crisis in the news business. The difficulty in monetizing hard news and the comparative ease of monetizing sports and entertainment starts to look a bit like what Romans once called [*"bread and circuses"*](https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/bread-and-circuses) - distractions that pacify citizens. Don't get me wrong, I love sports, movies and music. But they're not designed to hold people in power to account. That's the unique purpose of a free press.

Rather than turning away from civic engagement, now is the time to lean in. This isn't an election like any other. Democracies depend on active citizens engaging in political debates in good faith. They depend on elevating facts over hyper-partisan fiction. They depend on citizens getting in the arena, rather than retreating from it, especially during hard times.

We need to combat this growing sense of apathy. We meet the challenges of our time with confidence. If you're looking for good news to restore your faith that the country is not hopelessly fragmented, reflect on the fact that there is actually broad agreement on many issues facing our country - including policies that were polarizing just over a decade ago, from marriage equality to marijuana legalization.

There is also good news about America's [*economic recovery*](https://www.axios.com/2024/01/31/us-economy-2024-gdp-g7-nations) under Biden, outpacing every other industrialized nation since the pandemic. There are [*initiatives*](https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2021/04/why-infrastructure-is-an-investment-in-the-middle-class.html) like the Infrastructure Act and the CHIPs Act, which are aimed at bolstering the middle class, and the [*expansion of NATO*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/07/10/politics/turkey-sweden-nato/index.html) in the face of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. A clear-eyed look at reality involves acknowledging the gains we've made - not just fixating on the problems we still face.

In his celebrated "Man in the Arena" speech,Theodore Roosevelt [*decried*](https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-sorbonne-paris-france-citizenship-republic) the "cynic, as the man who has outgrown emotions and beliefs, the man to whom good and evil are as one." Morally relativist rationalizations around the 2024 election have a narcotic effect, as Cheney [*explained*](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/liz-cheney-tells-cbs-news-sunday-morning-that-the-u-s-is-sleepwalking-into-a-dictatorship/): "People who say, 'Well, if (Trump's) elected, it's not that dangerous because we have all of these checks and balances,' don't fully understand the extent to which the Republicans in Congress today have been co-opted." Falling into fits of whataboutism or succumbing to feelings of dread and helplessness is not a constructive response to the stakes of this election.

The great challenge of being a citizen of a democratic republic is that we the people are responsible. We cannot simply wait for someone to come save us. Democracy is our responsibility. That is the opportunity and the obligation of being alive at this time in the United States of America.

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