

STEVEN P. DINKIN A Path Forward

DIVIDED, AMERICANS STAND — BUT POLARIZED, WE WILL FALL

Did you hear that? In a thundering voice, our country has spoken.

Nearly 150 million Americans voted in our presidential election. Turnout exceeded 66 percent, the highest since 1908. This year, no one needed a reminder to participate in the process.

Joe Biden will be the 46th president of the United States. Kamala Harris will be the first female vice president — but also, the first Black woman, the first South Asian woman and the first daughter of immigrants to hold the role. Biden and Harris secured a record-setting number of votes: more than 77 million, according to the latest tally.

Yet President Donald Trump also secured a record number of votes: some 72 million in all, or 47 percent of the popular vote. Biden stands at 50 percent.

That's a narrow margin. Democrats were disappointed that repudiation of Trump wasn't more pronounced. Nearly half of the electorate supported him.

It's not the first time an American election has been this

close. The elections of Presidents John F. Kennedy, Bill Clinton and Ronald Reagan were close, too, just to name a few. In 2016, Trump received 3 million fewer votes than Hillary Clinton, but he won the majority of votes in the Electoral College. More often than not, our loyalties — and our votes — are split right down the middle.

In a recent interview, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Jon Meacham described the United States as perennially divided: patriot versus Tory, North versus South, agrarian versus industrial. We are a country, said Meacham, that has always been more defined by our divisions than our moments of unity.

But what's different now is that our country isn't just divided. It's polarized. Our political parties have shown an intractable unwillingness to compromise, compounding and intensifying our differences. It all seems so personal now.

Our citizenry is complicit: We have taken sides and dug in, writing off friends, family mem-

bers and co-workers with opposing views as a "lost cause." We've mastered the technique of "unfriending." A 2018 study by political scientists Nathan Kalmoe and Lillian Mason found that 15 percent of Republicans and 20 percent of Democrats believed that the U.S. would be better off if large numbers of the opposing party "just died." That's astonishing and sad.

How did we get to this tumultuous point? And how do we get past it — and become one country again?

For his part, Biden has promised to be a president for all Americans and not just the people who voted for him. But it's not all up to him.

We each have to do our part. It starts with cutting loose the hurt and bitterness tied to this most difficult year. Keeping other people at arm's distance doesn't help to heal the country, especially at a time when healing means coming together.

Nor is it a time for winners to gloat, or for losers to deny and threaten. If we weaponize the

results of the election, America won't be any better off. It'll be hard to swallow the prospect of four more years of entrenchment.

So, if you're ready, channel your feelings in a productive way. Instead of hurling insults or writing people off, do the harder thing: Welcome the tough conversations, even the ones that shake you to the core. It's the only way to soften hearts and minds, and to encourage deeper and more critical thinking.

Here are three tips for reaching across the divide:

1. Engage, despite your righteous anger. Challenge yourself to talk — voice to voice, person to person. Do it thoughtfully and with respect. When you converse with your MAGA-loving Aunt Mabel about the election at Thanksgiving dinner (or your familial Zoom call) know that she may be feeling wronged or even robbed.
2. Express curiosity. Ask "why" because you are genuinely interested in finding out why another person feels the way they do — and not because you want

to put them on the spot. Asking why, and then listening to the answer, can lead to an invaluable discussion about past experiences. It's a way to humanize an exchange.

3. Acknowledge differences but try to find similarities, too. Your words will seem less threatening. Even when our politics differ, we can find common ground based on shared concerns. Challenge yourself to find that common ground. It can be the basis for productive conversation and problem solving.

Being a divided country is not a bad thing. It's a good thing. It has defined our democracy since our nation's founding nearly 250 years ago. But to heal, we must come together around our common humanity and shared national purpose.

Let's get started.

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 NCRC's programming, visit nrcconline.com

GRAFFITI

FROM B1 residents who made the requests said they wanted to see graffiti removed from freeway overpasses, utility boxes, park signs and bus stops — regardless of the agency responsible.

Anthony Santacroce, a spokesperson for the city, said graffiti located on city property, such as a sidewalk or a street, is typically dealt with in three to seven business days.

But there can be delays when it's unclear who's responsible or if damage to commercial and private property isn't outsourced to the appropriate person, he said.

Santacroce added that the graffiti abatement program was impacted by the coronavirus pandemic. Starting in March, several city services were put on hold or downsized to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The graffiti program was one of those services, he said.

City Heights resident James Lively said it makes sense that bureaucracy would slow down the response time for some requests, but it's hard to understand why some reports that Lively made in his neighborhood were resolved in days or weeks, but others remained open for months or longer, he said.

"I don't really understand how there is inconsistency," Lively said.

According to a San Diego Union-Tribune analysis, it

took city workers an average of 25 days to resolve completed requests to remove or clean up spray paint, stickers and gang symbols on San Diego property.

But that average jumps to 30 days when unresolved requests are included in the mix.

Some requests have been pending for years.

City data show more than 400 requests to remedy graffiti on sidewalks, utility boxes, exterior walls, donation bins and street signs that have been marked as "in process" for more than a year.

Another two dozen have been pending for two years. About 60 percent are in City Council District 3 or District 9.

"Without looking at each specific case, I can't answer what's going on with every single request that's still pending," Santacroce said.

The city prioritizes requests in chronological order, he said, unless the graffiti is noted to be particularly offensive or poses a threat to the public.

There are typically five crews deployed each day to handle a list of graffiti reports.

"Sometimes graffiti is reported on the coast, on rocks, on the pier or on bridges," Santacroce said. "A lot of the times, it's hard to get to those right away and that can lead to more delays." Response times do vary by neighborhood or district.

San Diego City Council District 3 — which represents areas including Old Town, Hillcrest, North Park, South Park, Golden Hill and



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The graffiti abatement program was one of the city services put on hold or downsized to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

downtown San Diego — sees the most graffiti removal requests. Residents there filed about 27 percent of the total submissions received by the city.

District 9 — which includes City Heights, Mid-City and Southeastern San Diego neighborhoods — ranks No. 2, with about a quarter of the city's requests.

While the two districts report an almost equal number of graffiti removal requests, data show the time it takes the city to remedy the requests differs by up to 19 days.

According to city records, San Diego workers remedy requests in District 3 in an average of 21 days.

In District 9, the city takes an average of 39 days to close graffiti removal requests — the longest average wait time among all City Council districts.

"I can't dispute or confirm what's going on there," Santacroce said.

Fairmont Park resident Matt Armstrong grew so frustrated with the city's response time, he took matters into his own hands in 2017.

Armed with a paint bucket and a brush, Armstrong goes around his neighborhood painting over graffiti at least once a week. He went out Friday to cover at least three or four sewer covers that were tagged.

"If I see graffiti, I paint it that same day," said Armstrong, whose neighborhood falls inside the boundaries of District 9.

District 4 has the second-longest wait time at about 23 days, followed by Districts 8, 1 and 5, which all have wait times of about 21 days.

The wait times exclude requests that are still pend-

ing.

More than 33 percent of the city's open requests — some 900 submissions — are located in District 9 and have been pending for an average of 105 days, or about 15 weeks. District 9 neighborhoods include City Heights, Kensington-Talmadge, College Area, El Cerrito, Mountain View, Southcrest and Rolando.

Data show about a quarter of pending requests are in District 3, where they have been pending for an average of 164 days, or more than five months. District 3 neighborhoods include North Park, Mission Hills, downtown San Diego, Golden Hill, University Heights and Balboa Park.

San Diego City Councilmember Chris Ward, who represents District 3, said the difference in response times indicates that the

process should be reviewed.

Another analysis, done by a local law firm, George H. Ramos, Jr. & Associates, and marketing agency, 1Point21 Interactive, found discrepancies in response times to graffiti requests in poor and wealthy neighborhoods.

The analysis found that in the neighborhoods of La Jolla and Pacific Beach the average clean-up duration was 21.6 days and 17.8 days, respectively, but lower-income neighborhoods like the Tijuana River Valley and Mid-City, clean-up took 47.2 days and 42.7 days to happen, respectively.

Santacroce criticized that analysis and questioned its validity, saying it ignores that some graffiti is not on city property and it doesn't properly consider the time it takes for the city to get private property owners to clean up graffiti.

"This rudimentary, self-serving analysis of graffiti abatement was done on behalf of a law firm to advertise legal defense services and fails to account for many variables within the City's graffiti removal program that make the analysis essentially meaningless," Santacroce said.

Santacroce said the city's graffiti supervisor will go over the oldest graffiti reports next week, to ensure some of those lengthy delays are not due to glitches in the system.

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RAIL

FROM B1 run at night when passenger and commuter trains are out of service.

The San Diego Pathing Study was completed by the firm DB Engineering & Consulting USA for NCTD and BNSF, the private company that operates freight trains on the coastal rail corridor. The Port of San Diego is one of the biggest West Coast entry points for new foreign cars and bulk building supplies that arrive by sea and travel north by rail.

"The collaboration of this important study by NCTD and its freight partner represents the best example of a win-win in public-private partnerships," said Tony Kranz, chairman of the NCTD board and an Encinitas City Council member.

"We look forward to applying this framework in our capital budget planning," Kranz said in a transit district news release. "We expect these findings will translate into improved passenger and freight services that support our efforts to increase rail service frequencies, improve our rider experience, and improve our economy and overall quality of life."



U-T FILE PHOTO

North County Transit District plans to extend Coaster passenger rail service south from Santa Fe Depot to the San Diego Convention Center in five years.

Completion of the Convention Center train station is part of a package of related "mid-term" improvements expected to cost about \$380 million, according to the consultant's study, most of which is expected in a grant from the California Transportation Commission.

"We are always interested in projects that can help connect our Convention Center to the region for our visitors and for our staff," said Mara Dougherty, director of marketing and communications.

The study also identifies a separate set of long-term

improvements for the tracks south of the Santa Fe Depot that will cost an additional \$700 million, including an Amtrak maintenance facility to be built in National City, better rail crossings and signals, and other changes to make trains faster and more efficient.

The long-term plan also includes the "potential" for a passenger station in National City.

"This sounds like a great transportation opportunity for our South Bay region," said National City Mayor Alejandra Sotelo-Solis in an email Friday.

"National City is commit-

ted to smart growth and has been working with the Port, Navy, SANDAG, and MTS (the San Diego Metropolitan Transit System) to create solutions and opportunities," she said. "An Amtrak project could definitely fall into those efforts. It is essential to have Amtrak master plan the station as a mobility hub if this plan were to move forward. For the station to be a true mobility hub, it would be important to have Amtrak provide a commitment to start passenger service within 3-5 years from opening the service yard."

San Diego is part of

what's called the Los Angeles-San Diego-San Luis Obispo (LOSSAN) rail corridor, which in a typical year carries \$1 billion in freight and more than 8 million passengers.

This year has been anything but typical, though, and because of COVID-19 travel restrictions, ridership on Amtrak and Coaster trains has been down as much as 90 percent. Since April, the Convention Center has been a 1,495-bed homeless shelter to help slow the spread of the pandemic.

Transit officials say 2021 will be a turnaround year and are planning for a long-term increase in rail service.

The San Diego section of the coastal rail corridor had 62 trains daily before the COVID-19 crisis hit this year. Traffic is expected to increase to 101 trains daily by 2030.

Increasing service will require eliminating structural deficiencies, such as bottlenecks that occur at places like the Del Mar bluffs. Trains must reduce their speed on the bluffs, and there's no room for a second set of tracks that has already been installed along much of the coastal route.

The coastal bluffs also are subject to erosion, and

require costly stabilization work to keep them safe. Eventually, NCTD and the San Diego Association of Governments plan to move the tracks to an inland route through tunnels beneath Del Mar. That will take 10 years or longer and cost billions of dollars, but the new route will be safer and faster.

Another bottleneck on the LOSSAN route is just north of San Diego County at San Clemente, where a nine-mile section of single track prevents trains from passing and slows trains throughout the entire corridor. Travel between Capistrano Beach and San Onofre takes 15 minutes, during which no trains can pass on that segment.

The recommended solution is to double-track at least some parts of the segment, so that north- and southbound trains go around each other, which would shorten the bottleneck and increase the capacity of the corridor.

Faster, more frequent commuter rail service is part of SANDAG's 5 Big Moves, a comprehensive plan to invest in regional public transportation networks and to get more people to use mass transit.

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TRASH Volumes have risen in 2020

FROM B1 city officials said.

In May, the city reported an 18 percent increase in trash, a 19 percent jump in recycling and a 17 percent increase in green waste since the start of the pandemic, compared with the same period in 2019.

Add to that higher-than-normal rates of absences among trash collection workers. More workers than

usual are either sick or caring for a family member for reasons related to COVID-19, Rife said.

Since September, the city has added new sanitation drivers positions, has brought back retired sanitation drivers, has reassigned employees from other departments and has been diligently filling vacant sanitation driver positions and intensifying training, Rife said.

"This plan for continuity of operations will also assist should the pandemic worsen," she said.

People who have reported missed collections to the city's "Get it Done" web-

site describe waiting weeks for trash to be picked up from cans on the curb.

"Our garbage has been missed for two weeks," a resident reported Nov. 6 about missed collections on Fourth Avenue near Quince Street. "They do not go down our small street, yet take everyone else's trash around. Our garbage cans are full and we are not able to put anything in them. We have two cans for seven people. This is ridiculous."

A reporter who visited the address on Nov. 10 found two full trash cans, their lids slightly ajar, on the curb. The owner of the residence

could not be reached for comment.

Another person who made a report Nov. 6 about missed collection at an address on Chaparral Way near Montezuma Road, in the College West neighborhood, also described waiting more than two consecutive weeks for trash to be picked up, though all their neighbors' refuse was collected on time. The report said the problem was corrected Nov. 11.

The Union-Tribune reviewed numerous reports that described similarly lengthy gaps in collections.

San Diego's free trash

pickup for single family homes is an unusual service for a city. The practice was established by a law called the People's Ordinance in 1919, when trash was valuable to hog farmers.

Now the city collects trash, recycling and green waste from about 289,000 single-family homes and street-facing duplexes throughout the city. It costs the city about \$34 million annually.

Private haulers collect trash and recycling for businesses, commercial properties, condominiums, apartment complexes and gated communities, for which cus-

tomers pay fees.

Rife said Friday that the city is not currently experiencing any issues with delayed collections, noting that the collection status map on the city's website showed no impacted areas.

She recommended residents put trash containers curbside by 6 a.m. to ensure collection, though it may take more than a day to collect them. Rife also recommends people check the city's Environmental Services webpage for delays before reporting a missed collection.

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