

STEVEN P. DINKEN A Path Forward

EARLY VOTING SURGE: A SIGN OF ENTHUSIASM OR EXHAUSTION?

In the 100 years or so since the start of this presidential campaign, Americans have finally come together as a nation with a common goal: to put this election behind us.

More than 70 million people have voted already, a number that's 50 percent higher than the total number of ballots cast in the 2016 presidential election.

The patriot in me wants to believe that the surge in early voting indicates a swell of civic engagement. The pragmatist in me thinks that the COVID-19 pandemic is causing people to be proactive, rather than face long lines and unsafe conditions on Election Day.

Either way, the record-setting turnout so far is a flat-out repudiation of voter suppression tactics that were intended to cast doubt on the legitimacy of early voting — especially voting by mail.

Way to go America! There's no pushing you around.

But that might not be the whole story. The pundit in me also suspects that some early voting is due to exhaustion. Now that my

ballot has been cast, I can enjoy a brief respite from the polarization that's consumed the country — tuning out political ads on television and tossing the campaign literature that clogs my mailbox. The exhaustion factor must be off the charts in the so-called swing states, thanks to a constant barrage of political advertising.

As the campaign draws to a close, it's hard to imagine that anyone has yet to make their presidential pick.

According to FiveThirtyEight's Nate Silver, on Election Day 2016, about 13 percent of voters were undecided or planned to vote for third-party candidates. But that was a jump-ball election, with no incumbent in the race. In 2012, only 4 percent of voters were undecided between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, by the time voting took place.

Polls suggest that this election is looking more like 2012 than 2016. Before early voting even began, the vast majority of voters said they had already made up their minds and wouldn't change their decision.

Maybe this is a function of the candidates themselves — or rather candidate, singular. This election is a referendum on the presidency of Donald Trump.

Or maybe it's a function of our unwillingness to consider anything but a preset narrative. We've closed ourselves off from other ideas that may conflict with our closely held beliefs, to prevent feelings of unease or discomfort. This aversion to conflicting narratives prompts us to avoid, explain away, or flat out reject new information.

We've all turned into those dreaded parents whose kids are never wrong. You know the type.

Nor can we count on our politicians to go off script and say anything provocative (or even unexpected). In politician school, they must learn these lessons: "Don't give up any ground. Double down when pushed. Forge ahead." No wonder our minds have grown numb.

Witness the confirmation hearings for new Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney Barrett. Republican senators lobbed softball

questions her way, like asking Barrett to name the five freedoms guaranteed by the First Amendment. She could only name four (forgetting the right to peaceful assembly), but it really didn't matter. Republicans were persuaded to confirm Barrett even before her name was formally submitted.

For their part, Democratic senators tried to get Barrett to reveal her views on matters that are coming before the Supreme Court, like the Affordable Care Act. But the script had already been written: Regardless of the nominee, Democrats were opposed to the confirmation process, as Republicans had reneged on their earlier stance not to consider a vacancy ahead of an election.

The presidential debates were no better. It was easy to predict what Trump and former Vice President Joe Biden would have to say.

In a New York Times column titled "The Shrinking of the American Mind," opinion writer Roger Cohen said, "Among the words or phrases that were never

spoken in the exchanges were: Syria, human rights, democracy, inequality, Israel, Palestine, Middle East, United Nations, World Health Organization, European Union, Britain, Brexit, France, Italy, Hong Kong, Africa, South America, terrorism, or alliance."

Cohen described the exchanges between Trump and Biden as "petty, petulant and predictable," indicative of an American society in which constructive debate is nearly impossible. Instead, Cohen said, debate today is more about rival tribes insulting each other. Nobody's mind is changed by being made to feel stupid.

It's not about abandoning what we believe in. It's about throwing out the script and considering new and different ideas. The scope of human thought is vast — and much too valuable to squander.

Dinkin is president of the National Conflict Resolution Center, a San Diego-based group working to create solutions to challenging issues, including intolerance and incivility. To learn about NCR's programming, visit ncrconline.com

BARRIO

FROM B1
munity," Biezunski said.

They recently collaborated with community artists to paint colorful designs on seven trash cans along the block.

Barrio Logan has a maintenance assessment district, which provides cleaning services and sidewalk maintenance, but Logan Avenue between Evans and 26th streets does not fall within the district's boundaries.

Maintenance assessment districts are created by property owners who vote to pay an assessment to receive additional cleaning services on top of what the city provides.

Perez Demma said it would be great to be a part of the district, but that could be a long process.

"We need to solve our problems now, and the only way to do that is by working together," Perez Demma



JARROD VALLIERE U-T
A decoratively painted Logan Heights trash can.

said.

Perez Demma and Biezunski also organize the Saturday "Walk The Block" events.

The once vibrant Logan Avenue has been empty for several months because of canceled arts shows and events due to the coronavirus pandemic. Many businesses closed and have

offered online shopping or drive-thru pickup to stay in business.

"It was a ghost town," Perez Demma said.

She said watching other small boutiques on the block struggle to go out of business was scary.

The women helped businesses on the block apply for permits for outdoor operations for the Saturday shopping event, which hosts food and clothing vendors. Visitors are asked to wear face masks while shopping, unless they are eating.

Biezunski said other business owners have responded positively to the weekly event and are getting more business.

Perez Demma said that because of foot traffic from "Walk The Block" she has made enough revenue to pay her back rent and a loan.

"It's brought me back to where I can breathe," Perez Demma said.

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COUNTY

FROM B1
peutics to help people survive with COVID-19, this will continue to be the crisis of our lifetimes," Cox said. "Bottom line is, we have issues we are dealing with now that are not going to be resolved in the short term."

Jacob and Cox — who joined the board in 1992 and 1995 respectively, when the county was on the verge of bankruptcy — added the pandemic's pain will go on long after the public health dangers dissipate.

San Diego County, like many other jurisdictions, saw its revenue plunge while the unemployment rate skyrocketed in the spring and summer. For example in January, before COVID-19 swept the U.S., the San Diego region had 3.1 percent unemployment.

That jumped to about 27 percent by the end of April, according to the San Diego Association of Governments.

Although the region has recovered somewhat, with unemployment at 9 percent in September, county staff and economists say the region may face a multi-year recovery.

This will put new supervisors entering office in a difficult spot, Jacob said.

"Where we may have seen in the past increases in services in certain areas and more capital improvement projects, the new board may be faced with cutting back," she said. "We did that in the '90s and I can tell you that is not fun.... It's going to be very difficult for these next supervisors."

The next version of the Board of Supervisors also will be challenged to build consensus when it will likely face political divides.

Although supervisor seats are technically non-partisan, political parties have been deeply involved in supervisor campaigns in years past and during this current election.

This time there's a chance the board may have a Democratic majority for the first time in decades. Currently the board has one Democrat and four Republicans.

Over the past several years some of the public political fights among supervisors appear to leave lasting impacts. This year supervisors have had some heated exchanges during meetings and on social media about the handling of the pandemic.

Jacob and Cox — who have appeared to operate as negotiators and peacemakers this year — said the board has been able to function in the best interest of San Diegans despite the divisions.

However, both said, the disagreements have taken on a different tone than in years past, and they hope political divides won't dominate the board in the years to come.

"The unfortunate thing is some of those disagreements have become personal," Jacob said. "Everyone has a right to their own opinion, but they don't have the right to their own facts."

Cox said the election season often brings more tension, and the board has "certainly gotten... maybe a little more contentious."

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"Whoever is elected, I hope they keep in mind that once you're elected you have a responsibility to serve all the citizens in San Diego County," Cox said. "I hope the board doesn't become a partisan battleground."

Although both Jacob and Cox are Republicans, neither have a reputation as fierce partisans and neither Cox nor Jacob have weighed in on the closely watched District 3 Supervisor race, which will determine the political balance of the board and pits incumbent Supervisor Kristin Gaspar, a Republican, against Democrat Terra Lawson-Remer, an economist and former senior official in the Obama Treasury Department.

Jacob, the longest serving supervisor in San Diego County history, has weighed in on the race to replace her, though. She has thrown her support behind Poway Mayor Steve Vaus, a Republican competing against former State Senator Joel Anderson, also a Republican, to represent the mostly East County District.

"Who is gonna be representing the Second District and my constituents is of the greatest concern to me; that's why I'm strongly supporting Steve Vaus to take my place," Jacob said.

There's no question the three supervisor races could shake up everything for the Board of Supervisors, she added.

"Spending priorities could change significantly and policies could change significantly," she said.

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MEETING

FROM B1
in the provision of high quality services (and) comprehensive care while meeting all state regulations and accreditation standards," Gore wrote in August to the board, months after meeting with Wellpath.

The supervisors voted 4-1 to permit Gore to issue what is called a request for information — proposals from prospective bidders about their qualifications and how they would manage the workload.

Under its current practices, the jail system relies on 300 or more county employees to provide nursing and mental health services, and a handful of contractors that provide doctors, dentists and other health care professionals to treat inmates.

Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, San Diego County's seven jail facilities averaged about 5,500 inmates in total a day. Now that some inmates were released to control the virus spread, the system houses about 3,800 people.

The Sheriff's Department is considering using a single contractor to oversee the broad range of medical and mental services detainees require. That contract could be worth tens of millions of dollars; the county now invests \$90 million or more a year on inmate health care.

Some of the county nurses and clinicians who would lose their jobs if the plan goes forward say they worry that privatizing medical services would lead to more inmate deaths and lawsuits.

"Once it goes into for-profit hands, they're going to want to cut corners to meet their goals," said Travis Anderson, who works as a nurse at the men's central jail. "Inmates will suffer more because you won't have that consistent care."

Anderson was among 20 county workers who protested last week outside the downtown jail, where dozens of inmates have died or been injured in recent years due to lapses in medical or mental health care, according to lawsuits and some studies.

Wellpath said in a statement that there was nothing improper about the meeting with Gore late last year.

"While we have had conversations with San Diego County over the years, we have followed San Diego County procurement restrictions on communication following the release of the RFP," or request for proposals, Hallman said.

Wellpath, a Tennessee-based firm that until recently was known as Correct Care

Solutions, is one of the largest providers of medical and mental health care to prisoners in the United States. It serves some 300,000 people on any given day.

Margo Frasier, the former elected sheriff in Travis County, Texas, who now works as a criminal justice consultant, said outsourcing health care in local jails is generally a mixed blessing.

"I've seen situations where the level of care improved by contracting with a target group, and they should bring more to the table, some of these larger ones with national expertise," she said.

"But the downside of it is they are profit-oriented, so they have an incentive to do whatever it takes to keep the contract and keep themselves from being sued, but not much more," Frasier added. "They are in it to make money."

According to the Dun & Bradstreet commercial data company, Wellpath has estimated annual earnings of \$1.4 billion.

Treating inmates is generally more difficult than providing health care to the general public. Patients often arrive at county jails with existing medical or mental health issues, including addictions, that in some cases have gone untreated for years.

However, state and federal laws require jails and prisons to provide standard levels of care to incarcerated people — legal obligations that critics say have not always been met by San Diego County jails or Wellpath.

According to a six-month investigation by The San Diego Union-Tribune last year, more than 140 inmates died in Sheriff's Department custody over the prior decade, an average of more than one inmate every month. Many of the deaths documented in the multiday series were due to lapses in medical and mental health care, advocates and family members said.

The San Diego jail-mortality rate was the highest among California's six largest counties, the investigation found. Lawsuits resulting from mistakes and deficiencies inside county jails have cost taxpayers millions of dollars.

Gore has defended his department's handling of inmate health care, saying he has hired additional workers, invested more in services and toughened policies and procedures to protect detainees. He also disputes the jail death rate numbers, saying San Diego County jails are not numeric outliers compared to other California jail systems.

Wellpath also has seen its share of death and injuries among inmates who rely on

the company for basic medical and mental health needs, news coverage shows.

A CNN investigation in June 2019 said the company — called Correct Care Solutions at the time — provided substandard care due to its focus on containing costs, leading to numerous deaths and other serious outcomes that could have been avoided with more staffing, better training and more experienced employees, the network said. It examined complaints at nearly 120 locations in 32 states.

"CCS employees have denied urgent emergency room transfers," the CNN report found. "They have failed to spot or treat serious psychiatric disorders and have allowed common infections and conditions to become fatal."

Wellpath told CNN that the well-being of patients is the company's top priority, and its commitment to quality was evident in how many clients it retains year after year. It notes on its website that only 7 percent of legal complaints filed against the company result in a payment.

Hallman said in a statement to the Union-Tribune that Wellpath strives to deliver the highest level of service in a difficult environment.

In San Diego, the union representing hundreds of county workers whose jobs are threatened by the privatization effort said Gore has bypassed rules spelled out in their collective bargaining agreement. In a "cease-and-desist" letter to Gore dated Oct. 15, David Garcias of the Service Employees International Union Local 221 warned the sheriff that refusing to meet and confer with union officials violates state law.

"It is our sincere hope that you will take this opportunity to reconsider your decision to unlawfully fast-track your plan to contract out the jobs of hundreds of medical and behavioral health professionals who continue to serve patients and our community with dedication," Garcias wrote.

The Sheriff's Department, which has not responded to the warning letter, received up to 10 responses to the request for information issued this summer. It circulated a more formal request for proposals on Oct. 15, the same date of Garcias' cease-and-desist letter.

According to the county's purchasing and contracting website, responses are due by Nov. 19. The Sheriff's Department is free to award a contract; it doesn't have to seek the Board of Supervisors' approval, a county spokesman said.

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FOOD

FROM B1
those neighborhoods with only fast-food restaurants, liquor stores and small markets that typically don't stock fresh produce.

The poor health of many people living in such areas has been magnified this year by higher than average COVID-19 death and infection rates among Blacks and Latinos living in parts of Southeastern San Diego, City Heights and other low-income areas.

City officials this summer created an Office of Race and Equity, a new city department focused on eliminating systemic racism and other barriers to the fair distribution of resources like parks, libraries and lu-

crative city contracts. And this fall, council members endorsed a plan to begin paving 60 miles of unpaved dirt streets and alleys located mostly in the city's low-income areas. Montgomery Steppe, whose council district includes much of Southeastern San Diego, said she would likely support efforts to use city funding as an incentive to encourage more food businesses to open in low-income areas.

The proposal the food system alliance plans to unveil in January is based on feedback from 2,200 community leaders, members of the food industry and ordinary residents.

Some industry leaders said they would like the city to establish a "one-stop shop" for regulatory and



NICK MYERS

San Diego city officials seek ways to improve low-income neighborhoods' access to fresh produce.

technical assistance and help with small business loans, said Rachel Oport, a partnerships and operations associate for the alliance.

The alliance focused its outreach efforts in three areas of the city: Southeast-

ern San Diego, Logan Heights and City Heights.

Farmers markets and community gardens were popular solutions in each of those areas, but City Heights community leaders also expressed interest in subscription farms, where

customers agree in advance to buy weekly boxes of produce from a particular farm.

Sometimes called "community supported agriculture," the farms are typically owned and operated privately. But sometimes government agencies own and operate them, which could be an option for San Diego.

Cities should also focus on increasing community wealth by fostering more business development in low-income areas, said Tida Infahsaeng, a senior policy associate for the alliance.

Councilwoman Barbara Bry hailed that idea.

"It's something that would create an impact for generations to come," she said.

Communities in California often have greater problems with food insecurity

than elsewhere in the nation because the higher cost of housing leaves families with less money to spend on food. High housing costs also make it harder to afford a car, which makes food deserts more of a problem because residents have limited options to travel to grocery stores outside their neighborhood.

"The food system, in particular, can be a powerful lever for elevating social, environmental and economic equity for all," said Elly Brown, executive director of the food system alliance.

The alliance, established in 2012, is a collaboration of government agencies, nonprofits and food businesses. For details, visit sdffa.org/vision/promote

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