"HOW SCARED ARE YOU?"

Mapping the Threat Environment of San Diego's Elected Officials

Violence, Inequality and Power Lab

University of San Diego | KROC SCHOOL
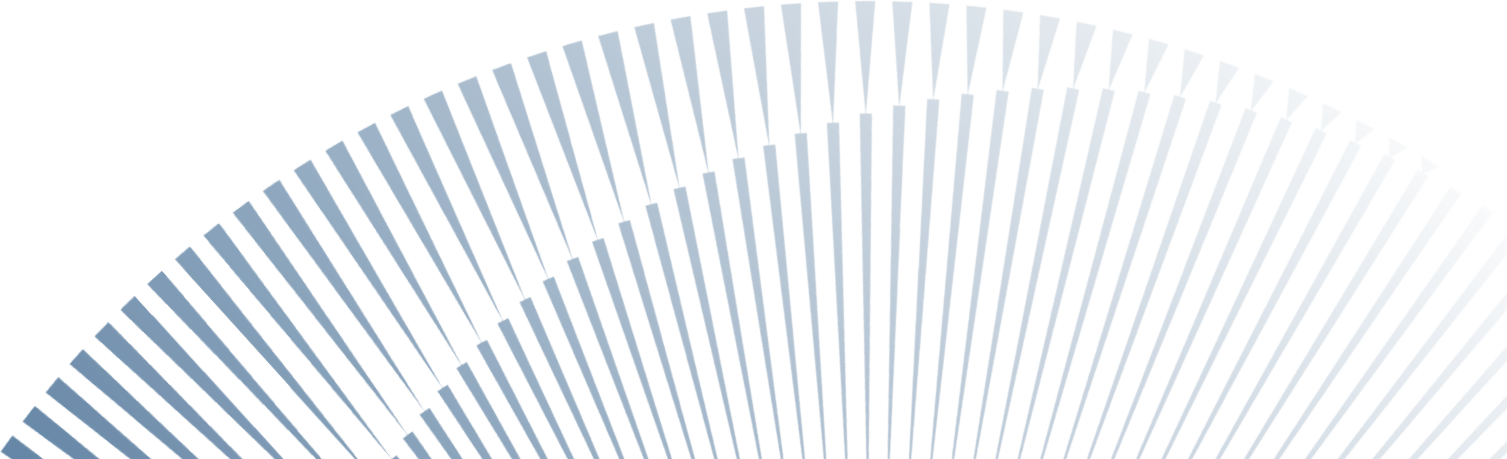Institute for Peace and Justice

INSTITUTE FOR CIVIL CIVIC ENGAGEMENT
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ABOUT THE VIOLENCE, INEQUALITY AND POWER LAB

The VIP Lab is a space for cutting-edge research and ideas on how to shift inequalities to end cycles of violence. We do this through partnerships, with a focus on advancing critical analysis alongside practical guidance to address multiple, often overlapping, forms of violence.

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR CIVIL CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The Institute for Civil Civic Engagement is a partnership between San Diego Mesa College, San Diego Miramar College, San Diego City College and the University of San Diego College of Arts and Sciences. The mission of ICCE is to encourage, promote and increase civility in civic discourse in San Diego as we confront the political challenges that shape our community.

Executive Summary

Democracy cannot function without individuals stepping up to serve as representatives of their community. The presence and growth of threats and harassment directed towards elected representatives poses a direct risk to our democracy, weakening community cohesion and our ability to address collective challenges. While our research found threats and harassment to be present across political parties, it identified women as far more likely to be on the receiving end both in terms of quantity and severity. If under-represented groups are pushed out of the processes of debate and decision-making, solutions will not be oriented around the diversity of our society.

Without clear data on the scale of the problem, the rise in threats and ad hominem attacks are too easily discounted by public officials, the media and the public at large. Possible consequences range from an increased potential for physical violence and the resignation from public life of elected officials. The research outlined in this report helps to expose the scale of threats and harassment, while in turn providing recommendations from those directly impacted, concerned community members and scholars on how to reinforce safe and non-threatening local governance.

While several studies have shown that cities, counties and states across the country are experiencing an increased level of hostility towards elected officials, very few geographically designated areas are measuring incidents in any structured way. The research outlined in this report aims to set a clear baseline on the extent of aggressive behavior towards nearly all categories of elected office in San Diego County. Our research looked at all County School Boards, Community College Boards, City Councils, Mayors, and the County Board of Supervisors.

Using a mixed methods approach that included surveys, interviews, a traditional media review and social media review, our team was able to get a clear picture of the problem both objectively and subjectively. Our findings confirm that the rise in threats and harassments targeting elected officials identified in national studies is also occurring at the local level in San Diego County. This rise in hostile threatening behavior towards elected officials is having a measurable impact on a) the ability of elected office holders to effectively participate in the public policy process; b) the likelihood of elected officials seeking to encourage others to enter public life or remain in public life themselves; and c) the psychological and physical health of office holders and their families. The vitriol we are seeing risks significantly and negatively impact the vitality of local democracy, civic engagement and effective policy making on across the policy spectrum.

The vast majority of local elected officials in San Diego County are impacted. Seventy-five percent of all elected officials reported being on the receiving end of threats and harassment. Of these, 47% reported the threats and harassment occurs monthly. Thus, not only do threats and harassment impact most of San Diego County elected officials, but the aggression is taking place on a regular basis. Of those who have not themselves been threatened or harassed, nearly half said they had witnessed threats and harassment against others. These data indicate nearly 90% of all San Diego County elected officials have either been threatened or harassed or have witnessed such abuse directed at their peers.

While there is not a significant partisan difference, with moderates most likely to be on the receiving end of threats and harassment, there is a big gender divide. Women are far more impacted than men. Eighty-two percent of female elected officials reported being on the receiving end of threats and harassment compared with 66% of all men. Of the 24 incidents of threats and harassment reported in local media, 19 incidents involved women, and five involved men. On social media, when examining men and women of comparable Twitter usage and prominence of position, women received 15 to 20 times the aggressive interaction as their male peers.

With 66% of survey respondents reporting that threats and harassment have gone up over the course of their time in office, the implications of a continued rise are concerning. Roughly half (52%) of all survey respondents have considered leaving public service because of the threats and harassment they endure. Disaggregating by gender, twice as many women considered leaving public office as did men (61% compared to 32%). This is alarming, although not surprising given the elevated frequency and intensity of threats and harassment women face compared to men.

Forty-five percent of those we surveyed stated they think new solutions are needed to handle the increasingly vitriolic environment. Several initiatives have been developed in the San Diego area in the last 2 years to provide new solutions, but more work is needed. As part of our effort to understand potential solutions, we conducted three "community conversations" across the County. The group discussions, and the recommendations that came from them, form the backbone of our recommendations, alongside insights from other national studies and academic sources. A summary of those recommendations is here, with detail provided in the relevant section below.

Recommendation 1: Increased Accountability for Perpetrators

Increased accountability for perpetrators of threatening and harassing behavior both in real time at public meetings and in terms of criminal prosecution.

Recommendation 2: Document and Report All Incidents

Although most incidents will not rise to the level of criminal prosecution, having a record will make it easier to prosecute if an incident does escalate. Documentation can also demonstrate patterns that can better inform prevention and response options.

Recommendation 3: Increased Protection for Local Officials

Numerous reports have highlighted the need for increased protection – in both the physical and digital space – for local officials to reinforce safety and security.

Recommendation 4: Potential Revisions to the Brown Act

Amend the Brown Act to allow for a degree of private discussion and provide space for elected officials and constituents to discuss issues in less formal settings.

Recommendation 5: Increased Training for Elected Officials

Provide trainings in diffusion and de-escalation tactics, connect elected officials with greater mental health resources, and reinforce key elements of civility.

Recommendation 6: Prepare for Threats and Harassment

Develop standardized plans that include clear warning systems for disruptive constituents, with agreed upon conditions about how many warnings are provided before law enforcement acts.

Recommendation 7: Partner with Community Organizations

Community conversations highlighted "upstream" work. This work might include engaging faith leaders to "preach and teach" civility from the pulpit and civil society to find pathways to engage political conflict constructively.

Recommendation 8: Do More Research

Expand research efforts to include other elected officials (e.g., judges, prosecutors), as well as teachers, superintendents, public health workers, and others. There was also a call for more detail on the differences across gender and racial groups.

I. Introduction and Context

Targeted threats and the perpetration of physical violence toward individuals serving in locally elected leadership positions have increased steadily around the world. Local leaders—the most foundational representatives of the democratic processes undergirding our system of government—have faced unprecedented levels of uncivil and antidemocratic threats, harassment, and attacks.[1] Such threats have included ad hominem attacks based on a person's identity, their political opinion, or their race or place of origin, among others. Data have indicated most threatening and harassing behavior directed against local officials is nonphysical and occurs in online spaces.[2] However, aggressive rhetoric also has done harm to our democratic systems and has escalated, in extreme cases, to physical violence. By nearly all measures, political violence is more acceptable in the United States than it was 5 years ago.[3]

Although threats, harassment, and violence directed against high-level officials have garnered the most media attention, threats and violence directed at local officials have been increasingly widespread, posing a serious threat to democracy. A survey conducted by the National League of Cities in 2021 revealed the extent of the problem, finding over 80% of 112 local public officials reported personally facing threats, harassment, and violence.[4] An even higher percentage (87%) "observed an increase in attacks on public officials in recent years." The survey found most threats and harassment occurred online (e.g., via social media), but threats and harassment also occurred in person in both public and private spaces. For example, over half of respondents (64%) were threatened during public meetings, and a significant number (35%) experienced harassment outside work while going about their daily lives.[5]

The Mayors Innovation Project conducted an extensive survey in 2021 that found similar results.[6] The researchers provided the survey to mayors of U.S. cities with populations over 10,000. The survey questions focused on the frequency with which mayors experienced threats and violence. Violence was delineated into categories of psychological violence (which causes fear or harm to one's sense of self-worth or well-being), physical violence, gendered violence, sexualized violence, and race–based violence. Results indicated nearly every mayoral respondent (94%) faced psychological violence at least once in 2021.[7] Nearly a quarter of mayors reported being threatened at least once during the year, and 15% reported experiencing physical violence within the year.[8]

1   Clarence E. Anthony, Tina Lee, Jacob Gottlieb, and Brooks Rainwater, *On the Frontlines of Today's Cities: Trauma, Challenges and Solutions* (National League of Cities, 2021), https://www.nlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/On-the-Frontlines-of-Todays-Cities-1.pdf.
2   Anthony et al., *On the Frontlines.*
3   Rachel Kleinfeld, *The Rise in Political Violence in the United States and Damage to Our Democracy* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 31, 2022), https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/03/31/rise-in-political-violence-in-united-states-and-damage-to-our-democracy-pub-87584.
4   Anthony et al., *On the Frontlines.*
5   Anthony et al., *On the Frontlines.*
6   Rebekah Herrick, Sue Thomas, Heidi Gerbracht, Ceri Jenkins, and Emily Miota, *Intersectional Psychological Violence, Threats, and Physical Violence against Mayors in 2021* (Mayors Innovation Project, May 11, 2022), https://mayorsinnovation.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/868/2022/05/Herrick-Thomas-et-al.-CAWP-Research-Brief_FINAL.pdf.
7   Herrick et al., *Intersectional Psychological Violence.*
8   Herrick et al., *Intersectional Psychological Violence.*

Further, across the country, those most at risk of attack represent politically underrepresented groups, including Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC); women; and members of the LGBTQ+ community.[9] The result here is twofold. One, if targeted attacks are successful, underrepresented individuals likely withdraw from positions of political influence, reinforcing dominant power structures and undermining diversity, equity, and inclusion. Two, if not prevented structurally, these attacks place the responsibility of protection on individuals, which reinforces the undue burden already borne by those whom many existing institutions do not equitably serve.

The studies cited previously make it clear that significant numbers of local leaders have experienced threats and harassment, which raises several questions we address in the following sections: Which local officials are most likely to be threatened and harassed? What form do the threats and harassment typically take?

In 2022, the Violence, Inequality and Power Lab and the Institute for Civil Civic Engagement launched a first-in-the-nation mixed-methods study to understand more fully the universe of threats and harassment directed at local elected officials in San Diego County. This research provides a clear picture of not only the scale of threats and harassment but also the concrete implications for San Diego County. The research was complemented by recommendations gleaned both from peer research and expert reports as well as a number of community conversations with County residents and local elected leaders.

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9   Marie Lamensch, *When Women Are Silenced Online, Democracy Suffers* (Centre for Interional Governance Innovation, April 22, 2021), https://www.cigionline.org/articles/when-women-are-silenced-online-democracy-suffers/; Roudabeh Kishi, Melissa Pavlik, and Hilary Matfess, *'Terribly and Terrifyingly Normal': Political Violence Targeting Women* (ACLED, May 2019), https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/ACLED_Report_PoliticalViolenceTargetingWomen_5.2019.pdf.

Across California, parent protests of student masking guidelines during the pandemic regularly shut down school board meetings with incendiary threats, yelling, and other forms of disruptive activity.[10] The disruption to school boards' abilities to conduct regular business became so severe that the California School Board Association contacted the state and federal government in September 2021 for assistance.[11] In a letter requesting support, the CEO of the Californian School Board Association wrote, "[I have] watched in horror as school board members have been accosted, verbally abused, physically assaulted, and subjected to death threats against themselves and their family members."[12]

San Diego is not immune. In September 2021, protestors forced themselves inside a school board meeting in Poway, CA, a suburb of San Diego, and declared themselves the new board after the actual board was advised to adjourn early due to fear of violence. The following month, two protestors were arrested at the same school board, and the county district attorney assigned a prosecutor to investigate.[13] When the Coronado School Board issued an apology for an incident of racist behavior by the Coronado High School basketball team, a member of the school board was harassed repeatedly and received death threats.[14] After a heated exchange during a La Mesa-Spring Valley School Board meeting in February 2021, one board member experienced racist attacks, and the district received calls threatening violence and abuse.[15] Unfortunately, it is not only school boards who are on the receiving end of hate. At a County Board of Supervisors meeting in November 2021, racist slurs were hurled alongside suggestions that at least one board member commit suicide.[16] In Carlsbad, a council member received personal, vitriol-filled attacks via email and social media for speaking out on public health requirements.[17]

Although this small sample of incendiary behavior should be enough to make one concerned, it is insufficient to explain how widespread the problem is. Without a repository of county-wide evidence, we know little of the full scale of the problem or whether actions taken to remediate have the intended impact. The research outlined in the following section sets that baseline. Research will be repeated on an annual basis to identify important trends.

10   Kristen Taketa, "'It's an Ugliness': School Officials Fear for Their Safety Amid Threats, Disruptions at Meetings," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, October 3, 2021, https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/education/story/2021-10-03/its-an-ugliness-threats-harassment-over-covid-plague-school-boards-across-california.

11   Taketa, "It's an Ugliness."

12   Vernon Billy, "Letter to Governor on School Board Safety," California School Boards Association, September 24, 2021, https://ca-times.brightspotcdn.com/6c/e5/8bdb6775404abc798969f0a6dbb9/letter-to-gov-on-school-board-safety-09.24.21.pdf.

13   Anya Kamenetz, "School Board Meetings Have Gotten Headed; This One in California is on a Whole New Level," *National Public Radio*, October 24, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/10/24/1048790515/school-board-meetings-have-gotten-heated-but-this-one-in-california-is-on-a-who.

14   Joseph Kahne and John Rogers, "Op-Ed: Attacks on School Board Meetings Are Threatening Democracy: Will Educators Help Save It?," *Los Angeles Times,* October 15, 2021, https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2021-10-15/school-board-attacks-democracy-civics.

15   Joe Hong, "La Mesa–Spring Valley School Board Member Faces Racist Threats and Recall," KBPS, March 5, 2021, https://www.kpbs.org/news/education/2021/03/05/la-mesa-spring-valley-school-board-member-faces-ra.

16   San Diego Tribute Editorial Board, "Vile, Racist Language at San Diego County Board Meeting Cannot Be Tolerated," *San Diego Tribune*, November 3, 2021, https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/opinion/editorials/story/2021-11-03/sd-ed-racist-insults-wooten-vargas-fletcher-san-diego-county-supervisors.

17   "'The City Hates You': Carlsbad Council Member Targeted in Profanity-Laced Email," NBC7 San Diego, January 11, 2021, https://www.nbcsandiego.com/news/coronavirus/the-city-hates-you-carlsbad-councilmember-targeted-in-profanity-laced-email/2493275/.

II. Study Methodology

Using several methods, this study gathered data on the experiences of all K–12 school boards in San Diego County, as well as the four San Diego County community college boards, all San Diego County city councils, mayors, and the County Board of Supervisors.

First, the literature review overviews the environment of threats and harassment toward elected officials nationwide for the past 10 years to contextualize San Diego County and help us understand whether localized findings aligned with or deviated from national trends.

Primary research included development and dissemination of a survey instrument sent to 328 elected officials in San Diego County representing all categories of elected office mentioned previously. Ninety-nine individuals replied to the survey, representing roughly 30% of survey recipients.[18] [19]

In addition to surveys, we conducted interviews with 10% of all survey respondents. These key informant interviews provided a significant qualitative perspective, putting a human face to the felt impact of both threats and harassment. To select interview subjects, we divided the 99 survey respondents into male and female groups[20] and then selected individuals at random from each gender category. This provided an even representation of male and female interviewees. The randomization also led to representation across the political spectrum as well as individuals serving in urban, peri-urban, and rural parts of the County.

In addition to self-reporting gleaned through the survey and interviews, the research team conducted both a traditional and social media review. We first searched for print and radio media pieces citing a threat or incident of harassment toward any local elected official during the 5-year timeframe from 2017–2022. We found 24 separate incidents, with several covered multiple times across various media outlets. This media review included all major print and radio stations in San Diego County[21] but not all local community papers given challenges in accessing archives.

For the social media scrape, the research team collected a list of all office holders as of January 2022 who maintained Twitter accounts. Beginning with this sample, the research team then searched for all replies and mentions of identified Twitter handles from January 2016 to December 2022, which yielded roughly half a million tweets (~460,000). We applied a natural language search to this body of tweets to identify about 13,000 that appeared likely to contain threats, harassment, or aggressive language. We reviewed these tweets, coding those we deemed aggressive when directed at a local official in San Diego County.

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18   A 30% response rate to a survey distributed by email is relatively high (see Petchenik and Watermolen, 2011). Our response rate is likely higher than usual due both to the personal outreach to board members by project staff and by following best practices on survey length and engagement strategy (see Martha C. Monroe and Damian C. Adams, "Increasing Response Rates to Web-Based Surveys," *Journal of Extension* 50, no. 6 (2012): 6–7), https://archives.joe.org/joe/2012december/tt7.php.

19   Surveys were administered through Qualtrics software. Survey links were emailed to the addresses of all verified members of the bodies listed above. Project staff sent reminders to all nonresponsive email addresses one, two, and three months after the initial survey distribution.

20   No individual self-identified as nonbinary, making it unnecessary to include another gender category.

21   Media outlets included ABC News, CBS 8, *The Coast News*, *Coronado Times*, *Daily Kos*, *Del Mar Times*, Fox San Diego, KPBS (local National Public Radio affiliate), NBC San Diego, *San Diego Union Tribune*, *Times of San Diego*, and Voice of San Diego.

III. Findings: Volume, Mode, and Severity of Threats/Harassment

This section details the extent to which local elected officials in San Diego suffer from threats and harassment. We found such abuse shockingly common, regardless of the official's political affiliation. Women were more frequent targets of abuse, especially women holding prominent positions. This type of abuse also appeared to be more common than in the past.

We found evidence of these trends not only in our survey and follow-up interviews but also in public posts on social media. As described previously, we engaged in a search of Twitter interactions to measure the volume of aggressive language targeted at San Diego policymakers and officials. Both in our investigation and in other research, we have seen an increase in aggressive language targeted at a wide range of policymakers, with special attention focused on women in power.
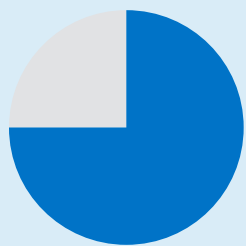
75% of all elected officials reported receiving threats and harassment.

47% of those responding in the affirmative reported the threats and harassment occurred monthly.
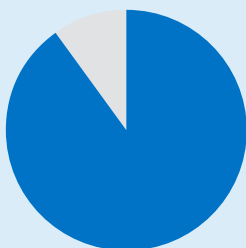
Nearly 90% of all San Diego County elected officials have either been threatened or harassed or have witnessed such abuse directed at their peers.

A. Threats and Harassment in Aggregate

Seventy-five percent of all elected officials reported receiving threats and harassment. Further, 47% of those responding in the affirmative reported the threats and harassment occurred monthly; thus, not only do threats and harassment impact most of San Diego County elected officials, but the behavior is repeated on a regular basis.

Among the 25% who said they had never been threatened or harassed, roughly half (48%) said they had witnessed threats and harassment against others, and slightly over half (52%) said the environment of threats and harassment is a central issue. These data indicate nearly 90% of all San Diego County elected officials have either been threatened or harassed or have witnessed such abuse directed at their peers.

B. Trends Over Time

Another conclusive finding from our research was that threats and harassment have gone up considerably in the past several years. Sixty-six percent of survey respondents said threats and harassment have increased since they started public service. Between 2017–2019, there were no more than two traditional media pieces on threats or harassment per year; however, starting in 2020, there were nine incidents reported—six in 2021 and eight in 2022. Further, interviewees described what previously had been a reasonable level of disagreement shifting toward something much more toxic, frequent, and intense, beginning most significantly in 2020. Not only have threats and harassment increased, but they also have become regularized.

66%

Threats and harassment have gone up considerably in the past several years. 66% of survey respondents said threats and harassment have increased since they started public service.
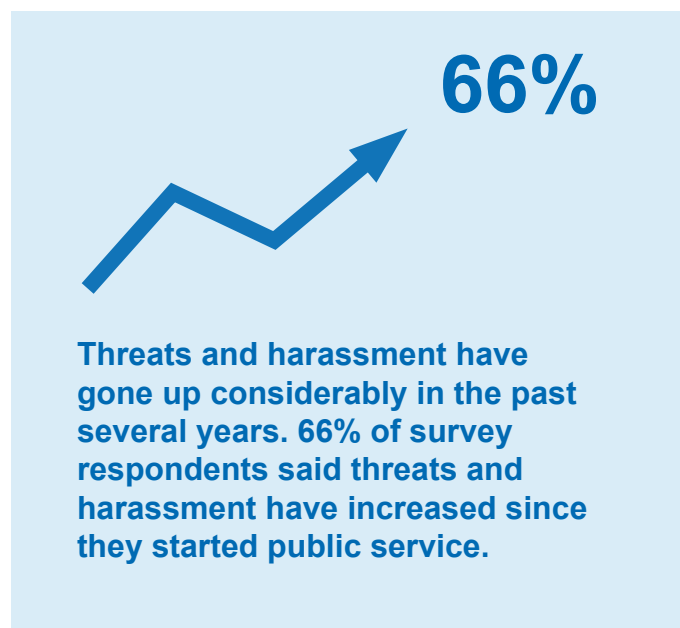
> *"Went from 'you're against the kids' to 'you're committing crimes against humanity.' 100% because of COVID, that's where it started."*
>
> *Anonymous interviewee, #SDT075*

C. Gender

Of significant concern, women have been far more impacted than men. Eighty-two percent of female elected officials reported being on the receiving end of threats and harassment compared with 66% of all men.[22] Of the 24 incidents of threats and harassment reported in local media, which constituted a proxy measure for the most public and/or egregious incidents (i.e., those attracting media attention), 19 incidents involved women, and five involved men.[23]

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22   Male and female survey respondents were nearly identical in terms of length of time in office—8.23 years on average for men and 8.16 years for women.

23   Of all incidents reported in local media, half involved a death threat, and 20 percent involved threats or harassment toward a family member of the elected official. Nine of 24 were forwarded to the police. These are indications of more intense levels of threat than the norm.

Our social media scrape added some depth and context to these figures. In a straight comparison of male and female office holders, men received more than double the aggressive interactions on Twitter as women, yet such a comparison of men and women is misleading for a number of reasons.

First, the two most prominent local politicians (who are also the two most active Twitter users in the sample) are men. Together, they accounted for nearly 50% of the total aggressive interactions we measured. Second, the women in our sample used Twitter much less often than the men did. Nearly 75% of officials in our sample who tweeted less than once a month during our time range were women. These women received almost zero aggressive interactions and drove down the average female total substantially.

What happens when we compare politicians with similar visibility and Twitter usage? Men and women on small school boards who use Twitter infrequently had very similar outcomes: not only did they have no negative interactions, they recorded almost no interaction at all. When we compared women and men on the San Diego City Council and County Board of Supervisors (who, by chance, all engaged on Twitter a similar amount), a very different picture emerged. Such prominent women received 15 to 20 times the aggressive interaction as their male peers.

In sum, the ratio we observed in the full social media scrape was driven by the tendency of women to serve in relatively low-visibility public posts that attract little attention of any kind.

82% of female elected officials reported being on the receiving end of threats and harassment
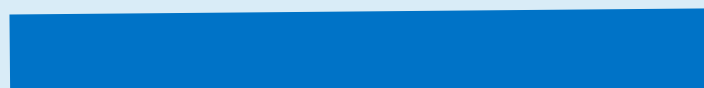
66% of male elected officials reported being on the receiving end of threats and harassment

> *"Unquestionably, women are much more likely to be threatened/harassed. A lot of hostility towards women that I never experienced as a white man. The harassment and institutional sexism that I've seen is significant."*
>
> *Anonymous interviewee, #SDT008*

This gender disparity we observed in San Diego tracks with national-level research. The Threats and Harassment Against Local Officials Dataset, published by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and Princeton University's Bridging Divides Initiative (BDI), has tracked publicly known incidents of threats and harassment against local officials in the United States between January 1, 2020, and September 23, 2022.[24] The local officials considered in the data have been categorized into three groups: health officials, election officials, and local government officeholders. The ADL/BDI data set has affirmed survey research showing female officials were targeted more frequently than male officials. In fact, the ADL/BDI data set found women officials were targeted in 42% of incidents, which, when adjusted for the proportion of women holding local office, equates to women officials being targeted 3.4 times more frequently than male officials.[25]

The incident-based nature of the ADL/BDI data set provides empirical evidence that complements and reinforces trends around threats and harassment of local officials identified through survey-based research. The Mayors Innovation Project conducted an extensive survey in 2021 provided to all mayors of U.S. cities with populations of over 10,000.[26] Survey results showed more women mayors reported higher rates of threats and harassment across every category compared to male mayors.[27]

24   *Threats and Harassment Against Local Officials Dataset* (Bridging Divides Initiative and the Anti-Defamation League, October 20, 2022), https://bridgingdivides.princeton.edu/sites/g/files/toruqf246/files/documents/Threats%20and%20Harassment%20Report.pdf.
25   *Threats and Harassment Against Local Officials Dataset.*
26   Herrick et al., *Intersectional Psychological Violence.*
27   Herrick et al., *Intersectional Psychological Violence.*

Women mayors faced higher rates of psychological violence, gender-based violence, sexualized violence, and threats than did male mayors.[28] In terms of frequency, women mayors reported being harassed more frequently on a monthly basis than male mayors.[29] Although women mayors in general were targeted more often than men, women of color faced the highest rates of monthly harassment.[30]

Not only did women receive more threatening and harassing language, but threats and harassment also impacted them differently. Our survey found although half of all elected officials considered leaving public service because of threats and harassment, twice as many women (61%) as men (32%) considered leaving. Given the intensity and frequency of the threats and harassment women received, this is not surprising, but all who have espoused a commitment to gender equity in local government should be shocked by the implications.

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28   Herrick et al., *Intersectional Psychological Violence.*
29   Herrick et al., *Intersectional Psychological Violence.*
30   Herrick et al., *Intersectional Psychological Violence.*

D. Partisanship

Although women are at greater risk of being on the receiving end of threats and harassment, our research did not find a significant partisan divide. Among survey respondents, 82% of moderates reported threats or harassment compared with 80% of liberals and 66% of conservatives.[31]

Indeed, in our interviews, several respondents who spoke about their experience being threatened or harassed reported on the vitriol from within their own party, which often occurred when the individuals' positions were insufficiently aligned with others within their party or were not aligned with an extreme position within their party. This anger towards people for not being extreme enough is perhaps why those self-reporting as moderate showed the highest levels of being threatened and harassed. Interviewees also reported harassment coming from their peers in elected office, most typically directed toward those representing a new demographic on the Board or Council (i.e., first woman of color, first openly gay individual).
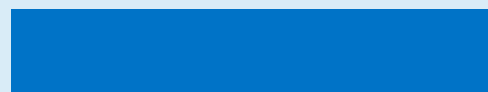
82% of moderates
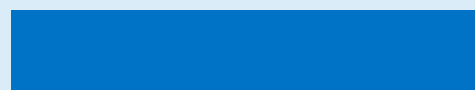
80% of liberals
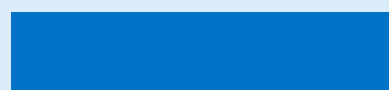
66% of conservatives

"[I am] the first woman of color . . . everyone else is white males. There is a regular exclusion. No room for anything different or anyone who looks different."

Anonymous interviewee, #SDT080

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31   In California, school board members do not run on party lines. Our methodology asked individuals to self-report along a spectrum ranging from highly conservative to moderate to highly liberal.

Nationally, the partisan nature of threats and harassment is complex, tied to a range of factors, from demographic changes to shifts in political rhetoric and an increasingly partisan media environment, but it also is linked to a broader trend in partisanship across the country. Antipathy toward those of opposing political parties has become increasingly personal. According to the Pew Research Center, "Perhaps the most striking change is the extent to which partisans view those in the opposing party as immoral. In 2016, about half of Republicans (47%) and slightly more than a third of Democrats (35%) said those in the other party were a lot or somewhat more immoral than other Americans. Today, 72% of Republicans regard Democrats as more immoral, and 63% of Democrats say the same about Republicans."[32]

Findings from the Pew Research Center survey (i.e., that slightly more Republicans view Democrats as immoral than do Democrats of Republicans) tracks with our findings, which showed slightly more Democrats receiving threats and harassment than Republicans. In other words, although there is a higher overall percentage of Republicans viewing their partisan "opponents" as immoral and directing threats and harassment toward them, the difference between parties is small.

Once one moves from *verbal* threats and harassment to *physical* violence, however, the differences become quite stark. As William Braniff, director of the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) testified to Congress in 2019, "Among domestic terrorists, violent far-right terrorists are by far the most numerous, lethal and criminally active."[33] Put succinctly, although animosity is bipartisan, actual violence is used much more frequently by those on the right.[34]

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32   Pew Research Center, *As Partisan Hostility Grows, Signs of Frustration With the Two-Party System* (Pew Research Center, August 9, 2022), https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/08/09/as-partisan-hostility-grows-signs-of-frustration-with-the-two-party-system/.

33   William Braniff, "Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee 'Countering Domestic Terrorism: Examining the Evolving Threat,'" United States Senate, September 25, 2019, https://go.umd.edu/wLT.

34   Kleinfeld, *The Rise in Political Violence.*
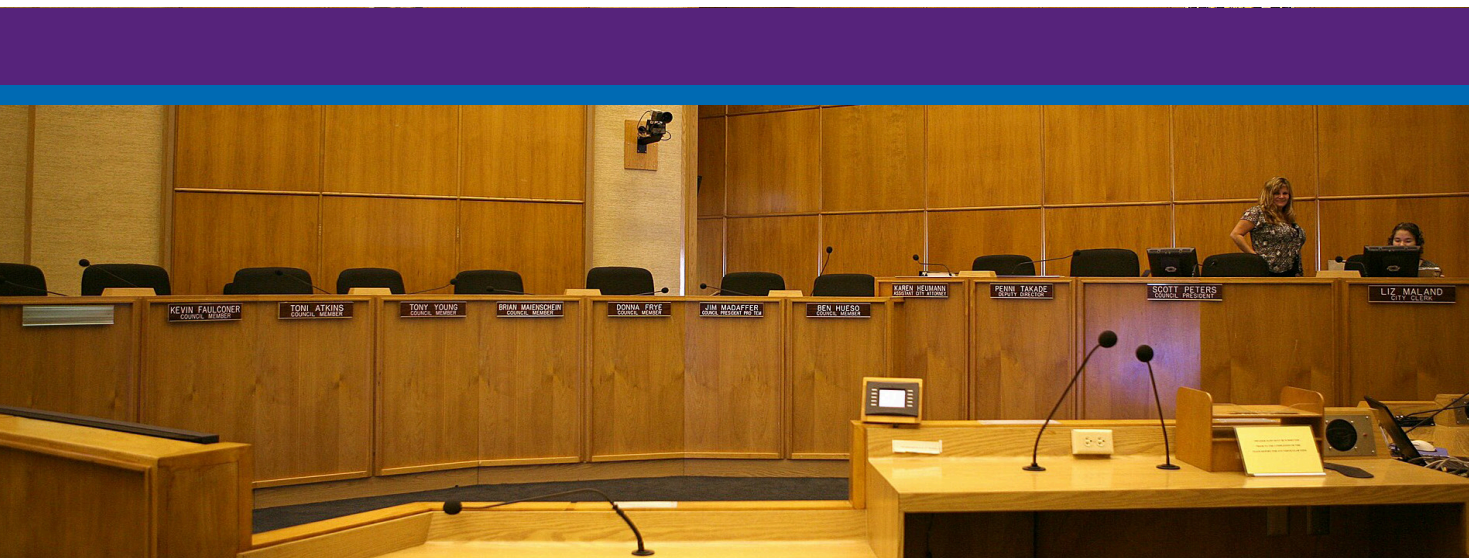
IV. Impacts

Many Americans are alarmed about threats and harassment directed against public officials. Oftentimes, these concerns stem from a desire to return to civil discourse or from a sense that public officials deserve more respect and privacy as fully private citizens. Beyond these concerns, it is reasonable to question the effects threats and harassment may have on our democratic systems and representative policy deliberation.

Although our research uncovered some areas of clarity (e.g., the impact of threats and harassment on people's decision to remain in office), several areas are still in need of further research. For example, what is the aggressors' intent? Are threats and harassment used to achieve a specific outcome, or are they the result of frustration with not having an outlet? If officials who face threats and harassment are more likely to leave office or change their behavior or policy stances, the aggression achieves an outcome similar to terrorism. Those who study the threat environment to public officials are working diligently to try to understand the broad impacts of this "new normal" in our civic space.

The clearest finding from our research demonstrated roughly half (52%) of all survey respondents considered leaving public service because of the threats and harassment they endured. Disaggregating by gender, twice as many women considered leaving public office as did men (61% compared to 32%). This is an alarming finding, although not surprising given the elevated frequency and intensity of threats and harassment women face compared to men.

52% of all survey respondents considered leaving public service because of the threats and harassment they endured.
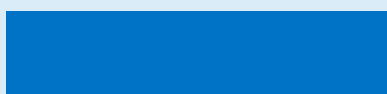
Twice as many women considered leaving public office as men

61% of women
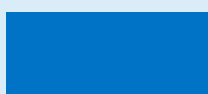
32% of men

There are other impacts in addition to considering not running for or resigning from office. Our survey found 23% of respondents said they were *less* likely to speak their minds about policy because of threats and harassment, and 14% said they were *more* likely to speak their minds. Interview data provided more perspective on this point. Many respondents discussed California's Brown Act, which governs transparency requirements for public officials and does not leave a lot of space for restricting discourse or deliberations out of public view. Because the Brown Act mandates a certain level of transparency in deliberations, many interviewees said they may prefer to deliberate more in private, but this was not an option. Brown Act transparency requirements may be part of why only 23% mentioned being less likely to speak their minds. More commonly, interviewees spoke about being abbreviated in their remarks to limit opportunities for vitriolic responses. Meanwhile, some interviewees said the vitriol pushed them to be even more proactive in speaking their opinion to push back against the intimidation.

Our sample size was too small to say anything statistically significant regarding impacts across racial categories; however, in larger national surveys, women of color were shown to face the greatest amount of threatening behavior and harassment by far, a finding we assume applies in San Diego County as well. In our County, therefore, we know women face 2–3 times the level of threats and harassment as men and are twice as likely to leave office. We can assume this rate increases for women of color. The question that must be asked, therefore, is what impact this might have on the goals of inclusive democracy. Women and minorities traditionally have been kept out of elected office; indeed, for much of the history of this country, they were barred from both serving and voting. Great strides have been made to rectify this, strides tested in the current context of threats and harassment. It is essential to see the current phenomenon not only from the perspective of immediate policy and individual well-being but also our broader democratic ideals and aspirations.

> *"When things ramped up the board members didn't really engage in discussion in front of the public, just voted. Limited discourse because that limited the space for hostility."*
>
> *Anonymous interviewee, #SDT087*

Beyond public dialogue, nearly all interviewees spoke to how threats and harassment impacted them personally. From reinforcing security around their homes to hiding things from their spouses and bouts of insomnia and mental health impacts, elected officials have been impacted intensely by this threatening behavior and harassment. Nearly all interviewees spoke about how they expected a certain degree of hostility serving in public office, but that the frequency, intensity and hostility of threats and harassment toward them and, in many cases, their loved ones, had become extreme.

Again, our research aligned with national trends. Across the country, hostility toward school board members, who are largely unpaid volunteers, have resuled in board members questioning whether serving on the board is worth it. In a letter he wrote resigning from a Wisconsin school board, Rick Grothaus shared that the work had become "toxic and impossible to do."[35] In Arizona, school board member Allison Pratt had to step up her home security system due to the level of toxicity projected onto her, and she recalled one constituent claiming, "It's my constitutional right to be mean to you guys" during a school board meeting.[36] Pratt, who was on the school board for 6 years, said if she was not already a board member, participating on the board would have little appeal. She shared, "There is starting to be an inherent distrust for school boards, that there's some notion that we are out to indoctrinate children or to undermine parents or things like that, when we are on the same team."[37]

> *"I don't go to the grocery store during peak hours or when we are deliberating something that's contentious."*
>
> *Anonymous interviewee, #SDT075*

Finally, the interviews shed light on how normalized the environment of threats and harassment had become. Nearly all respondents used this exact language—a normalization—and as a result felt they had to shoulder the burden of threats and harassment themselves. Although it used to be "normal" to face disagreement from constituents while serving in public office, it has become "normal" to face aggression, hate, identity-based attacks, and even threats to one's life or the lives of loved ones.

35   The Associated Press, "As School Board Meetings Get Hostile, Some Members Are Calling It Quits," National Public Radiohttps://www.npr.org/sections/back-to-school-live-updates/2021/08/30/1032417970/school-board-members-hostile-meetings-mask-mandates-politicized.

36   The Associated Press, "As School Board Meetings Get Hostile."

37   The Associated Press, "As School Board Meetings Get Hostile."

V. Sources of Threats

Political polarization and the vilification of opponents are two significant factors driving threats, harassment, and attacks against local leaders. The two issues that have seen the greatest polarization and incivility across the nation, and particularly among school boards, are COVID-19 precautions (e.g., masking and school closures) and ethnic studies or diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) curriculum or policy (termed "critical race theory" by opponents).[38] Across California, parents protesting student masking guidelines during the pandemic regularly shut down school board meetings with incendiary threats, yelling, and other forms of disruptive activity.[39] The disruption to school boards' abilities to conduct regular business became so severe that the California School Board Association reached out to the state and federal government for assistance in September 2021.[40] In a letter requesting support, the CEO of the Californian School Board Association wrote he "watched in horror as school board members [were] accosted, verbally abused, physically assaulted, and subjected to death threats against themselves and their family members."[41]

California is not the only state whose school leaders have faced this issue. A RAND Corporation study found an estimated 75% of school district leaders nationwide believed their ability to educate their students between 2021 and 2022 was hindered by polarization over COVID-19 precautions.[42]

Although our research did not go into extensive detail regarding the source of threats, our social media scrape found the following issues to generate the most aggressive language: LGBTQ rights, COVID policy, immigration, and Black Lives Matter. In interviews, respondents mentioned DEI/ethnic studies and gun rights in addition to those found in the social media scrape. Several interviewees also mentioned any flashpoint topics debated on the national or state level trickle down to anger and hostility directed toward them at the local level, even on topics where local elected officials have no influence on policy.

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38   *Threats and Harassment Against Local Officials Dataset.*
39   Taketa, "It's an Ugliness."
40   Taketa, "It's an Ugliness."
41   Billy, "Letter to Governor."
42   Melissa Kay Diliberti and Heather L. Schwartz, *District Leaders' Concerns About Mental Health and Political Polarization in Schools: Selected Findings from the Fourth American School District Panel Survey* (RAND Corporation, February 8, 2022), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA956-8.html.

Respondents remarked on small groups of individuals attending public meetings around San Diego County, including in cities where they are not residents, to provide public comment. One interviewee said, "[There are] about a dozen people—they also go to city council meetings. Same people. Yelling, bullying. Has taken on a meanness. Sure, they are influenced externally, but not sure precisely how."[43] Another spoke to how they can always tell what people are going to come and speak aggressively about based on what is happening in the national or state-level conversation. The interview stated, "If something gets into public conversation, they often see it coming down the pike. Masks, vaccines, CRT—there was a state senator who was pushing for mandatory vaccines and that causes hostility. People don't necessarily realize that the State of CA pushes a ton of stuff down. And that often makes things harder at the local level."[44] Several interview respondents made clear that although threats and harassment seemed to be disorganized initially, threats and harassment now seem to be a mix of individually motivated and highly organized. The level of organization warrants much greater scrutiny and future research we hope will get into greater detail on this topic.

> *"In beginning was loosely organized. Now it's very organized."*
>
> *Anonymous interviewee, #SDT075*

Further, our traditional media review found, in 84% of all incidents reported—where information regarding a perpetrator was included—white men were responsible for the threatening and/or harassing behavior. This is obviously not a conclusive finding because only a very small percentage of overall threatening and harassing incidents make it into the formal media space; however, it is an area in need of further research to understand better the demographic of those perpetrating threats and harassment.

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43   SDT015.
44   SDT087.

VIII. Potential Solutions

45% of those we surveyed stated they think new solutions are needed to handle the increasingly vitriolic environment.

Forty-five percent of those we surveyed stated they think new solutions are needed to handle the increasingly vitriolic environment. Several initiatives have been developed in the San Diego area in the last 2 years to provide new solutions. In 2021, for example, the San Diego County Board of Supervisors approved policy changes to curtail hate speech and inappropriate conduct during county meetings.[45]

Mara Elliot, City Attorney for the City of San Diego, along with the San Diego-based National Conflict Resolution Center, the California School Boards Association, and the San Diego County Office of Education, have collaborated on holding de-escalation training sessions for some elected school board members as well as teachers and staff in the region, encouraging boards to post codes of conduct in advance of meetings and clarifying steps that can be taken to legally remove disruptive individuals and adjourn meetings as needed.[46] Despite these efforts, survey respondents reported incidents of personal harassment and disruption of public meetings continued to increase.

As part of our effort to understand additional potential solutions, we conducted three "community conversations," two in the city of San Diego and one in North County. These convenings included remarks by other concerned groups, a comprehensive presentation of the researchers' findings, and group discussions on potential solutions. The group discussions, and the recommendations that came from them, formed the backbone of this section. Additional insights from other national studies and academic sources were then used to supplement these recommendations.

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45   City News Service, "San Diego Supervisors Approve Policy Changes to Limit Disruptive Conduct at Meetings," KPBS, November 10, 2021, https://www.kpbs.org/news/local/2021/11/10/san-diego-supervisors-approve-policy-changes-to-limit-disruptive-conduct-at-meetings.
46   Maria Elliott, ""How to Keep Public Meetings Safe and Civil," *La Jolla Light*, May 11, 2022, https://www.lajollalight.com/news/opinion/story/2022-05-11/guest-commentary-how-to-keep-public-meetings-safe-and-civil.

Recommendation 1: Increased Accountability for Perpetrators

Increased accountability for perpetrators covers two main areas: public meetings and criminal prosecution. In our community conversations, a frequent recommendation was for elected officials to begin meetings with clear enunciation of a code of conduct and consequences for violating it. As the meeting progressed, either an elected official or a nonpartisan parliamentarian would be tasked with giving warnings and indicating when a constituent had violated the code of conduct to the point of needing to be removed. The thinking here is that by increasing the accountability in public meetings for perpetrators, elected officials could curtail threats and harassment.

This higher level of accountability tracks with similar recommendations from other reports. The Brennan Center recommended the Department of Justice "create an election threats task force to work with federal, state, and local partners to prioritize identifying, investigating, and prosecuting threats against election officials and workers."[47] This kind of task force could extend to local elected officials and provide greater accountability for those who threaten and harass public officials.

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47   Brennan Center for Justice, *Election Officials Under Attack: How to Protect Administrators and Safeguard Democracy* (Brennan Center for Justice, June 16, 2021), https://www.brennancenter. org/our-work/policy-solutions/election-officials-under-attack.

Recommendation 2: Document and Report All Incidents, Even When They Do Not Rise to the Level of a Crime

A frequently cited recommendation from our community conversations was increased accountability and consequences for those who engage in threatening or harassing behavior. However, a significant amount of this behavior, while feeling threatening or harassing, does not rise to the level of a prosecutable crime. During our community conversations, both San Diego County District Attorney, Summer Stephan, and San Diego City Attorney, Mara Elliot, made a point of encouraging documentation of all threats and harassment. Although most incidents will not rise to the level of criminal prosecution, having a record of threats and harassment will make it easier to prosecute cases if an incident is deemed to rise to that level. Documentation can also demonstrate patterns that may make it easier for law enforcement officials to act in support of public officials.

This recommendation also came in light of the finding from our report and others that threats and harassment are underreported, further complicating potential responses. Given their underreported nature, other studies also have recommended increased reporting. BDI, for example, recommended several actions to facilitate reporting, including for key actors to "support robust, safe, and easily accessible self-reporting" and "increase data sharing and collaboration."[48] Increased reporting allows for potential future prosecution and provides for a clearer understanding of the issue.

Recommendation 3: Increased Protection for Local Officials

Numerous reports have highlighted the need for increased protection for local officials to create a greater sense of safety and security in the face of threats and harassment. These security measures should span both digital and physical spaces. The Institute for Strategic Dialogue, in a report on candidate abuse on social media, argued both companies and democratic governments should "put in place measures to address and minimize the abuse and harassment of politicians and high-profile figures on their platforms."[49] This could include greater training for online moderators and clearer policy rules on what is and is not appropriate speech.

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48   *Threats and Harassment Against Local Officials Dataset.*
49   Cécile Guirin and Eisha Maharasingam-Shah, *Public Figures, Public Rage: Candidate Abuse on Social Media* (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2020), https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Public-Figures-Public-Rage-4.pdf.

In addition to digital protection, the Brennan Center recommended "states should pass new laws and appropriate funds to provide greater personal security for election officials and workers."[50] These measures could include funds to buy home security systems, private information protection of home addresses to prevent doxing, or greater personal security during times of heightened tension. By dedicating more resources to protect officials in online and physical spaces, local governments can decrease some of the detrimental effects of threats and harassment toward officials and prevent it from escalating to violence.

Recommendation 4: Potential Revisions to the Brown Act

The Brown Act is a California state law requiring all meetings of elected officials to happen in public. The lack of any privacy in discussion often leads to elected officials forgoing any real deliberations or debate out of fear of saying something that would instigate threatening or harassing behavior. The Brown Act also does not allow for dialogue between constituents and officials, making it difficult for those in public meetings to see how their input is used in decision making. In the community conversations, potential solutions were proposed for these issues, including (a) advocating for changes to the Brown Act to allow for some level of private discussion and (b) providing additional space for elected officials and constituents to discuss issues in less formal settings. By creating structural changes in these laws, elected officials could engage in real political discussion without fear of reprisal from constituents. That said, several participants acknowledgement that the Brown Act was developed originally to prevent unethical and corrupt behavior, so any changes would need to be concerned with ensuring those intentions remain in place.

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50   Brennan Center for Justice, *Election Officials Under Attack*.

Recommendation 5: Increased Training for Elected Officials

Elected officials could engage more effectively with threatening or harassing comments in a variety of settings by receiving more in-depth training. In our community conversations, three types of training were discussed. The first type of training discussed included courses on diffusion and de-escalation tactics when confronted with harassing or threatening comments. These kinds of skills could prevent the situation from getting worse and help elected officials feel more confident voicing their opinions in public meetings. Another type of training could be one that helps connect elected officials with greater mental health resources to deal better with the psychological impacts of threats and harassment. These resources could include support groups and other applicable resources. A third type of training could encompass key elements of civility in how elected officials interact with one another. Not only can elected officials better model civil behavior to set examples for constituents but they also could help to address the harassment taking place among board or council members.

This recommendation parallels insights from other reports. The National League of Cities, in their report on harassment, threats, and violence toward local officials, recommended cities "improve training for police and security offices focused on de-escalation. Train key staff on key principles and strategies for de-escalation."[51] They likewise recommended cities "connect staff to mental health professionals and resources for individual treatment emphasizing the importance of prioritizing mental health and confidentiality of treatment."[52] By increasing training and resources, elected officials will be better equipped to handle threats and harassment both in the moment and related to longer term mental health effects.

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51   Anthony et al., *On the Frontlines.*
52   Anthony et al., *On the Frontlines.*

Recommendation 6: Prepare for Threats and Harassment

Another frequent recommendation from our community conversations was for elected officials to strategize and plan for threats and harassment in public meetings. Aggressive comments often are triggered by divisive issues on the agenda or larger political turbulence at the national level. When either situation is present, officials can forecast likely comments and write "scripts" of level, rational ways to respond. Officials can likewise coordinate with local law enforcement before public meetings to discuss a plan for dealing with disruptive behavior; indeed, this already happens in many parts of the County. Standardized plans could include making a clear warning system for disruptive constituents, with agreed upon conditions about how many warnings each would receive before law enforcement removed them from a meeting. Lastly, elected officials could plan ahead by starting each meeting with clear expectations for participants about what will be discussed, how long they have to respond, and what the code of conduct is for the meeting.

This recommendation tracks with similar studies. The National League of Cities found "three-fifths of surveyed local officials indicated that their office does not have a strategy or action plan in place to respond to or mitigate incidents of harassment, threats and violence."[53] They recommended cities "work with local law enforcement and other key stakeholders to develop a plan should a violent incident occur."[54] By preparing for threats and harassment and coordinating with other local actors, officials can be better protected.

Recommendation 7: Work With Community Organizations to Teach Constructive Ways to Engage With Political Conflict

Although many of the previous recommendations have focused on additional work elected officials can engage with, some recommendations from the community conversations highlighted the "upstream" work that could be done with constituents. This work might include (a) engaging faith leaders to "preach and teach" civility from the pulpit to reach a wider audience, (b) hosting workshops by NGOs on civility and ways to engage with political conflict constructively, and (c) including workshops by both groups to help shift the predominantly negative perceptions of politicians permeating society. These and other such workshops could help change the overall perception of locally elected officials and give constituents alternative, constructive tools with which to engage their representatives.

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53   Anthony et al., *On the Frontlines.*
54   Anthony et al., *On the Frontlines.*

Other reports also highlighted the critical nature of working with communities and constituents. The National League of Cities wrote, "Repairing civil discourse will require a whole community approach. The city should strategically work and correspond with community groups to begin to mend points of tension where and when safe to do so."[55] By working with constituents, those perpetrating threats and harassment toward local officials could be reached and engaged with directly.

Recommendation 8: Do More Research

In the context of our community conversations, several people advocated for more research to understand better how threats and harassment impact others, including not only other elected officials (e.g., judges, prosecutors) but also teachers, superintendents, public health workers, and others who face abusive language from residents frequently.

We also heard a call for more research into organized patterns of threats and harassment as well as what the organizational structures look like. We also heard a request for more detail on the differences in threats and harassment between men and women and across racial groups. For example, how many threats are sexual in nature, how many involve family members, how many are acted upon, and are there any indications regarding the profile of threatening individuals? This kind of research is important, and now that a baseline has been set, a deeper level of analysis can lead to more targeted prevention strategies.

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55   Anthony et al., *On the Frontlines.*

IV. Conclusion

The late former Speaker of the House, Tip O'Neil, famously observed, at root, "All politics is local." Although we reside in a federal system with its matryoshka doll of federal, state, and local units of government, most Americans are touched by their government at the local level. The foundation of our democracy rests on vibrant, responsive, legitimate, and effective local government. If this foundation cracks, the rest of the edifice—from state capitols to Washington DC—begins to teeter.

The rising volume and intensity of threats and harassment directed at local officeholders in San Diego and around the country undermines the legitimacy and efficiency of the local government and poses a major, if not existential, threat to all levels of U.S. government. If local political conversations between the public and their elected representatives is increasingly co-opted by political actors looking to disrupt and paralyze the political process, meaningful civil dialogue cannot be achieved, necessary public policies cannot be discussed sensibly, and faith in local government could falter. If, as our and other studies' findings have indicated, rising personal vitriol, producing increased anxiety and fear among local office holders, results in making people of good will, who are committed to the public good, reconsider—or withdraw from—public life, the void will be filled increasingly by ideologues and power-seekers advancing their own interests or that of a narrow segment of the community. This will directly and negatively impact the quality and professionalism of candidates for state and national office downstream. Local government serves as the training ground for politicians who go on to their state and national capitals. The stakes are high.

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