

# The Death of Serious Politics

When's the last time you had a substantive discussion about policy instead of politics? Everything is now about horse races, political rhetoric, scandals—but rarely about how to solve real problems.



BRIAN KLAAS

MAR 26, 2024



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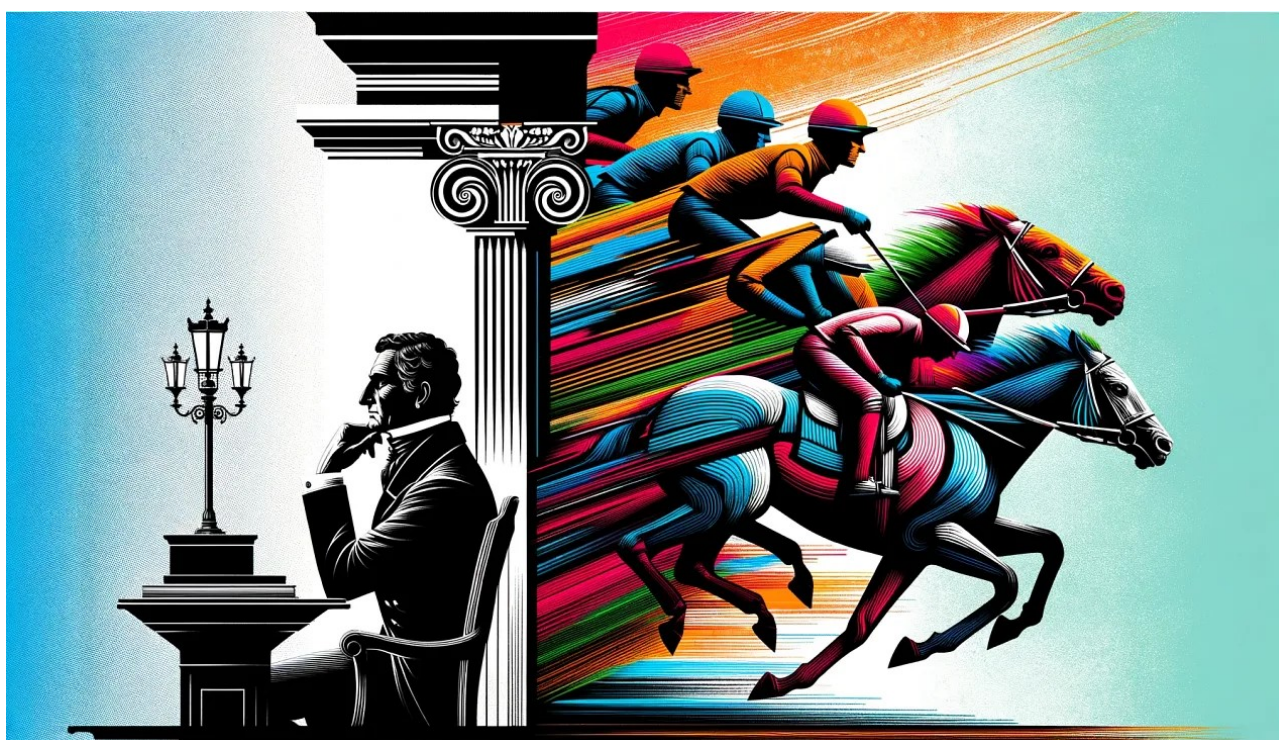


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Actually, I immediately try to make any discussion about policy. Usually, the media is the problem.

For many of us, it's been a while. That's not because we've tuned out. It's because politics—the art of determining “who gets what, when, and how”—has become subsumed by scandals, outrage, discussions of rhetoric, culture wars, and, above all, focusing on who's winning and losing at politics rather than who's winning or losing at solving problems.

Why has this happened? The media led this change.

Increasingly, modern governance is swayed by memes, vibes, feelings forged in ignorance, and an apathy for anything that requires thoughtful, sustained consideration of how to make our lives and our societies substantively better. We're governed by narcissistic political influencers who trade in the currencies of eyeballs and clicks, rather than measuring their achievements by, say, children lifted out of poverty.

Clicks are driven by emotions

media culture!

Our political cultures encourage this grotesque state of affairs, rewarding the extremists, the zealots, the spotlight chasers, while leaving the unassuming problem-solvers to languish in Sisyphean obscurity, until they inevitably give up and decide to do something more productive with their talents and their time.

We talk about politics endlessly, but almost never debate policy. Tune into the news, and you'll get a firehose of information about political intrigue, but, too often, virtually no new information about the actual nuts and bolts of solutions or governance.

Here are some screenshots from Monday's top news, from Fox News, MSNBC, and The New York Times:



Deadline arrives for Trump to post \$454 million bond in NY AG case



Marco Rubio gives stunning response when asked if he would serve as Trump's VP



Woman rejects 'worst name ever' for child, pleads with others for 'sanity' check

MSNBC DECISION 2024 RACHEL MADDOW MORNING JOE INSIDE WITH JEN PSAKI DEADLINE: LEGAL BLOG



CONGRESS

Julio Cortez / AP file

## Democrats have a very big problem emerging in the Senate

Zeeshan Aleem

- House Republicans just gave Biden the biggest possible gift
- ▶ WATCH: Larry Hogan discusses Senate run and battle for the soul of the GOP



CONGRESS

## Matt Gaetz and Marjorie Taylor Greene just scored a striking legal victory in California

Clarissa-Jan Lim

- The 'Great Resignation' continues as yet another GOP rep exits
- ▶ WATCH: Why GOP House members don't believe MTG will move to oust Speaker Johnson



DECISION 2024

## Trump's new fundraising plans could trigger a war among GOP chapters

Ja'han Jones

- There's an unmistakable crack in the narrative of Trump's GOP domination
- ▶ WATCH: Trump creates 'an environment of fear' to win over voters

**Trump's Legal Troubles**   Key Inquiries   Case Tracker   Civil Fraud Case   Ballot Eligibility Decision   E. Jean Carroll Trial

## Trump Seeks to Again Delay His Criminal Hush-Money Trial in Manhattan

Donald Trump is expected to appear in court on Monday to seek another delay in what would be the first criminal prosecution of a former U.S. president.

3 MIN READ

## In a separate legal threat on Monday, Donald Trump must secure a \$454 million bond.

5 MIN READ



Jefferson Siegel for The New York Times

**2024**   Who's Running for President?   Trump's V.P. Contenders   Election F.A.Q.   Listen to 'The Run-Up'

## Tammy Murphy Drops Out of Race for New Jersey Senate Seat

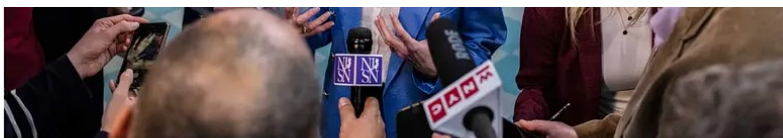
Ms. Murphy, New Jersey's first lady, struggled to gain support from rank-and-file voters as she sought the seat now held by the embattled Robert Menendez.

4 MIN READ

## Senator Lisa Murkowski of Alaska said she would not vote for Donald Trump and declined to rule out leaving the Republican Party.



See more updates 9+



Bryan Anselm for The New York Times

Notice anything?

Where's the policy? Politicians are supposed to be vectors to solve *our* problems. They're not supposed to be the story. *We are supposed to be the story.* And many of our collective stories—of ordinary people struggling in modern society—are tragic, not just because they involve suffering and despair, but because their suffering and despair is completely avoidable in the richest countries on the planet.

*This isn't true. We could coordinate it. But it simply isn't in the interest of the people with the money and the power.*  
It's not that we lack the resources to eliminate needless suffering, but rather that we are unable to effectively coordinate and allocate our resources. That's a maddening enough state of affairs, but it makes you want to fling stuff at a wall when you recognize that we're not even talking about how to fix that dysfunction, because our collective political brainpower is focused on political stunts, horrific rhetoric, or armchair analyzing of the cynical personalities of political psychopaths—psychopaths who would happily let thousands of faceless children go hungry if it meant getting *their face* into a slot on primetime Fox News. *(or the NYT)*

*This is no accident. This is by design.*

This is also one of the great, but often overlooked, tragedies of Trumpism. For nearly a decade, his extremism, vitriol, incitement to violence, and threats to the superstructure of American democracy have required us to fixate on *him* and the endless bile he spews onto the body politic. We [can't ignore it](#)—because the threat is real.

*This is wrong. Clinton, Bush, or Obama weren't more effective in solving these issues at all.*

But just imagine how many of our collective brain cells have been commandeered after being poisoned by Trump's hateful venom and his endless supply of pointless, avoidable authoritarian drama. Many of us know what "[covfe](#)" refers to, even as we struggle to keep track of his 91 felony indictments, all while we debate what he *really* meant when he warned of a "bloodbath" during a rally that began with him [saluting the convicted January 6th prisoners](#).

*This is the dead-end craft making anything Trump about - exactly the problem!*

*He's falling victim to the very thing he is complaining about: He's making it about the person of Trump, not policy.*

We could be solving problems instead.

Exactly! We could be debating Trump's or Biden's actual policy instead!

What a profoundly vapid waste of the power of our collective consciousness.

## Why it matters that we don't talk policy

This has nothing to do with Trump. It can change when Trump is gone. It's the media that's stupid!

Because of Trump and the full-blown, profit-seeking news industry embedded within the frenetic pace of American life, the United States is ground zero for the destruction of serious political discourse. We're dopamine-addled consumers of snippets of information, delivered in digestible sound bites. Everything is BREAKING NEWS, but rarely is there a deep dive about why society is broken—or how to fix it.

I regularly appear on MSNBC, NPR, and CNN, and I admire many of their journalists, producers, and hosts. But I've never been asked about policy and what we should do to fix a problem. Not once. Pundits don't have to be experts on policy. How crazy is that?

So why exactly do you admire these idiots again?

It's not really their fault, either. In a world of hyper-competitive, for-profit news production, slow and substantive always loses, because media consumers with digitally shortened attention spans just switch it off. Leave the details to the eggheads! For countless millions, policy is boring. So, it's easier to present our political system as though it's WWE wrestling. The spectacle is the show.

OF COURSE IT IS THEIR FUCKING FAULT!!!

Why are you writing this, then?

Consider this: how many diehard cable news viewers—people who watch for hours a day—could accurately answer the question: “How much money does the US government spend on foreign aid?” or “What’s the current top marginal income tax rate?”

These questions aren't gotcha trivia questions; they shape political worldviews, with profound consequences for governance.

For example, there's a surging strand of isolationism in the political right, particularly in the United States. Many Republicans rail against foreign aid spending as extravagant, wasteful, and excessive. But when researchers actually probe these views among voters, the [same pattern](#) always emerges.

When Americans were asked how much of the federal budget they think is spent on foreign aid, the [average answer was 31 percent](#)—about one in every three dollars. The same Americans are then asked what percentage *would* be appropriate. The [most frequent answers](#) hover around 10 percent.

*The US spends around 20% of its revenue on the military.*  
 In reality, foreign aid consumes less than 1 percent of the US federal budget.

In other words, the people railing against the “excesses” of foreign aid would, if their stated views were enacted, lead to a ten-fold *increase* in foreign aid spending.

*Biden has spent \$75 billion on the war in Ukraine. That alone is more than 1% of the annual budget.*

## Knowingness, or, are news junkies “well informed”?

I previously wrote about the [perils of “knowingness,”](#) in which contentedly ignorant people lack intellectual curiosity to find out new facts that might change how they see the world. Jonathan Malesic [explains it beautifully](#):

Knowingness is why present-day culture wars are so boring. No one is trying to find out anything. There is no common agreement about the facts, and yet everyone acts as if all matters of fact are already settled.

*Prime examples: climate change, the pandemic.*

One could think, perhaps, that the antidote to knowingness would be higher news consumption—as a vector to better understand our unimaginably complex world. But that assumption falls apart under even the lightest scrutiny. As I [previously explained](#):

We sometimes use the phrase “well-informed” to describe the same kind of person who can be classified as a “news junkie”...But if you know the minutiae of day-to-day horse race politics in the 2024 presidential race but lose sight of the bigger picture about the world and its people, are you truly “well-informed?”

*He misses the main problem: Journalists are doing a shit job, which is why the news are so bad.*

Healthy societies keep a laser-like focus on reminding ourselves *why* we’re tuning into political debates. Politics isn’t reality television. It’s real life. As NYU’s Jay Rosen puts it, we should care about “the stakes, not the odds”—why it matters, rather than just endlessly debating who will win. The stakes, after all, are enormous: the decisions made by powerful people dictate not just the life

*so bad no matter how much you ingest, it's still a bit*

chances of eight billion humans, but also the future of our species and our planet.

With existential risks lurking with greater frequency than ever before, our endlessly complex world demands serious politics. Instead, we have shouting octoboxes of pundits on cable news, TikTok reels from incendiary randos, craven politicians who have morphed into political influencers, and populist demagogues who have tapped into a proud vein of ignorance within our ailing body politic.

The scale of the problem demands not just a radical restructuring of our media ecosystem and the norms within it, but also a change in ourselves—such that we, collectively, consume news that covers policy and problem solving, not just political intrigue. In the meantime, we can all do our part by voting with our clicks and being stubborn about where we focus our coveted eyeballs, rewarding outlets that inform, educate, and debate solutions.

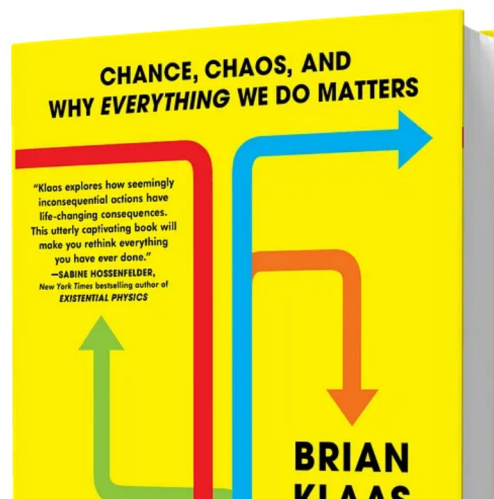
And we need to recognize that what is happening is serving the power elite.

Until then, I fear that we will remain stuck on an endlessly dystopian racetrack, watching with eager anticipation as we enthusiastically debate which political horse and jockey will win, all as our rivers dry up and our democracies collapse.

would happen/our actual problem is WU3 We need to reward the few Journalists, who have

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the guys to stand up to these people, instead of attacking these journalists due to partisan differences.





189 Likes · 42 Restacks

## 55 Comments



Write a comment...



Mark In Colorado Mar 26 ❤️ Liked by Brian Klaas

Deep in our brain is an organ called the amygdala. Visual and auditory input is processed through the amygdala before it reaches the higher brain functions. That allows us to jump away from a rattlesnake before we actually process that there is a rattlesnake. That's helpful when we were hunter gatherers. Knowingly or not, politicians who seek power and not solutions take advantage of this. Biden is old!, they scream. Jews are evil! They are coming to get (fill in the blank)! The list goes on and on. That's why people go to TFG's rally — to have their amygdala activated (and why people go to horror movies).

Our collective ignorance of how our body works is threatening our lives and our country. Narcissists, who are the result of childhood trauma or neglect relied on their amygdala, and everything becomes a threat to the self. So they endlessly seek to fill the void that their amygdala has repeatedly created. Sensational news takes advantage of how the brain functions. Trump clearly is one amygdala activated narcissist. There simply is no reasoning with this part of our brain.

Thoughtful analysis, being comfortable with different people and contrary ideas requires mastery of the self, something that American does not value. Reading, rather than watching, allows us to process information and perspectives much more effectively. Yet, as a value, we no longer cherish and support reading and discussion.

Alas, we build huge (taxpayer subsidized) football stadiums rather than libraries. We need the next level fighter plane rather than investing in diplomacy (I am not against national defense, but not at the extent of failing to invest in the daily health of our collective



society). We do not see the sleight of hand that those in power use over and over.

Sigh.

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**4 replies**



**Diane Baker** Mar 26  Liked by **Brian Klaas**

Might I bring your attention towards policy-focused groups like The League of Women Voters? They may seem stuffy and old fashioned, but depend on them to research policies, and to disseminate well-thought out recommendations. Also environmental groups, and others. It's always good to check out reputable issue-focused organizations.

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**1 reply by Brian Klaas**

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