CALIFORNIA THREATS AND HARASSMENT INITIATIVE

Mapping the Threat
Environment of
Southern California's
Elected Officials

Violence, Inequality
and Power Lab

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

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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. The VIP Lab led all aspects of this year's research design, data collection and analysis, and community conversations.

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 challengesthat shape our community. ICCE supported outreach and dissemination.

Executive Summary

Are threats towards and harassment of public officials a problem? Some characterize the issue as one of free speech; strenuous criticism of local officials is required for democracy to function. Others argue that local elected officials and the media are simply seeking attention or blowing a small problem out of proportion. In other spaces, the case is made that democracy in America is broken, that governance at the local level can no longer function, and that security risks are rampant. Those studying the issue have gathered data that point to more insidious effects, including the disenfranchisement of voters, shifting representation based on intimidation rather than policy preference, silencing officials or causing them to self-censor, and more. Our own research intends to shine a light on this question, both interrogating the level of threats and harassment in San Diego, Riverside and Imperial Counties in Southern California, and trying to understand the impact on our democracy and local government systems.

While accountability and representation are essential to democracy, there is a line between the freedom to express differences of thought and the intentional use of intimidation or violence to influence policy decisions. What our research is aiming to understand is to what extent we are approaching, are crossing or have crossed the line into fear-based government. As with everything, context matters, but what is clear based on our findings is that for many people and in many contexts, we are further over the line than most would prefer to believe.

This is the second year of our research. In the first year, in which we focused on San Diego County only, we conducted a traditional and social media review, interviews, and a survey which revealed that 75 percent of respondents reported being threatened or harassed. In this second year, we expanded to include Riverside and Imperial Counties, and the level of individuals (in all three counties) reporting having been threatened or harassed dropped to 66 percent, a positive finding, but also one to take with a grain of salt. These aggregate figures can conceal variation within them.

The average male elected official respondent to our survey reported receiving abusive conduct annually, while the average female respondent reported abuse a little less often than monthly. Taken together, our survey results suggest the average female elected official receives at least ten times the amount of threatening or harassing behavior as the average male. While this disparity is consistent with findings from research across the country, we are also seeing an increase in vitriol newly directed at white, male, conservative and rural elected officials, which may indicate a normative shift in the broader acceptability of such behavior.

This normalization of threatening and harassing behavior makes it even more urgent to consider the effects on local democracy, which benefits from public service being a pro-social experience. From our survey, we can identify at least two mechanisms by which threatening or harassing behavior might be influencing policy outcomes, thereby undermining local democracy. First, if people choose to leave public service as a result of abuse, this undermines the voice of those who elected the official in the first instance, thereby diminishing the power of the vote. Second, if people self-censor, this diminishes their ability to influence the causes and issues that they ran on and around which people supported them. Both of these undermine government for the people and by the people.

If elected officials, particularly those working at very local levels, pull away from their community out of fear, intimidation or abuse, this does not just impact representative democracy, it also harms the social networks and local bonds that are critical aspects of social cohesion. Communities are not homogenous, and disputes or differences are expected; but when these shift to real threats and fears of personal safety, the landscape for functioning government shifts in corresponding ways. If left unaddressed, this dynamic can create an environment of permissiveness for the ongoing perpetration of abuse, an increase in partisanship that may lead to more extreme positions, and an elevating risk to individuals and communities.

Many Americans respond to discussions of incivility in local politics by arguing that public servants should "toughen up" or "grow thicker skin." We believe this framing harms the wellbeing of our representatives and the spirit of local participatory democracy. By accepting this behavior, we entrench it, removing expectations of civil civic engagement that follows due process, mutual accountability and respect. Normalizing the deterioration of democracy is exceptionally cynical; we believe that the majority of Americans and residents of Southern California are not, in fact, so cynical but, rather, are unaware of the depth of the problem.

Unless we believe that "might makes right," then it is past time to be paying more attention.

Many Americans respond to discussions of incivility in local politics by arguing that public servants should "toughen up" or "grow thicker skin." We believe this framing harms the wellbeing of our representatives and the spirit of local participatory democracy.

I. Organization of the Report and Introductory Comments

We lay out the trends from our research in four sections. The first provides a brief overview of our methodological approach over the course of three years of research and two survey rounds.

The second section explores the volume of threat and harassment faced by elected officials. Our data — and that from other studies around the country — paints a grim picture that is getting worse. Substantial majorities of elected officials of all gender, racial and political identities report experiencing threats or harassment and agree that these behaviors are accelerating. Respondents in our study demonstrated a range of self-censoring behaviors — a red flag as to how an increasingly vitriolic environment is undermining the ability of elected officials to fully represent the priorities of their constituents. As these trends worsen, this should cause real concern for our local democratic practices. This section further demonstrates that some demographic groups, in particular women, suffer from far higher levels of aggressive behavior than others. Despite this, we find troubling signs that threats and harassment are spreading to demographics that previously enjoyed relative safety.

The third section details some important factors that define the context in which threats and harassment take place. In this section we provide a description of the way in which local elected officials confront aggressive language. Perhaps not surprisingly, given the ability to remain anonymous, aggression is most likely to be delivered via social media and through emails than in person. However, it is not uncommon for officials to be confronted in person or in public settings. Generally, respondents noted a transition between 2020 and 2023, from aggression sparked by COVID-related policies to that sparked by a broader array of social and economic issues. In line with national studies and news coverage, respondents to our research identified issues concerning gender, sexual orientation and race as being major touchpoints for threats and harassment, particularly at the school board level. In the context of Southern California, issues concerning housing policy also tended to provoke aggressive reactions. This section of the report also touches on the discussion of who is perpetrating threats and harassment as well as how the media is covering the topic.

In the fourth section, we consider potential solutions. This section is informed by our interviews, our survey responses, feedback from three community conversations on the topic, and expertise from scholars around the country. It also includes a summary of legislation in California that has been linked to incivility at the local level or is intended to address aggression toward local officials.

II. Methodology

Over the course of the past two years, we have gathered data and spoken with stakeholders to better understand the characteristics and dimensions of aggression directed towards elected officials in Southern California. Our formal data collection focused on four sources.

First, we surveyed local elected officials about their experiences with and attitudes toward threats and harassment.[1] Using public records, we compiled a list of elected officials in several common positions, including members of city councils and school boards.[2] We engaged in public outreach to make elected officials aware that our survey was coming and then emailed a link to complete the survey to everyone on our list. In 2022, we focused our research on San Diego County only. In 2023-2024, we expanded to include Riverside and Imperial Counties, while also adding a few select positions or offices. Our first survey received 99 valid responses (a response rate of about 30 percent); our second received 108 valid responses (a 13 percent response rate).[3]

Second, we engaged in follow-up interviews with respondents to the survey (around 10 percent of respondents to the 2022 survey and 20 percent of respondents to the 2024 survey). In each year, we asked survey respondents if they would be willing to engage in such an interview. We separated the pool that responded "yes" into categories of men and women. In 2023, we further separated the pool by county and then randomly selected a proportional number from each group for follow up. Interviews took about one hour each.

Third, we conducted a social media scrape to obtain objective data. The research team collected a list of all office holders in San Diego County as of January 2022 who maintained Twitter accounts. Beginning with this sample, we 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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1   The authors will make the survey tool available upon request.
2   The 2024 survey was sent to 785 elected officials in San Diego, Riverside and Imperial Counties: Members of 89 school boards, seven community college boards, 53 city councils, and three county boards of supervisors; 53 mayors; three sheriffs; three district attorneys; three assessors; three auditors; three treasurers; and two city attorneys.
3   Both 30 percent and 13 percent response rates are relatively high for email surveys (see Jordan Petchenik and Dreux J. Watermolen, "A Cautionary Note on Using the Internet to Survey Recent Hunter Education Graduates," *Human Dimensions of Wildlife* 16, no.3 (2011): 216–218. https://doi.org/10.1080/10871209.2011.563434). Our response rate is likely higher than usual due to both the personal outreach of project staff to board members and the best practices followed on survey length and engagement strategy. Additionally, it is likely higher in San Diego due to our connections and reputation closer to home. (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://open.clemson.edu/joe/vol50/iss6/34/.)

Finally, we searched a variety of traditional media sources, including news reports from print, radio and television, for information on incidents of threats and harassment targeting locally elected politicians in the three counties under study. We included articles about contentious politics and incivility to provide context. This traditional media review helped to shed light on how incidents of aggression are being covered for a mass audience and what proportion of overall incidents is making the news.

From traditional media, press releases and other sources, we also constructed a legislation tracker in which we gathered proposed and passed legislation related to the topics and context driving debate and disagreement at the local government level. This tracker endeavors to link various bills' proponents and opponents to the issues triggering threats and harassment. This effort establishes a framework to explore the connective tissue between local events and state-level policy initiatives that may help stakeholders focus on the drivers of the problems while also identifying feasible solutions to protect local elected officials and promote civil democratic processes.

We supplemented these data collection activities in several ways. First, we reviewed a wide variety of other literature on incivility and political violence predominantly in the United States. We paid particular attention to reporting about similar issues with state-level elected positions and with election officials. Second, over the course of both years we have conducted six "community conversations" with voting-age residents in San Diego and Riverside Counties. After listening to the presentation of our findings and to presentations by other speakers of note providing broader context, attendees at these events broke into small groups for facilitated discussion focused on community solutions and interventions on threats and harassment. These findings have been aggregated and included in this report. Third, we discussed our project informally with a variety of others with expertise, including other researchers and academics, city and district attorneys, and law enforcement officers, and have integrated these insights into our recommendations.

III. Quantity and Impact of Threats and Harassment

The data presented in this report is from our 2023-2024 research process (herein referred to as 2024 survey or research), the second round effort of a multi-year project to assess the scope and intensity of threats and harassment towards local elected officials in Southern California.

This section discusses the frequency and volume of threats and harassment that take place against local elected officials in three Southern California counties and the effect these behaviors have on officials and their communities. Our research led us to four topline take-aways:

1. Most elected officials have experienced at least some threats and harassment; many experience regular and frequent aggression.

2. Elected officials engage in a variety of self-censoring behaviors. Some leave public service due to exhaustion, hopelessness or burnout.

3. Particular demographics — in particular women — face substantially higher volumes of threats and harassment than others.[4]

4. White, male, conservative, rural elected officials in the three counties surveyed are seeing an increasing rate of threats and harassment.

For each major theme, we lay out our findings and then contextualize them using studies and reports from other parts of the country or about other populations of public servants, such as state legislators or election officials and volunteers.

A. The Volume of Threats and Harassment in Southern California

Americans are pessimistic about polarization and political violence in the United States. More than eight in ten agree that "Republicans and Democrats are more focused on fighting each other than on solving problems," and the most frequent word they volunteer to describe the United States' political climate is "divisive."[5] Two-thirds worry that violence will follow the 2024 elections.[6] Members of city councils, school boards and similar bodies are resigning or reconsidering their run for re-election in record numbers.[7]

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4   Nationally, results show higher volumes of threats and harassment against racial minorities, as well. We could not verify this difference in our survey, as we discuss below.

5   Pew Research Center, "Americans' Dismal Views of the Nation's Politics," Pew Research Center, September 19, 2023, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/09/19/americans-dismal-views-of-the-nations-politics/#:~:text=Ordinary%20Americans%20are%20more%20polarized,of%20partisan%20polarization%20on%20politics.

6   Jason Lange and Andy Sullivan, "Two-Thirds in US Fear Violence Could Follow Election, Reuters/Ipsos Poll Finds," *Reuters*, May 23, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/us/two-thirds-us-fear-violence-could-follow-election-reutersipsos-poll-finds-2024-05-23/.

7   Kayla Jimenez, "The 'Great Resignation' Hits School Boards. Only 38% of Members Want to Run for Reelection," *USA Today*, November 4, 2022, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2022/11/04/great-resignation-school-boards-research/10618795002/; Carolyn Thompson, "Hostile School Board Meetings Have Members Calling It Quits," *Associated Press*, October 29, 2021, https://apnews.com/article/health-education-coronavirus-pandemic-school-boards-35db5c9eec87b85ca8eb95a64c2f6dd7; Beth Hawkins, "Minnesota School Board Members Quitting in Record Numbers," *Mankato Free Press*, May 10, 2022, https://www.mankatofreepress.com/news/local_news/minnesota-school-board-members-quitting-in-record-numbers/article_0d15e5b8-cc7f-11ec-83b0-8f52512059c2.html

How many local elected officials face threats and harassment in Southern California?
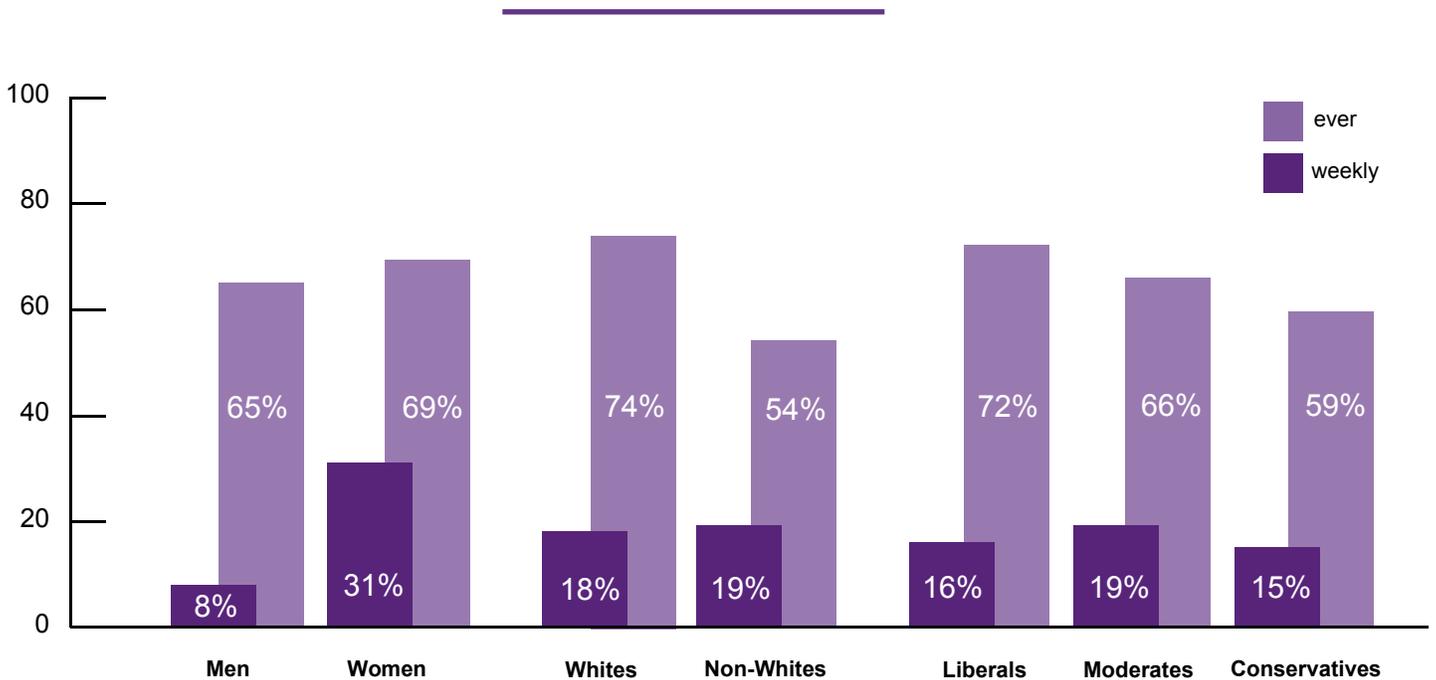
Figure I: Percentage of respondents[8] reporting threats or harassment, ever or monthly

In our 2024 survey, two-thirds of respondents reported having been targeted by threats or harassment during their terms in public office,[9] while almost 20 percent said they face such intimidation tactics at least weekly. As Figure I shows above, the base finding that local elected officials face these behaviors is consistent across race, gender and political affiliation.

One interview respondent described the types of behavior they endured while running for re-election, including doxing, false reports to law enforcement and threats from individuals claiming to be armed. This official obtained a restraining order against at least one of the responsible individuals.[10] Others reported receiving emails with photos of their homes followed by observing a car drive slowly by their home for hours,[11] being approached at public meetings with threats of violence,[12] and receiving threatening phone calls to their offices.[13]

Eighty-three percent of respondents said that threats and harassment against office holders is a major problem. And roughly half of respondents who have never been threatened or harassed say they are concerned about becoming a target in the future.

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8   Respondents are local elected officials in San Diego, Riverside and Imperial counties.
9   This total is down from 2022, when 75 percent of respondents reported having ever experienced threats. The 2022 survey was conducted in San Diego County only.
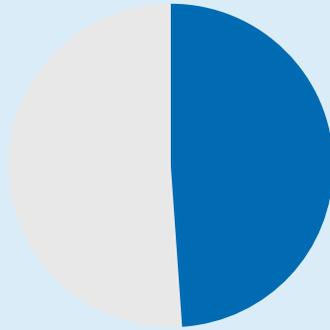10   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23003, April 25, 2024.
11   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23011, May 2, 2024.
12   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23017, April 26, 2024.
13   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23013, May 5, 2024.
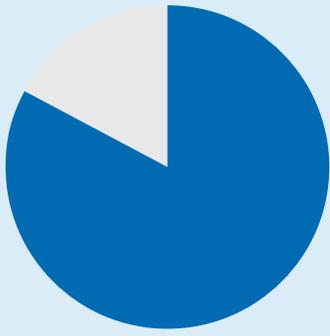
83% of respondents said that threats and harassment against office holders is a major problem

Roughly half of respondents who have never been threatened or harassed say they are concerned about becoming a target in the future.

The experience of Southern California officials is strikingly similar to counterparts around the country. A National League of Cities survey found that 80 percent of local public officials faced threats, harassment or violence.[14] Similarly, the Mayor's Innovation Project undertook a similar survey of mayors in towns with populations over 10,000 and found that one-quarter had been threatened with violence and 15 percent victimized by violence in the previous year alone.[15]

These findings are, of course, not restricted to local elected officials. Perhaps the most striking crisis concerns election volunteers, who administer ballots and organize local polling places. Turnover of lead precinct volunteers has risen from 28 percent between elections in 2004 to 39 percent in 2022,[16] an exodus that may lead the American election administration to "lose a generation of professionalism and expertise."[17] Across our literature review, we saw similar results in other areas, including local appointed positions, state- and national-level elected officials, and a range of public employees such as teachers and public health workers.[18]

We also examined whether threats and harassment against local officials has worsened. A strong majority of our 2024 survey respondents (59 percent overall) believe that threatening or harassing behavior has become worse since they were first elected. Again, we see majorities of almost all demographic and partisanship groups agree that the frequency of threats and violence is on the rise.

14   Clarence Anthony et al., *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.

15   Rebekah Herrick et al., "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.

16   Joshua Ferrer et al., *Election Official Turnover Rates from 2000-2024* (Bipartisan Policy Center, 2024), https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/election-official-turnover-rates-from-2000-2024/.

17   Michael Wines, "After a Nightmare Year, Election Officials Are Quitting," *The New York Times,* July 2, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/02/us/politics/2020-election-voting-officials.html.

18   U.S. Department of Justice, "Justice Department Addresses Violent Threats Against School Officials and Teachers," Department of Justice Office of Public Affairs, October 4, 2021, https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-departmentaddresses-violent-threats-against-school-officialsand-teachers.
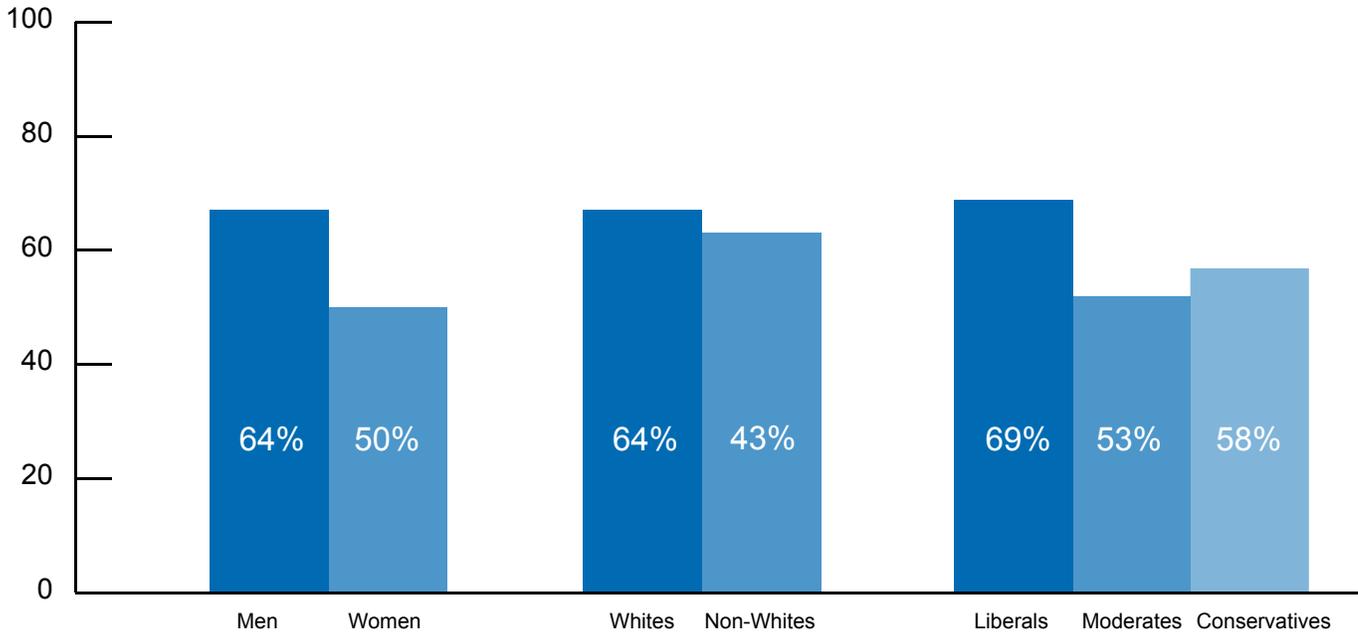
Figure II: Percentage of respondents reporting an increase in threats and harassment since election to public office

Some of our interviewees disagreed, however, with one saying the volume of such behaviors has been "constant since the 1980s."[19] But most could pinpoint the moment things started to worsen. Some cited the election of "inflammatory" board members with alleged connections to outside groups known for disruptions.[20] Others reference specific political or social events, such as the COVID pandemic.[21] One interviewee captured the effects of COVID on local political discourse this way:

> *"COVID escalated everything and seemed to unleash a new kind of communication… People were seeing others speaking more aggressively, so [they] felt it was socially acceptable to lash out. Taking cues from others that it was okay to speak in extremes."[22]*

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19   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23005, April 16, 2024.
20   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23010, April 30, 2024.
21   E.g., interviews with Respondents #CaTHI23011, May 2, 2024, #CaTHI23017, April 26, 2024, and #CaTHI23019, May 13, 2024.
22   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23019, May 13, 2024.

In addition to analyzing subjective data from elected officials themselves, our study of Twitter/X data allowed us to measure this change in a different way. From our review of nearly 500,000 tweets, the density of aggressive messages sent to local elected officials in San Diego more than doubled from 2016 to 2021. A KPBS media study generated similar results. KPBS randomly sampled videos of county supervisor meetings in San Diego and scanned the meetings for various types of aggressive language. KPBS found an eight-fold increase in disruptive incidents between 2019 and 2023, and also charted how such incidents have become more severe over time. In 2019, all recorded incidents were either usage of profanity or interruptions to the meeting itself. By 2023, more than 30 percent of the recorded incidents were spurious accusations of criminal conduct or threats against board members.[23]

Again, our figures seem to match national trends. Anthony et al. found that 87 percent of respondents had "observed an increase in attacks on public officials in recent years."[24] Princeton University's Bridging Divides Initiative found that every state has reported increases in a wide range of aggressive treatment of local officials.[25]

One potential reason for this increase is perhaps the mirrored increase in the number of Americans who say that political violence is at least sometimes justified.[26] Measures of approval for political violence range widely, with one report finding that one in three Americans support political violence[27] and another finding one in five.[28] Differences in results are unsurprising given that surveys vary substantially in how they frame political violence. By nearly all measures, however, political violence in the United States is considered more acceptable than it was five years ago.[29]

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23   Amita Sharma, "Threats, Profanity, Accusations Skyrocketing at Public Meetings, KPBS Analysis Shows," KPBS, July 1, 2024, https://www.kpbs.org/news/politics/2024/07/01/threats-profanity-accusations-skyrocketing-at-public-meetings-kpbs-analysis-shows. The VIP Lab was consulted by KPBS on their research design.

24   Anthony et al., *On the Frontlines of Today's Cities*.

25   Bridging Divides Initiative and the Anti-Defamation League, *Threats and Harassment Against Local Officials Dataset* (Bridging Divides Initiative and the Anti-Defamation League, 2022), https://bridgingdivides.princeton.edu/sites/g/files/toruqf246/files/documents/Threats%20and%20Harassment%20Report.pdf.

26   We discuss the issue of who finds violence most acceptable in a short section below on the perpetrators of threats and harassment.

27   Meryl Kornfield and Mariana Alfaro, "1 in 3 Americans Say Violence against Government Can Be Justified, Citing Fears of Political Schism, Pandemic," *The Washington Post*, January 1, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/01/01/1-3-americans-say-violence-against-government-can-be-justified-citing-fears-political-schism-pandemic/#.

28   PRRI, "Competing Visions of America: An Evolving Identity or a Culture Under Attack?," PRRI, November 1, 2021, https://www.prri.org/press-release/competing-visions-of-america-an-evolving-identity-or-a-culture-under-attack/.

29   Rachel Kleinfeld, "The Rise in Political Violence in the United States and Damage to Our Democracy," Testimony to the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol, March 31, 2022, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/03/31/rise-in-political-violence-in-united-states-and-damage-to-our-democracy-pub-87584.

In sum, we observed a remarkable amount of self-reported threats and harassment affecting local elected officials in Southern California. While the self-reported nature of these reports might give us pause, we think these data are reliable for three reasons. First, because there was consistency of reporting across racial, gender and partisan groups regarding the presence, intensity and trendlines of threats and harassment; this supports the conclusion that the high numbers are not driven by any particular agenda but rather reflect the reality of the current context. Second, findings from our other modes of data collection mirror the self-reports from our survey. Finally, our evidence matches trends seen elsewhere in the United States.

How does this increasingly hostile environment affect the elected officials themselves? Is local politics likely to become less democratic?

B.   Effects on Elected Officials and Local Government

It is clear that local elected officials in Southern California face a variety of threatening and harassing behaviors, in addition to other forms of intimidation and incivility. As we will see below, many elected officials considering leaving office do not characterize themselves as afraid but as exhausted. This exhaustion stems from the pressure of having to maintain one's own commitment to public service in the face of a barrage of criticism, incivility and declining trust in government. The pressure to accept this uncivil and aggressive behavior, coupled with a lack of awareness of the scope of the problem, places great emotional and physical strain on public servants. Additional research on candidates on the campaign trail indicate that women and men suffer from stress, anxiety and sleeplessness, among other physiological and mental health issues resulting from threats and harassment.[30] While drawing a conclusion would require more research, we do see some evidence that threats and harassment against local officials have the effect of pushing out candidates who represent community concerns who are then replaced with candidates driven by single-issue priorities or political motivations.

In our 2024 survey, we asked respondents to list the professional and personal consequences of facing threats and harassment. Forty-three percent said that threats and harassment have caused them to consider leaving office entirely.

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30   Marissa Roy et al., Her Stories on the Campaign Trail (California Women's List, 2023), https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63e537c594adce1f4be767a8/t/665c81ce19f1ad0e975b259c/1717338580699/%5BCWL%5D+Her+Stories+Report+ONLINE.pdf.

We then asked how threats and harassment are influencing the way elected officials are carrying out their service, including whether they limit the amount of time they spend on public service, limit their interactions with constituents, are more or less vocal at meetings, are less willing to engage on contentious topics, or consider changing their votes. Table I, below, summarizes the total percentage of respondents across all demographic categories that listed each effect as relevant to them.
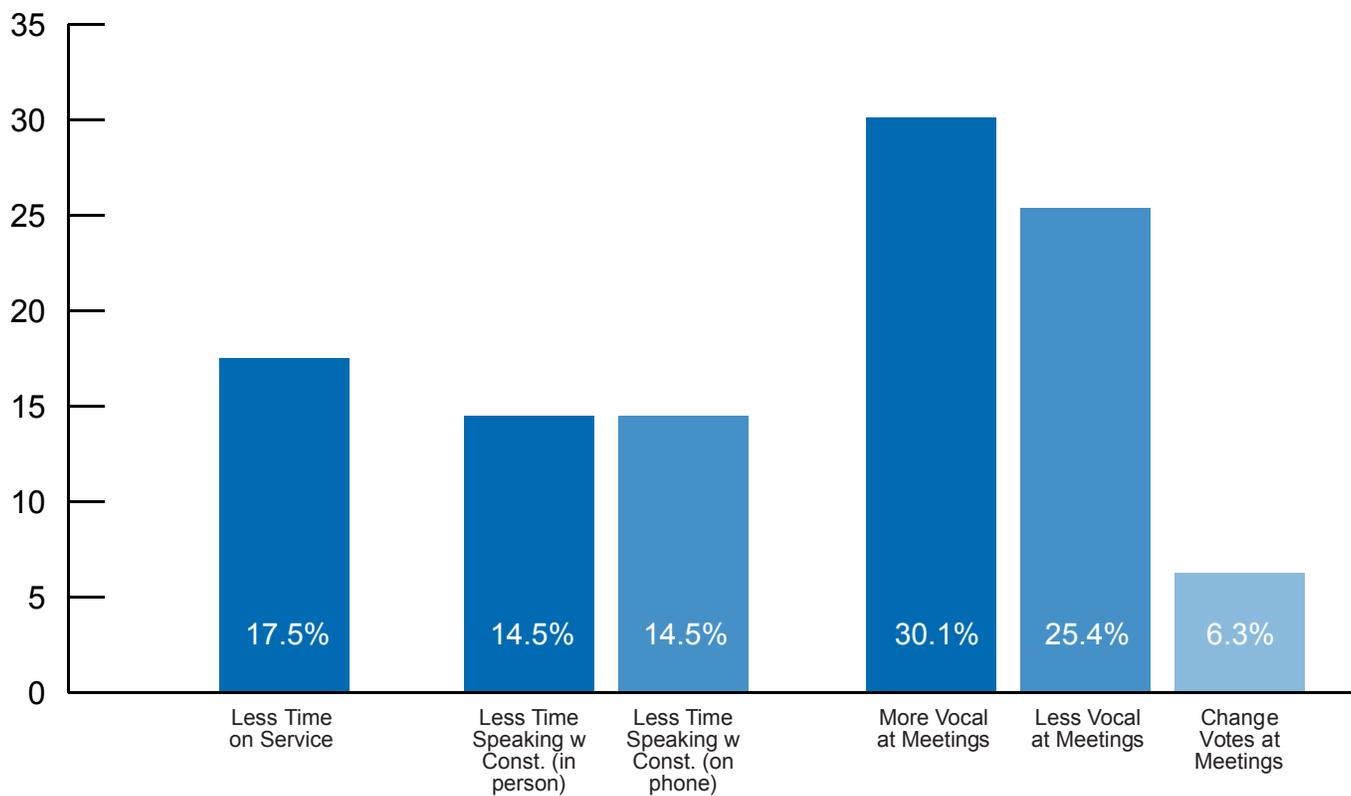
Figure III: Professional effects of threats and harassment on respondents [31]

Beyond the impact on their service roles, we asked about the personal impacts, such as fear for one's personal safety or the safety of loved ones, exhaustion or facing pressure from one's family to retire from public service. The results are in Figure IV below.

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31   We discuss who becomes more and less vocal in the next section on representation.
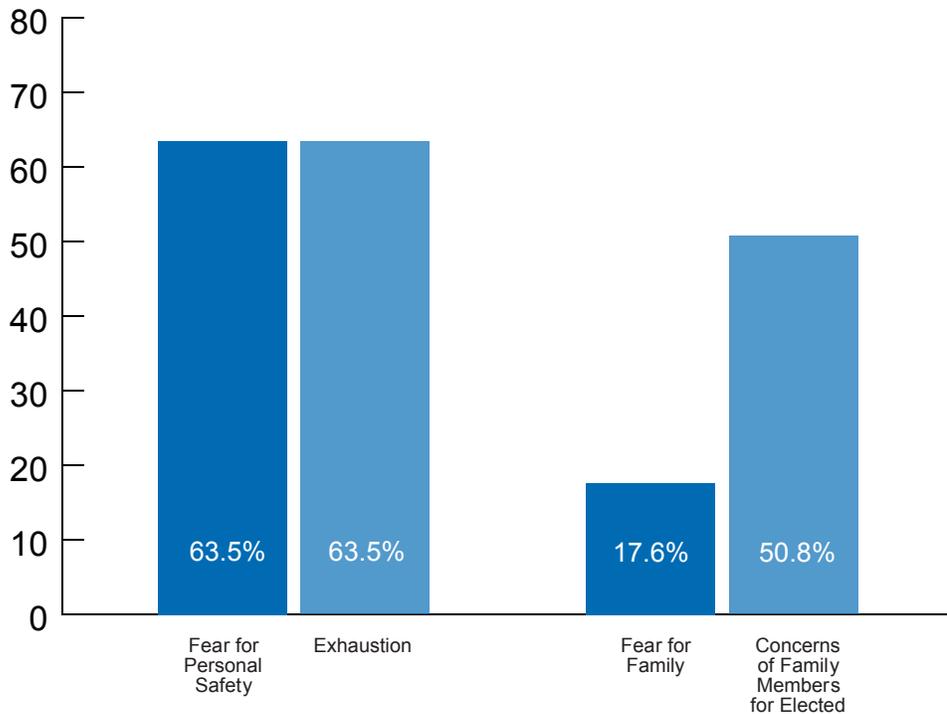
Figure IV: Psychological effects of threats and harassment on respondents

From the survey, we can identify at least three mechanisms by which threatening or harassing behavior might influence policy outcomes, thereby undermining local democracy. First, if elected officials choose to leave public service as a result of abuse, this undermines the voice of those who elected them in the first instance, thereby undermining a core tenet of representational democracy. Second, if elected officials self-censor, this diminishes their ability to pursue their platform, the causes and issues that they ran on and around which people supported them. Third, intimidation when out in public may cause elected officials to retreat from public engagements, limiting interactions with constituents and their understanding of constituenttheir perspectives and needs — with consequences on the quality of representation. These effects undermine government for the people and by the people.

Both the surveys and the interviews underscore the complexity of individual decisions about and reactions to threatening or harassing behavior. One interviewee discussed how their school-aged children were harassed over policy decisions made by their board. While the interviewee said they did not fear for anyone's physical safety, they planned not to run for re-election "mainly to protect my kids."[32] Several others mentioned that they could no longer take their children to campaigns or official events.[33]

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32   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23014, April 19, 2024. Tellingly, this interviewee did not answer "fear for my safety" or "fear for the safety of my family" on their survey but did mark the "exhaustion" option.
33   Interviews with Respondents #CaTHI23012, May 2, 2024, and #CaTHI23003, April 25, 2024.

Another said they avoid speaking about issues of identity politics and lament that so few people seem to "push back" by emphasizing more constructive ways to handle disagreement.[34] Others discussed interacting less with constituents on social media and in person,[35] and many noted that they saw similar changes in their colleagues.[36]

A number of interviewees explicitly told us they planned to leave public service to pursue opportunities with volunteer organizations, friends or family that would allow them to avoid feeling stressed, angry or sad as consistently as they do in public service.[37] One interviewee said, "It takes a toll on your mental health … you dedicate all this time and see no progress … and then you have all the negativity from your own community … you think, 'Why am I doing this?'"[38]

If elected officials, particularly those working at very local levels, pull away from their community out of fear, intimidation or abuse, this is likely to harm the social networks and local bonds that are critical aspects of social cohesion. This also signals to the aggressors that threatening and abusive tactics are effective. Communities are not homogenous, and disputes or differences are expected; but when this shifts to real threats and fears for personal safety, the landscape for functioning government shifts in corresponding ways. If left unaddressed, this can create an environment of permissiveness for the ongoing perpetration of abuse, an increase in tension and partisanship that may lead to more extreme positions and demands, elevating the risks to individuals and communities.

The growing environment of threats and harassment has had a similar effect on elected officials across the country and in other types of service. The Mayors Innovation Project survey found that 69 percent of mayors knew someone who decided not to run for office as a result of the environment of threats and violence directed at local officials, and 32 percent of those in office had considered leaving.[39] In a Brennan Center study, around half of state legislators reported being deterred from bringing their family members to public events, holding public events, holding virtual spaces, making media appearances or being interviewed, posting on social media, and working on controversial topics.[40] According to a 2023 Voting Rights Lab report, election officials are resigning in significant numbers due to harassment and threats, especially in several swing states across the country.[41]

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34   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23013, May 5, 2024.

35   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23022, May 21, 2024.

36   Interviews with Respondents #CaTHI23019, May 13, 2024 ("I have seen some who get shaken, not fearful, but rattled"), and #CaTHI23006, April 24, 2024.

37   Interviews with Respondents #CaTHI23012, May 2, 2024, and #CaTHI23006, April 24, 2024.

38   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23003, April 25, 2024.

39   Herrick et al., "Intersectional Psychological Violence, Threats, and Physical Violence."

40   Gowri Ramachandran et al., *Intimidation of State and Local Officeholders: The Threat to Democracy* (New York: Brennan Center for Justice, 2024), www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/intimidation-state-and-local-officeholders#footnote5_agqoihk.

41   Voting Rights Lab, "Battleground 2024: How Swing States Changed Voting Rules After the 2020 Election," Voting Rights Lab, October 5, 2023, https://votingrightslab.org/2023/10/05/battleground-2024-how-swing-states-changed-voting-rules-after-the-2020-election/. In Kansas, officials estimate that *one-third* of all election volunteers have quit for this reason. Dylan Lysen, "A Third of Kansas Election Officials Have Quit because of Harassment and Conspiracy Theories," *Lawrence Times*, November 15, 2023.

The statements of local elected officials from around the nation also demonstrate the role of burnout and hopelessness in disincentivizing experienced officeholders from running again. In his resignation letter from a Wisconsin school board, Rick Grothaus wrote that the work had become "toxic and impossible to do."[42] 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 recalls one constituent claiming, "It's my constitutional right to be mean to you guys," during a school board meeting.[43] Pratt, who has been on the school board for six years, said that if she wasn't already a board member, participating on the board would have little appeal, stating: "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."[44]

Neither our research nor any of which we are aware can conclusively answer how many elected officials have been chased out of office or have changed their votes. Our research does make clear, however, that threats and harassment are influencing how and whether elected officials engage on controversial topics. This limits the potential for innovation and progress for all voters but in particular for those from historically disenfranchised or marginalized groups. As a result, we must consider threats and harassment as a key challenge to our local democratic processes.

42   The Associated Press, "As School Board Meetings Get Hostile, Some Members Are Calling It Quits," *NPR*, August 30, 2021, https://www.npr.org/sections/back-to-school-live-updates/2021/08/30/1032417970/school-board-members-hostile-meetings-mask-mandates-politicized.
43   The Associated Press, "As School Board Meetings Get Hostile."
44   The Associated Press, "As School Board Meetings Get Hostile."

Are some elected officials targeted more than others on the basis of their identities? If so, what are the effects on representation?

Could this asymmetry result in poorer representation of certain viewpoints in local politics?

C. The Targeting of Demographic Groups and Effects on Representation

Research from around the United States tends to show that female and/or racial-minority elected officials receive more aggressive language and intimidation than male and/or white elected officials. Our research reaches a similar conclusion about the relative difference between mens' and womens' experiences but finds little difference due to racial demographics.[45]

Interestingly, we are beginning to see indications that the atmosphere of threats and harassment may be spreading in such a fashion that white, male and rural local elected officials will soon face these behaviors at levels comparable to those faced by the most targeted demographics today.

1.   Threats and Harassment against Women

While our survey results above show that a similar percentage of men (65 percent) and women (69 percent) responded affirmatively to the question, "Have you ever received threats or harassment as an elected official?" their experiences diverge when we asked how often they face these types of aggression. Sixty-nine percent of women report experiencing threats and harassment monthly, compared to 38 percent of their male counterparts. Additionally, 31 percent of women report weekly threats and harassment, compared to eight percent of their male counterparts.[46]

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45   More than half of our non-white respondents were rural men who self-identified as conservative and Hispanic. These respondents reported the lowest incidence of threats and harassment of any group. In research from other parts of the country, non-whites are more likely to be urban or liberal, and less likely to be men or Hispanic. The relatively small size of our sample prevents us from conducting conclusive analysis between rural and urban non-white populations, but we believe it possible Southern California looks different than other parts of the country because more non-whites here are conservative and Hispanic. We discuss this in greater detail below.

46   These differences are statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level.

The average male respondent to our survey reported abusive conduct a little more than once annually, while the average female respondent reported abuse a little less often than once monthly. Taken together, our survey results suggest the average female elected official receives at least ten times the amount of threatening or harassing behavior as the average male.

Some interviewees told us they would hesitate to recommend public service to women specifically,[47] and some male respondents said that they witnessed disproportionate harassment directed at their female peers themselves.[48]

There are multiple examples in San Diego County of female elected officials being targeted in this way. One city councilwoman who served from 2016 to 2021 in Carlsbad, CA, alleged that she was stalked and threatened online by several male constituents, eventually leading her to file a restraining order to protect herself and her spouse.[49] A second councilwoman in San Diego County filed two police reports against men who threatened, harassed and stalked her within two years of her 2018 election.[50] A third reported receiving threats throughout her campaign and time in office. In one instance, a man who claimed to be a Vietnam War veteran used a racial slur (the councilwoman is the first Latina woman elected in her position) and threatened to "take care of" her with his AK-47.[51]

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47   Interviews with Respondents #CaTHI23003, April 25, 2024, and #CaTHI23013, May 5, 2024.
48   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23017, April 26, 2024.
49   Kayla Jimenez, "Women Politicians Across the County Say They've Faced Harassment, Threats," *Voice of San Diego*, November 9, 2020, http://voiceofsandiego.org/2020/11/09/women-politicians-across-the-county-say-theyve-faced-harassment-threats/.
50   Jimenez, "Women Politicians."
51   Jimenez, "Women Politicians."

A survey of such incidents found few corollaries among male elected officials, leading the *Voice of San Diego* to conclude that "Black, Latina, and Asian women, as well as those who identify as LGBTQ+, and other marginalized women often face the worst harassment."[52] Dr. Esperanza Camargo, a professor at San Diego State University, has suggested that women, racial minorities and members of the LGBTQ+ community become targets of threats and harassment because their presence in political office poses a threat to the traditional social order.[53]

National research suggests that Southern California is similar to the rest of the country when it comes to the gendered profiling of threats and harassment. A Mayors Innovation Project survey shows that female mayors reported higher rates of threats and harassment across every category compared to male mayors. Female mayors faced higher rates of psychological violence, gender-based violence, sexualized violence and threats than did male mayors. In terms of frequency, female mayors reported being harassed more times each month than male mayors.[54] A joint study by the Anti-Defamation League and Princeton's Bridging Divides Initiative examining health officials, election officials and local government officeholders found that women in its sample received three times as many threats as men.[55] Other national results echo this trend.[56]

The differences in frequency are staggering. To confirm our findings, we employed two further methods that could test the veracity of our results. First, we reviewed social media accounts of elected officials in San Diego County. Using lists of threatening words and grammatical structures taken from other sources, we identified tweets that appeared to contain aggressive language targeted at the author of the original tweet. Controlling for the number of constituents and how often they tweeted, female elected officials received four times as many aggressive tweets as male elected officials did.[57]

The trends we observed in our social media analysis have been confirmed in other studies. Women in general tend to be more aggressively targeted through online spaces; they are twice as likely to experience cyberstalking and are more likely to receive derogatory comments or comments about their appearance.[58] An analysis of violence against women in politics produced by the United Nations notes that online and phone stalking may have a "gateway impact," making it easier for perpetrators to move from the virtual to the physical world, thereby increasing the psychological and physical toll on women in politics.[59]

52   Jimenez, "Women Politicians."
53   Jimenez, "Women Politicians."
54   Herrick et al., "Intersectional Psychological Violence, Threats, and Physical Violence." While women mayors in general were targeted more often than men, women of color faced the highest rates of monthly harassment.
55   Bridging Divides Initiative, "BDI Launches Public Event-Level Dataset on Threats and Harassment Against Local Officials," Bridging Divides Initiative, April 11, 2024, bridgingdivides.princeton.edu/updates/2024/bdi-launches-public-event-level-dataset-threats-and-harassment-against-local-officials.
56   Bridging Divides Initiative, "Local Officials Continue to Face High, Widespread Hostility: Latest Findings from Ongoing Threats and Harassment Survey," Bridging Divides Initiative, February 8, 2024, bridgingdivides.princeton.edu/updates/2024/local-officials-continue-face-high-widespread-hostility-latest-findings-ongoing.
57   These differences are statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level.
58   Katerina Standish, "Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence and Democracy," Toda Peace Institute, Policy Brief No. 181, December 2023, toda.org/assets/files/resources/policy-briefs/t-pb-181_gender-based-violence-and-democracy_standish.pdf.
59   UN Women. *Violence Against Women in Politics: Expert Report and Recommendations* (UN Women, March 2018), https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Women/ViolenceAgainstWomeninPoliticsReport.pdf.

Second, we asked survey respondents to read a series of two- to three-sentence stories about constituents interacting with a local elected official and then rate the story on a scale of one (completely benign) to seven (very threatening). Women and men rated each story as similarly threatening to one another. What this tells us is that, generally, women and men are defining what constitutes threatening or abusive behavior similarly, meaning that any subjective reporting is unlikely to be different due to a different interpretation of terms.

Despite numerous indications that female elected officials experience greater levels of threat than male elected officials do, there are some studies that point in an opposite direction. A survey of state legislators conducted by the Brennan Center found that, over their terms and preceding campaigns, 35 percent of women reported threats compared to 46 percent of men, and one percent of women reported attacks versus five percent of men.[60] There may be a range of reasons for this disparity, but it is highly likely a result of methodological differences.

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60   Ramachandran et al., *Intimidation of State and Local Officeholders*.

Why might perpetrators focus so much on women? As women have gained more power, with higher educational and professional achievements than men,[61] there has been a corresponding negative reaction among some men. Men facing relatively higher financial instability and social insecurities are more vulnerable and susceptible to negative messaging, within which misogyny and other forms of bigotry are embedded.[62] As historically oppressed groups reach higher levels of success, the response is often hostile, even violent.[63] A rise in the acceptance of extremist rhetoric and ideology, particularly since the Trump administration and its introduction of policies that scaled back women's and LGBTQ+ rights, may be a form of backlash against rising gender equality.[64] In particular, patriarchal violence — which encompasses the practices, policies, beliefs and behaviors that undermine and harm women and gender-nonconforming individuals, and is considered both widespread and a "normalized epidemic"[65] — may be a driving factor in the targeting of women and minorities. As a result, women and non-conforming genders will often face attacks as they move into new roles, as evidenced by the personalized and sexual nature of threats and harassment discussed above.

As discussed above, threats and harassment are having a chilling effect on the political participation of elected officials that receive them. Consequently, we may be likely to see demographics that receive more threats or harassment drop out or self-censor more often.

Our survey offers some support for this notion. As shown in Figure V, below, women are more likely to report almost all kinds of self-censorship behaviors than men are. We consider this evidence to be very preliminary. None of the differences reported are significant to the $p < .05$ threshold, and some are statistical dead heats. A larger sample size is necessary to more fully understand gender implications. Curiously, women are substantially less likely to report changing their votes than men.

61   "Why Young Men and Women Are Drifting Apart," *The Economist*, March 13, 2024, https://www.economist.com/international/2024/03/13/why-the-growing-gulf-between-young-men-and-women.

62   Lydia Bates, "Patriarchal Violence: From the Far Right to the Mainstream," The Southern Poverty Law Center, February 20, 2021, https://www.splcenter.org/news/2021/02/01/patriarchal-violence-misogyny-far-right-mainstream.

63   Jamille Bigio and Rachel Vogelstein, "Women Under Attack: The Backlash Against Female Politicians," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February, 2020, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/women-under-attack.

64   Bates, "Patriarchal Violence."

65   "What is Patriarchal Violence?" Black Feminist Future, accessed September 10, 2024, https://blackfeministfuture.org/resources/what-is-patriarchal-violence-a-working-definition-from-the-abolishing-patriarchal-violence-innovation-lab/; and Kaitlyn Regehr et al., *Safer Scrolling: How Algorithms Popularise and Gamify Online Hate and Misogyny for Young People* (University College London and University of Kent, January 2024), https://www.ascl.org.uk/ASCL/media/ASCL/Help%20and%20advice/Inclusion/Safer-scrolling.pdf.
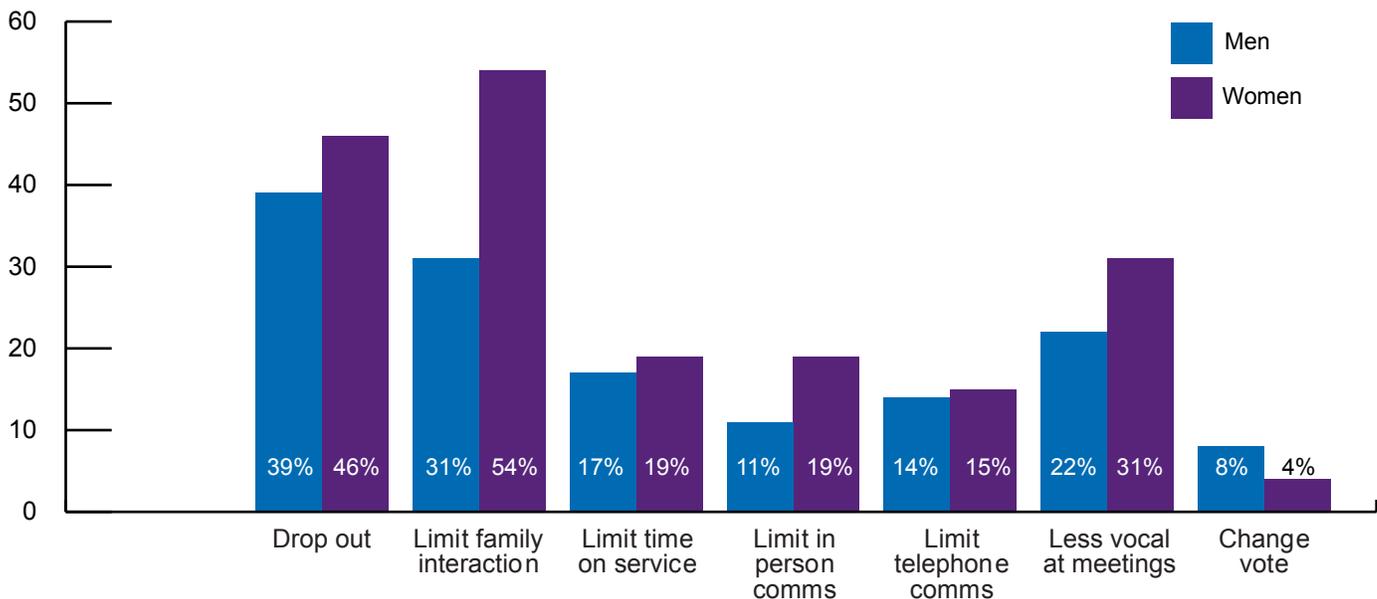
Figure V: Percentage of respondents reporting self-censorship behaviors in political service, by gender

The Brennan Center study referenced above found that state legislators reported being deterred from bringing their family members to public events, holding public events, holding virtual spaces, making media appearances or being interviewed, posting on social media, and working on controversial topics.[66] In all of these categories, more female (52 percent) than male (43 percent) legislators reported being deterred. Significantly, these attacks led to 31 percent of women and 16 percent of men reporting that they avoided working on controversial topics.[67]

Women are more likely to support pro-active solutions to incivility in public space than men. In our survey, we asked respondents to indicate whether they supported any of six[68] commonly suggested changes that might reduce aggressive behavior toward local elected officials. Women indicated stronger support for all six.

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66   Ramachandran et al., *Intimidation of State and Local Officeholders*.
67   Ramachandran et al., *Intimidation of State and Local Officeholders*.
68   Stricter punishment for offenders, changes to laws about citizen-board relationships and public meeting requirements, greater involvement of police at meetings, trainings and public education about civility, training for board and council members, and greater cooperation between boards on tackling threats and harassment.

2.   Threats and Harassment against Racial Minorities

National studies of threats, violence, intimidation and other aggressive tactics against policymakers consistently find that persons of color face more of these behaviors than white people. For example, one survey found that 25 percent of minority officials reported threats compared to 18 percent of non-minority officials in a three-month period.[69]

Our study similarly found evidence of both bias and egregious racism in Southern California. One interviewee described racist attacks against colleagues.[70] Another reported racial and religious slurs used so frequently against them that they purchased a gun.[71] Threats and harassment of public officials in San Diego County appear to support the finding that female officials and those with intersectional minority identities are targeted more frequently than their male counterparts. Reporting by the *Voice of San Diego* affirms that "Black, Latina, and Asian women, as well as those who identify as LGBTQ+, and other marginalized women often face the worst harassment."[72]

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69   Bridging Divides Initiative, "Local Officials Continue to Face High, Widespread Hostility."
70   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23021.
71   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23002, April 16, 2024.
72   Jimenez, "Women Politicians."

Yet overall results from our study suggest a different pattern. From our survey, white officials (74 percent) are more likely to report being threatened or harassed than non-white officials (54 percent),[73] although the percentage reporting harassment "at least weekly" is nearly identical (18 percent for white officials and 19 percent for non-white officials). This divergence from national studies compelled us to consider why our findings were not aligned.

While it is impossible to know for sure, we note that both our non-white sample and the demography of Southern California are different from the rest of the country. In particular, our non-white sample is almost entirely Latino and is substantially more rural and conservative than non-white populations across the country as a whole.

Across the United States, about 22 percent of Latino people live in rural areas and about 27 percent are consistent Republican voters. Among our survey respondents, 43 percent of self-identified Latino officials are rural and 41 percent said they are moderate or strong conservatives. Indeed, only 48 percent of Latino officials reported any threats, and only seven percent reported threats at least weekly. Rural, male, conservative Latino officials reported the lowest incidence of threats and harassment overall.[74] It is likely true that these unique demographic differences influenced findings on the topic of targeting by race.

Our relatively small sample size also precludes our study being able to say anything significant with regard to race. For this reason, we present our findings on racial differences with a significant grain of salt.

D. The Spread of Threats and Harassment to Rural, White, Conservative Men

This year's survey — as well as some reporting from national studies — points us towards a speculative conclusion: that threats and harassment are spreading from targeting local elected officials who are predominantly urban, female and non-white to also targeting those who are rural, male and white. The evidence for this conclusion is uneven but compelling.

At the outset, our white, male, rural and conservative respondents all reported that threats and harassment had gotten worse more often than their non-white, female, urban and liberal counterparts despite the fact that non-white, female, urban and liberal respondents all self-reported receiving more threats and harassment overall. Figure VI summarizes these differences.[75]

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73   This difference is significant and the p < .05 level.

74   These categories correlate substantially. Of rural Latino respondents, 75 percent were men and more than two-thirds were conservative. No rural, male, Hispanic respondents reported being liberal.

75   These differences are statistically significant at the p < .05 level for white versus non-white respondents and rural versus urban respondents. Time in office is not different between any groups.
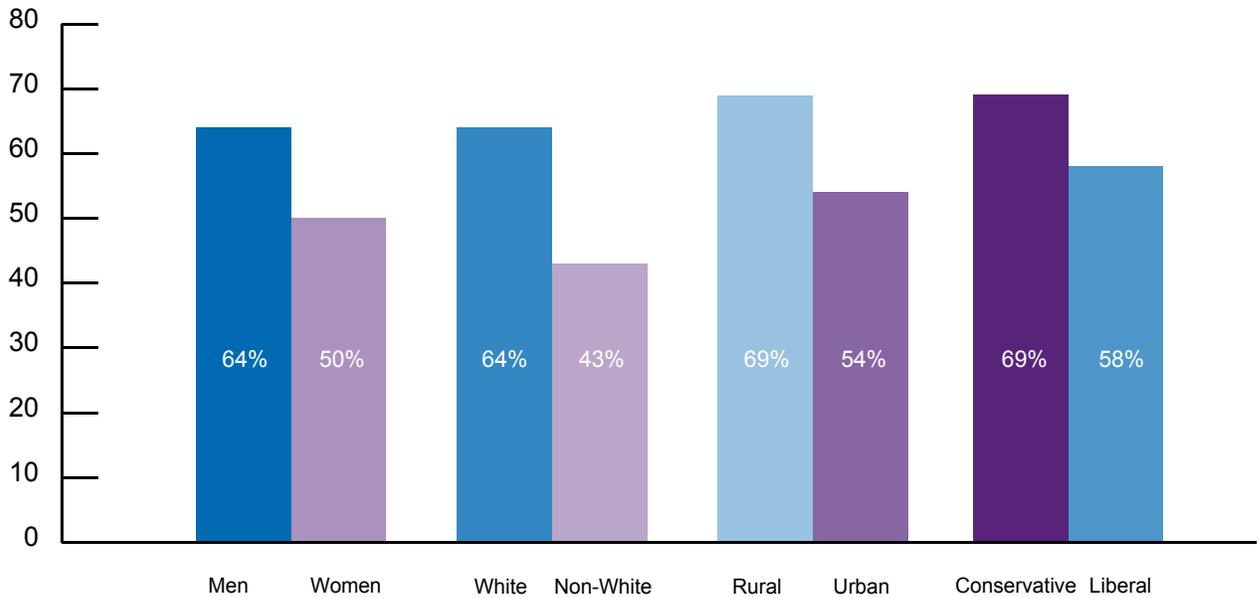
Figure VI: Percentage of respondents of different demographics saying the frequency of threats has worsened during time in office

We also see evidence that these demographics are responding more intensely to threatening and harassing behavior. For example, among our survey respondents, men (69 percent) are twice as likely as women (38 percent) to say they have reported threats or harassment to the police. The same is true of conservatives (84 percent) versus liberals (39 percent). Rural respondents (69 percent) are twice as likely as urban respondents to say that threats and harassment have caused them to consider dropping out of public service.[76]

These observations tell us two things. First, aggressive behavior is shifting to demographics previously less targeted. And, second, as threats and harassment become more common among these demographics — and representing groups traditionally in positions of power, namely white men — they are seeking stronger responses than members of demographics already used to such treatment and perhaps with less faith in institutions to address the behavior.

Not all of our results support this second conclusion. For example, we asked respondents whether they considered threats and harassment a "routine part of public service." We might expect, given our explanation, that non-white, female, urban or liberal officials would respond "yes" more often than white, male, rural or conservative officials. In fact, liberals (79 percent) were significantly more likely than conservatives (56 percent) to describe threats as routine, but male and female (67 and 68 percent), rural and urban (64 and 68 percent), and white and non-white (69 and 70 percent) officials were all indistinguishable on this question.

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76   All of these differences are significant at the p < .05 level.

This second year of research suggests that threats and harassment may be spreading to different demographics, including to groups who have traditionally occupied dominant positions in society.

This second year of research suggests that threats and harassment may be spreading to different demographics, including to groups who have traditionally occupied dominant positions in society. As a relatively new finding on which we did not gather additional data, we can only speculate as to what this potential spread can indicate. First, it could suggest a change in perpetrator motives or tactics, or simply in the values or geography of perpetrators. Second, it could indicate a saturation of the effectiveness of threatening and harassing behavior on more diverse urban populations. Or, third, it could suggest a change in the levels of acceptance of incivility (leading to an increased inclination to report threatening behavior) among these additional demographic groups.

In the next section we discuss some of the contextual factors that may be motivating observed threatening and harassing behaviors against local elected officials. These include contextual factors that contribute to an enabling environment that condones the perpetration of these aggressions, as well as early indications of organized and networked efforts to influence local policy positions, including public school curricula.

IV. Context of Threats and Harassment

Why has the local political environment become so contentious? Before we move on to our last section on solutions, we consider a number of factors that may help contextualize and explain the high level of threats and harassment we and others are observing. While we reach fewer solid conclusions in this section, we can highlight several important issues:

1. Local elected officials receive a significant amount of threats and harassment on social media as compared to other channels. Independent research suggests that the anonymity afforded by these platforms, coupled with the intentional use of social media to attract attention, contributes to increased hostility.[77]

2. Those who threaten or harass elected officials likely perceive the political or social issues that provoke their actions as substantial challenges to individual rights— even if these same issues may seem minor to others.

3. Aggression against local elected officials is becoming more organized. Local government is increasingly seen by both officials and those who threaten them as a stage from which to gain greater influence.

4. The significant decline in local reporting and local newspapers makes it harder for people to know what is happening in their local communities. This void is often filled by non-fact-based information sources, such as social media, which is ripe with rumor, misinformation and disinformation.

A. Modes of Communicating Threats and Harassment

How do threats or harassment reach elected officials? We asked respondents who indicated that they had been threatened or harassed at least once during their service how often they experienced such communication through five specific channels: via social media, in person at official meetings, in person outside of meetings, over the telephone and by text.

Perhaps not surprisingly, respondents indicated that social media and personal aggression at meetings were substantially more common than other channels. Figure VII shows the percentage of respondents who received threats via each of the five respective channels each month.

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77   Michael J. Moore et al., "Anonymity and Roles Associated with Aggressive Posts in an Online Forum," *Computers in Human Behavior 28*, no. 3 (2012): 861-867; and Thais Sardá et al., "Understanding Online Anonymity," Media, Culture & Society 41, no. 4 (2019): 557-564.
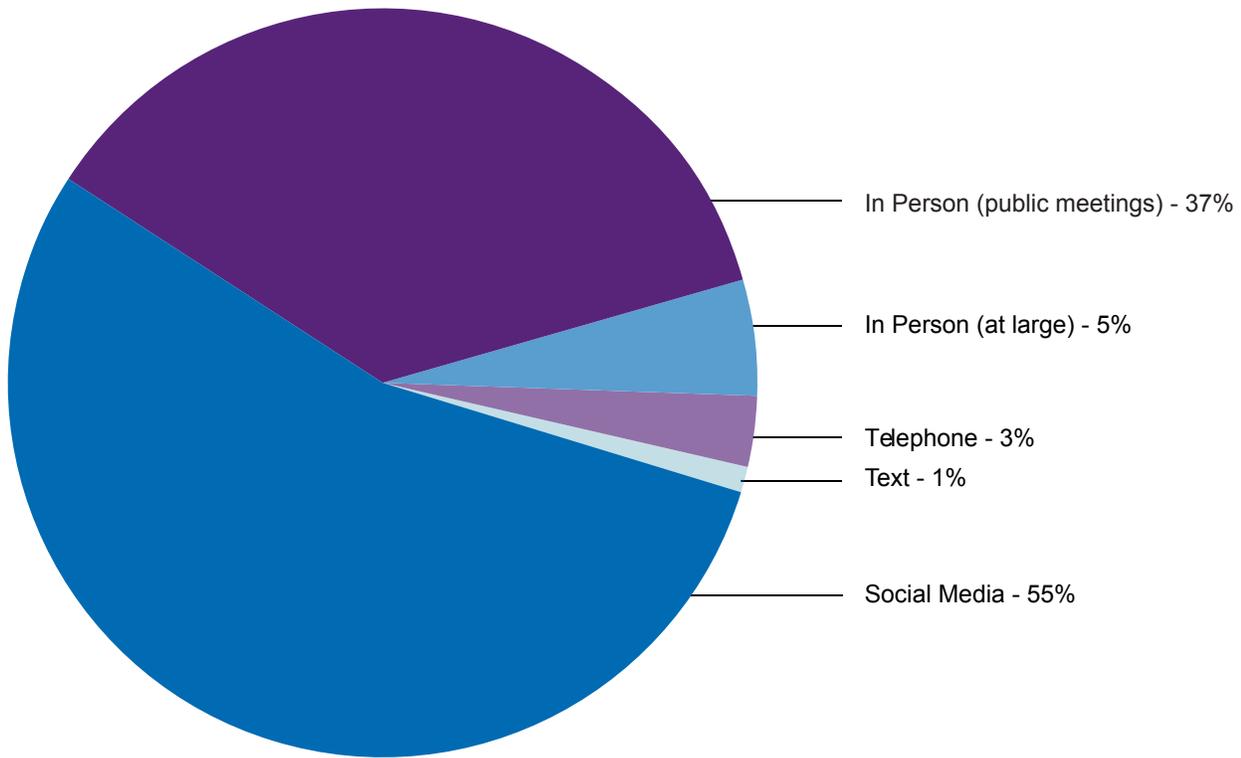
Figure VII: Percentage of respondents reporting threats and harassment in each modality at least monthly

In Person (public meetings) - 37%

In Person (at large) - 5%

Telephone - 3%

Text - 1%

Social Media - 55%

In interviews, local elected officials spoke mostly about social media and emails. These incidents include seemingly organized harassment in which large numbers of anonymous accounts spam the official's personal channels with offensive material or accusations[78] or use these channels to contact the official's family or place of work.[79] Others reported more ominous behavior, such as emails detailing where the official lives[80] or even photographs of the official's house or of nooses and other images alluding to violence.[81]

Aggressive behaviors experienced in person were often described as happening at arms-length by speakers at public meetings. One respondent told us that a harasser would call into the public comment line during open meetings.[82] In some cases, aggressive individuals would follow the elected official to their car after meetings. Run-ins in person but outside of public meetings were rarer. Nonetheless, these sorts of personal confrontations typically occurred when the elected official was recognized in the course of their personal lives outside of their official course of duty.

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78   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23010, April 30, 2024.
79   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23002, April 16, 2024.
80   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23006, April 24, 2024.
81   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23011, May 2, 2024.
82   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23019, May 13, 2024.

Again, these findings match trends from other studies. In a National League of Cities (NLC) survey, 79 percent of respondents reported being threatened over social media and 60 percent through email or other online means.[83] Similar to our results, the NLC listed public meetings as the second most frequent sites of threats and harassment (64 percent), followed at a distance by encounters elsewhere in person (in public spaces [35 percent] or at work [26 percent]).

Social media is the most common channel through which aggression flows to many officials. A report from the California Women's List describes "a barrage of insults and disparaging comments targeted at [female elected officials] through social media" as "a seemingly inescapable feature of the digital age."[84] The most violent threats are typically delivered anonymously, while aggressive language in public forums tends to allude to violence rather than explicitly endorse it. (Zoom meetings or in-person meetings with anonymous call-in options have also featured in reports about threats and harassment.[85])

As we will see in later sections, research suggests that social media has an incubator effect for online harassment and discussion of political violence. Individuals or groups often find or seek like-minded entities who mobilize around grievances or fringe ideas that are seeded and propagated in virtual spaces — spaces that are under-regulated and can lead users into more radical and extreme thinking. It may be tempting to brush off patterns of harassment and aggression on social media as regrettable but ultimately the responsibility of the elected official to ignore. Some would suggest that if elected officials don't like such behavior, then they should simply remove themselves from social media. Yet the pervasiveness of the medium means it is a critical component of campaigns, communications and constituent outreach.

B. Thematic Triggers

Our observations (and the observations of others) about the issues that generate tension at local board meetings dovetail with broader conversations about polarization in the United States. Many Americans hold their partisan views as core aspects of their identity. When politicians or others reinforce these identity markers through negative or antagonistic messaging about members of the other party, polarization is increased and space for common ground decreased.[86] Issues that are most consistently used to divide include race, immigration, sexual orientation and preference, and school curricula.[87]

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83   Anthony et al., *On the Frontlines of Today's Cities*.
84   Roy et al., *Her Stories on the Campaign Trail*.
85   Amita Sharma, "Women in San Diego County Politics Speak Out about Threats," *KPBS Public Media*, August 4, 2023, https://www.kpbs.org/news/politics/2023/08/04/women-in-san-diego-county-politics-speak-out-about-threats.
86   Shanto Iyengar et al., "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States," *Annual Review of Political Science 22*, no. 1 (2019): 129–46, https://doi.org/10.1146/ annurev-polisci-051117-073034.
87   See, e.g., Marisa Abrajano and Zoltan L. Hajnal, *White Backlash: Immigration, Race, and American Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

Our observations in San Diego, Riverside and Imperial Counties would seem to bear this out. In our review of Twitter/X data, aggressive tweets most often considered immigration policy, LGBTQ+ rights and so-called critical race theory. Interviewees frequently mentioned these issues, alongside the various threads of discord concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, as key touchstones for intimidating behavior. The region found itself in national headlines at least twice for controversies concerning school board decisions that contravened state education policies. More specifically, the way these issues are framed is not in terms of policy differences but rather in terms of individual rights and freedom, with some seeing these issues as almost existential in their seriousness or severity. Issues that might otherwise register as functional policy differences — for example, whether masks are required or not — become instead cast as threats to freedom of speech, suppression of individual rights and even violence (of a state against the people or by certain groups against others).

We did not ask survey respondents in either year to identify the issues associated with specific incidents of threats and harassment, nor did we ask interviewees this question directly. Instead, our data relies on our review of media reporting as well as on what interviewees volunteered to us as they described their experiences and the changes in their communities. Among the 21 interviews we conducted, nine mentioned COVID-19 (during the 2019-2021 period) and six mentioned LGBTQ+ issues as leading causes of aggression against them and their peers. Five mentioned critical race theory or other issues about race relations or diversity programming (DEI). Three mentioned the conflict in Israel/Palestine. Several also mentioned issues related to zoning, building and environmental regulations.

In Appendix A we have collected a brief list of contentious or potentially contentious local and state legislation on these triggering issues, as related commentary may incite incidents of threats and harassment.

Whatever issues animate threats and harassment now, interviewees focused on COVID as a major turning point. One interviewee observed, "COVID escalated everything and seemed to unleash a new kind of communication."[88] The fear and confusion ushered in by COVID led to a range of expressions of concerns, most prominently at school board meetings. One interviewee recalled a group of parents who blamed COVID policies, and those who upheld them, for the suicide of a student in the district.[89] City councilors recalled aggression stemming from anger at business closures.[90]

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88   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23019, May 13, 2024.
89   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23012, May 2, 2024.
90   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23002, April 16, 2024.

These recollections reflect contemporaneous reporting. 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.[91] In September 2021, the CEO of the Californian School Board Association wrote that he had "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."[92] California schools were not alone — a RAND Corporation study estimated that 75 percent of school district leaders nationwide believed that polarization over COVID-19 precautions hindered their ability to educate their students.[93]

91   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.

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

93   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, 2022), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA956-8.html.

The social distancing requirements of COVID and the subsequent move to virtual and online interactions and meetings fostered an anonymization and obfuscation of identities that created a different tenor and tone of engagement, which then piled onto other, ongoing trends. Polls revealed that 70 percent of Americans, regardless of party, believed that Trump's presidency worsened civility.[94] A number of our interviewees mentioned the Trump presidency and his rhetoric as a contributing factor to the state of local politics; according to one, "all politics aside, Trump's willingness to go outside the norms of civility has pushed others to do it."[95] Polarization, declining trust and divisiveness have been worsening for decades, accompanied by a resistance to seeking compromise — all of which alter how and with whom we engage.[96] As politicians focus on differences, these become further enflamed between urban and rural communities and along ethnic and racial divides, especially on issues such as immigration policy or racial justice[97] topics of salience in local politics.

As the prominence of COVID policies has waned, disagreements — particularly at the school board level — have shifted to debates over gender, sexuality and race. These issues have also captured national attention, including through Florida's "don't say gay" bill, which aims to prohibit "classroom discussion about sexual orientation or gender identity,"[98] and through Moms for Liberty, a national movement aimed at prohibiting books or lessons that members see as promoting certain sexual or gender identities.

Similarly, local groups and debates over education policy have sprung up across California. A conservative school board in San Bernardino County (Chino Valley School District, outside of our study area, but in a neighboring county) introduced a requirement for schools to notify parents if a student requested to be referred to as a gender other than that on record. The requirement, which contravenes state policy, reached national attention when the school board president evicted the state school superintendent from a board meeting, and the attorney general moved to sue the school district and block the policy going into effect.[99]

94   Laura Santhanam, "New Poll: 70% of Americans Think Civility Has Gotten Worse Since Trump Took Office," *PBS News*, July 3, 2017, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/new-poll-70-americans-think-civility-gotten-worse-since-trump-took-office.
95   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23011, May 2, 2024.
96   Audrey Hamilton, "How Politics Became So Uncivilized with Jonathan Haidt, PhD," Speaking of Psychology (podcast), Episode 43, 2016, https://www.apa.org/news/podcasts/speaking-of-psychology/incivility-politics.
97   Hamilton, "How Politics Became So Uncivilized"; and Jonathan Haidt and Sam Abrams, "The Top 10 Reasons American Politics Are So Broken," January 7, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/01/07/the-top-10-reasons-american-politics-are-worse-than-ever/.
98   Matt Lavietes, "Here's What Florida's 'Don't Say Gay' Bill Would Do and What It Wouldn't Do," *NBC News*, March 16, 2022, https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-politics-and-policy/floridas-dont-say-gay-bill-actually-says-rcna19929.
99   "California Sues District that Requires Parents Be Notified If their Kids Change their Gender or Pronouns," *PBS News*, August 28, 2023, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/california-sues-district-that-requires-parents-be-notified-if-their-kids-change-their-gender-or-pronouns.

In Temecula, another conservative school board successfully moved to ban a state-mandated social studies curriculum that mentioned gay rights activist and politician Harvey Milk, garnering reaction from California's governor who threatened to fine the school district. The politicization of school curricula continued with a March 2023 parent notification bill that modeled the Chino Valley School District parental notification policy for other boards to adopt.[100] While the bill was not passed, its proponents have been inspired to fight state education policies. The move to politicize school board positions has also garnered media attention, as residents tangled to seat or remove board members based on overtly political or religious principles.[101] Several interviewees and media reports confirm the role local mega churches have played in coordinating candidates for school board and promoting specific educational policies in opposition to state mandates.[102] One interviewee reported that "they're all taking orders from the same people, using the same tactics and language for the same goals."[103]

Our cases in Southern California also reflected national dialogue about race and critical race theory.[104] The Coronado Unified School District (CUSD) in San Diego County provides an example of how political polarization around the concept of critical race theory has led to threats and attacks on school board officials. In June 2020, the CUSD superintendent promised to make the district a leader in promoting racial justice. This was not welcomed by all, and, subsequently, the home addresses of some school board members who supported this new direction were posted online, along with a photo of one female board member and her two young children.[105]

Several interviewees also mentioned housing, planning or environmental policy as issues associated with aggression. These issues often interacted in unique or locally specific ways. For example, one council member recalled disagreements in his community between those opposing housing density and those calling for improved management of environmental standards and protections. These arguments disrupted their council meetings and stalled progress on both issues.[106] These experiences seem to echo a recent high-profile incident in which a city councilor in Berkeley resigned, citing threats and harassment primarily over housing policies.[107]

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100   Refers to AB 1314, proposed in 2023, an act intended to amend existing education code which has since died. California Legislature, "AB-1314 Gender Identity: Parental Notification (2023-2024)," February 16, 2023, https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202320240AB1314.

101   Cerise Castle, "'This Is Our Watch Now': The Pastor Guiding Conservatives to Southern California School Boards," *The IE Voice*, March 26, 2024, https://theievoice.com/tim-thompson-culture-wars-temecula-valley/.

102   Carl Cohn, "New Evangelical School Board Majority Exposes Deep Polarization in Temecula," *EdSource*, December 19, 2022, https://edsource.org/2022/new-evangelical-school-board-majority-exposes-deep-polarization-in-temecula/683148; and Jeff Horseman, "Why Conservative Christians Want to Take over Southwest Riverside County School Boards," *Press Enterprise*, March 31, 2022, https://www.pressenterprise.com/2022/03/27/why-conservative-christians-want-to-take-over-southwest-riverside-county-school-boards/.

103   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23010, April 30, 2024.

104   Critical race theory is an academic theory based on the works of legal scholars in the 1970s who asserted that racism was built into the legal and institutional systems of the United States.

105   Bridging Divides Initiative and the Anti-Defamation League, *Threats and Harassment Against Local Officials Dataset*.

106   In an interview with Respondent #CaTHI23003 (April 25, 2024), we heard that "NIMBYism" and the desire to preserve a rural way of life influenced threats and harassment.

107   Nico Savidge, "Berkeley Councilmember Rigel Robinson to Step Down, End Run for Mayor, Citing 'Harassment, Stalking and Threats'," *Berkeleyside*, January 9, 2024, https://www.berkeleyside.org/2024/01/09/rigel-robins-berkeley-resignation-city-council-peoples-park.

In Riverside County, local communities mobilized to harass city council members for their support of certain infrastructure projects including the construction of power lines in rural areas and the reconfiguration of a popular public event space. Others noted that even minor infrastructure projects, such as road works, resulted in complaints regarding timing and process — and, as one interviewee noted, reactions were most often a result of constituents' "expectations not being met."[108]

C. Organization and Premeditation

Our interviews explored the likelihood that these behaviors and rhetoric are part of an organized effort to disrupt local government processes and influence the policy-making process. Ten of 22 interviewees referred to what they felt were organized attempts to threaten and harass elected officials. Much of this was due to what some saw as the reflection of national politics playing out at the local level.

School boards seem to be the focus of concerted efforts among Republicans in particular — who are otherwise often outnumbered in Democratic California — to build grassroots networks to influence policy and legislation. The strategy over the past few years has been to seek out, train and elect conservative representatives to school boards, essentially politicizing these apolitical bodies and driving wedges between teachers, students and parents on specific culture war issues. These issues include parents' rights, the teaching of critical race theory and the history of race relations in the United States, and sexual education curriculum that is inclusive of gender nonconformity.[109] In our traditional media review and surveys we did not encounter any specific cases of similar agendas to influence school boards by other party interests.

Yet efforts to organize disruptions were noted as tactics used by political interests across the spectrum. One interviewee echoed this perspective, noting that "there has been more of a concentrated effort to have partisan politics get a foothold in school boards. The theme that seems to run here in the district is this idea that the Board is the tool to do the will of some group."[110] Another noted that the organized efforts represented a strong minority who were willing to do "harassing things." They were either organized labor — for example, the local teachers' union — or the "equity crowd."[111] According to other accounts, some of these groups were local, while others were county-wide[112] and organized through sharing information online, including photos, communications strategies and tactics.[113]

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108   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23001.
109   Blake Jones, "The GOP School Boards Making California Dems Red in the Face," *Politico*, August 21, 2023, https://www.politico.com/news/2023/08/21/gop-school-boards-california-00112084.
110   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23021, May, 21, 2024.
111   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23017, April 26, 2024.
112   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23015, April 22, 2024.
113   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23013, May 5, 2024.

Interviewees also noted that they would be targeted by other elected officials on the boards or councils on which they served. In some cases, it would be for making an inquiry into management and transparency practices; in others, it would be for not falling along party lines or for simply holding a different policy position. The responses included personal attacks or criticism, censures or, as in one case, a coordinated effort by a colleague, his wife and friends to intimidate and harass an elected official. We come back to this in the solutions section, but it is worth noting that threats and harassment directed at elected officials are coming not only from the "general public" but also from other elected officials — and that this may require a different set of responses.

Some of these organized efforts are having the effect of turning relatively minor issues into lightning rods of disagreement, with local politics increasingly seen as a zero-sum game. While organizing around issues of common interest is essential in a democracy, the inclusion of threatening tactics to advance these interests is not. Once that line is crossed, the slide towards "might makes right" begins.

Perpetrators of Threats and Harassment

Who are the people engaging in threats and harassment against local elected officials? Can identifying their profiles better help in designing interventions or responses? Interviewees echoed this curiosity, stating that the media (in this case) "need to figure out who are the people who are perpetuating this behavior and what their motivations are. It would be helpful to investigate people's motivations."[114] Our survey and interviews did not ask respondents to specify the source of threats, but several made clear that they believed threats and harassment to be organized. Some alluded to efforts by local church pastors who have expanded their reach by actively campaigning for local candidates and proselytizing through YouTube channels, podcasts and sermons on a few of the trigger issues mentioned above.[115] While they are not directly implicated in the perpetration of specific threats, these entities have still fed into an environment of distrust and antipathy towards the status quo and have used their pulpit to mobilize followers who are moved by allusions to the immoralities of decisions made by local elected leaders to pursue liberal policies.

Threatening and harassing tweets in our dataset were most often sent through email or comments on social media platforms, so the individuals behind them are not easy to identify. However, some contained similar language, suggesting a coordinated effort to intimidate and harass the receiver. Our interviewees had varying impressions of which groups might be responsible for the increase in aggression, with some attesting that the main perpetrators were colleagues on the same board. Others suggested that disruptors were from out of town and likely less directly affected by the local politics of the city but rather invested in the broader consequences of the decisions at hand.

To learn more, we provide the following list of studies we believe offer important insights into this question:

Kleinfeld, Rachel. "The Rise in Political Violence in the United States and Damage to Our Democracy." Testimony to the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol, March 31, 2022. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2022/03/the-rise-in-political-violence-in-the-united-states-and-damage-to-our-democracy?lang=en.

Kuznia, Rob, et al. "A Deluge of Violent Messages; How a Surge in Threats to Public Officials Could Disrupt American Democracy." *CNN Politics*, December 7, 2023.

Simi, Pete, Gina Ligon, Seamus Hughes, and Natalie Standridge. "Rising Threats to Public Officials: A Review of 10 Years of Federal Data." *CTC Sentinel* 17, no. 5 (May 2024).

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114   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23014, April 19, 2024.
115   Interviews with Respondents #CaTHI23010, April 30, 2024, #CaTHI23013, May 5, 2024, and #CaTHI23014, April 19, 2024.

D. Evaluating the Context and Impacts of Threats and Harassment: Implications for and of Local Media

Perceptions of what may be considered threatening are informed by media coverage. Many interviewees frequently described the reporting on threats and harassment as 'biased' for not providing the full context of the situation, or as an under-reported and often ignored issue. One respondent noted that the media was biased in their representation of alt-right groups without considering the disruptive role of the alt-left.[116] Some opined that the local media sensationalized the issues, emphasizing conflict to feed outrage without "telling a balanced story."[117]

One example is a story of a 2023 incident in which Mayor Ureña in Imperial County was kicked during a Pride Flag-raising ceremony.[118] The article provides only a brief account and does not contextualize this incident in a larger pattern of threats and harassment. One interviewee suggested that journalists should, as standard practice, reference California law, cite employment and privacy law, and mention any ongoing police investigations to expand on the context and interrelated considerations.[119] The limited reporting and the lack of substantial analysis on the contributing dynamics offer little insight into the aggravating factors and potential responses to the volume and intensity of threats against officials and their impact on our democracy. As a result, these are often considered isolated events, the manifestation of some fringe elements or ideologies rather than a persistent effort to undermine the functioning of local government.

When asked about the role of media to help mitigate threats, several interviewees mentioned the declining presence of local press at their meetings, reflecting the limited coverage, stating that "there is no local media" or "it's not what it used to be."[120] Local news is "the real determinant"[121] of an informed populace and a core means through which communities hold public officials accountable. Local media also helps residents understand the process of local governance, candidate platforms and legislative deliberation, so that they know how and in what ways voter priorities are being tended to or not.[122]

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116   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23018, April 18, 2024.
117   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23021, May 21, 2024.
118   "Suspect Lunges at Mayor Ureña & Kicks His Father during Pride Flag-Raising Ceremony, *Calexico Chronicle*, June 16, 2023, https://calexicochronicle.com/2023/06/16/suspect-curses-lunges-at-mayor-urena-during-pride-flag-raising-ceremony/
119   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23022, May 21, 2024.
120   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23022, May 21, 2024.
121   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23010, April 30, 2024.
122   "The State of Local News and Why It Matters," American Journalism Project, accessed September 11, 2024, https://www.theajp.org/news-insights/the-state-of-local-news-and-why-it-matters/.

Since 2005, about one-third of California's newspapers have gone out of business or been absorbed into corporate entities. At the same time, there has been an almost 70 percent decline in the number of full time journalists on staff at these outlets.[123] The San Diego Union-Tribune has gone from employing 400 people in the 1990s to just over 100 today.[124] Across Southern California, major papers have faced a 30 percent decrease in their circulation of Sunday papers since 2015.[125]

Despite the efforts of nonprofit journalism, social media has steadily supplanted local news as the primary source of news and information for many.[126] In a recent poll from the University of Chicago's Institute of Politics, a majority of individuals reported receiving news from social media, yet few cite social media as a source that covers news in good faith.[127] The fragmented nature of media sources, including, for example, Facebook and X, contributes to skepticism about the veracity and authenticity of almost any form of reporting.[128] The same poll reflected that more than one in four Americans feel so "alienated from their government that it may soon be necessary to take up arms against it."[129] The decline of local news is depriving communities of access to good-faith news sources, reducing trust in media itself and jeopardizing its ability to fulfill its watchdog role. Interviewees noted the media's bias and their tendency to focus disproportionately on the extremes because of the drama that sells and has "sizzle," which takes attention away from those "getting the good work done in the middle."[130]

123   Ashley Ahn, "California's News Industry Is Shrinking while Misinformation Spreads. Here's What the Numbers Tell Us," *The Los Angeles Times*, July 24, 2024, https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2024-07-24/here-are-five-charts-that-explain-californias-struggling-news-industry.

124   Amita Sharma, "How Healthy Is Democracy in San Diego? Depends on Where You Look," *KPBS Public Media*, September 15, 2023, https://www.kpbs.org/news/politics/2023/09/15/how-healthy-is-democracy-in-san-diego-depends-on-where-you-look.

125   Ahn, "California's News Industry Is Shrinking."

126   Sharma, "How Healthy is Democracy in San Diego?"

127   "Our Precarious Democracy: Extreme Polarization and Alienation in Our Politics," The University of Chicago Institute of Politics, accessed September 11, 2024, https://uchicagopolitics.opalstacked.com/uploads/homepage/Polarization-Poll.pdf.

128   "Our Precarious Democracy."

129   "Our Precarious Democracy."

130   Interviews with Respondents #CaTHI23019, May 13, 2024, and #CaTHI23022, May 21, 2024.

V. Solutions

The best available evidence suggests that an increasingly hostile civic space deters the full participation of many otherwise qualified public servants.[131]

We asked our survey and interview respondents about their experience with and preferences for solutions to these issues. We also took our findings to community meetings and built a tracker of legislative and procedural changes intended to protect local elected officials. We use these sources to discuss possible solutions, as well as their practicality and support, below.

In our survey, we asked respondents to indicate whether they supported any of six strategies to mitigate the threats and harassment environment. These strategies included the following:

1. Stricter penalties
2. Introducing or increasing police presence
3. Changes to the Brown Act and board procedures (*please see section C, below, for a detailed discussion on the Brown Act)*
4. Public education or outreach campaigns
5. Training for elected officials
6. Cooperation between boards

Figure VIII shows the percentage of approval for each suggestion across the whole pool of respondents.
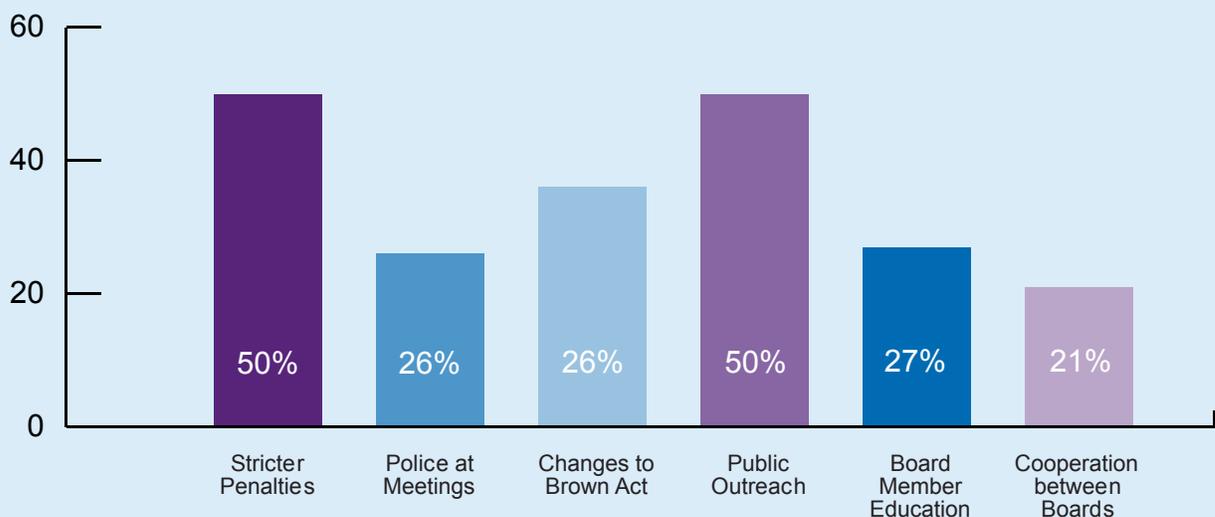
Figure VIII: Respondents' levels of support for specific solutions to threats and harassment

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131   In addition, this threat environment incentivizes other reactions that are also lamentable; one interviewee told us they had purchased a gun to bring to board meetings. Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23002, April 16, 2024.

Only stricter penalties for illegal acts and public outreach even received 50 percent support from respondents. We did notice, however, that many interviewees who expressed skepticism about these solutions became more supportive during the interview process. In many cases it appears that respondents imagined the worst possible implementation of each idea and softened as they thought through options.

A. Stricter Penalties and Stronger Prosecution for Violating Existing Law

One potential way to confront threats and harassment involves enforcing existing laws. Nationally, the statute concerning interstate communication of a threat (18 USC 875 (c)) is increasingly being used to prosecute threats against public officials.[132] Although the federal statute can be utilized, the diversity of charges based on the statute reflects a lack of standardization. Of the cases the Department of Justice has taken with this federal charge, more than 20 percent resulted in either a dismissal or acquittal, which is high when compared to all federal cases.[133] Further, the range of sentencing varies considerably.[134]

Locally, we see similar variation. In our survey, 50 percent of respondents stated that they supported stricter enforcement of existing laws against threats and harassment.[135] Statewide, CA Penal Code § 71 has been updated to increase the penalty for threats to public officials, making it a crime to threaten, inflict bodily injury on or damage property of public officers or employees, school officials or employees.[136] As of January 2024, CA PC § 71 was amended to increase the penalty of violation.[137] Other penal codes, such as 422[138] and 653,[139] which make it a misdemeanor to threaten an individual or harass someone by phone, also provide legal grounds to prosecute.

However, while these penal codes provide an outline for prosecuting offenses, the line between civil criticism and threatening behavior is imperfectly defined. Both locally and nationally, certain threats may not constitute violations of existing criminal statutes, and first amendment thresholds provide a wide berth for freedom of speech.[140] Further, the use of social media increases the difficulty of identifying individuals cloaking themselves in anonymity. Additionally, some interviewees told us they felt attorneys that work for boards and districts primarily exist to protect the institution rather than any individual under threat.[141]

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132   Pete Simi et al., "Rising Threats to Public Officials: A Review of 10 Years of Federal Data," CTC Sentinel 17, no. 5 (May 2024), https://ctc.westpoint.edu/rising-threats-to-public-officials-a-review-of-10-years-of-federal-data/.
133   Simi et al., "Rising Threats."
134   Simi et al., "Rising Threats."
135   Including 60 percent of women, 47 percent of men, 54 percent of whites and 49 percent of non-whites.
136   See Appendix A: Legislation Tracker.
137   See Appendix A: Legislation Tracker.
138   See Appendix A: Legislation Tracker.
139   See Appendix A: Legislation Tracker.
140   Simi et al., "Rising Threats."
141   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23012, May 2, 2024.

In 2021, the Department of Justice (DOJ) responded to increasing threats towards election workers and created an Elections Threats Task Force to investigate and prosecute harassment and threats of violence against election workers.[142] The Task Force includes the Criminal, Civil Rights and National Security Divisions of the DOJ and the Department of Homeland Security. It partners with the U.S. Attorneys' Offices and FBI field offices as well as state and local officials. Since its creation, the Task Force has prosecuted 20 cases. A large majority of the reported threats could not be prosecuted, however, as they did not rise to the Supreme Court's standards for a "true threat."[143] Election workers are of course not the same category as elected officials, but lessons from this Task Force are instructive nonetheless.

Others suggest changes to legislation to make multiple forms of aggression toward elected officials a criminal offense. For example, the Anti-Defamation League's Backspace Hate Campaign argues for regulating online spaces to hold perpetrators of online hate accountable.[144] Another report suggested stronger laws to prevent doxing (the publishing of private, personally identifiable information on the internet without consent).[145] Legislation passed in 2022 by California legislators allows public officials to hide their home addresses from public records if they are concerned about their safety.[146]

In 2023, the California Senate attempted to pass the School Employees Protection Act,[147] which would have amended an existing law to make it a misdemeanor for any person to threaten or harass a school employee during the course of their duties, including school board officials. However, this proposal was vetoed by the governor, as it could be perceived as "stifling parents' voices in the decision making process."[148] Creating stricter penalties requires addressing the tricky balance between free speech and protecting officials.

In order to ensure a separation between legitimate criticism, on the one hand, and harassment or threatening behavior, on the other, all public officials should keep careful records, even of instances that do not go over a legal threshold. This has been a consistent message from both the San Diego City Attorney's Office and the San Diego County District Attorney's Office.

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142   "Justice Department Launches Task Force to Combat Threats Against Election Workers," U.S. Department of Justice, July 29, 2021, https://www.justice.gov/opa/blog/justice-department-launches-task-force-combat-threats-against-election-workers-0.

143   Josh Gerstein, "Justice Department: Crackdown on Threats to Election Officials Won't Relent," *Politico*, March 25, 2024, https://www.politico.com/news/2024/03/25/justice-department-threats-election-officials-00148934.

144   "Backspace Hate: An ADL Initiative," Anti-Defamation League, accessed September 11, 2024, https://www.adl.org/backspace-hate. It bears mentioning that a recent decision by the U.S. Supreme Court limits the ability of public officials to protect themselves online by declaring it against the First Amendment to "block" citizens from viewing their social media feeds. Alexander Nguyen, "Supreme Court Rules on Social Media Case Involving Poway Unified Officials," *KPBS Public Media*, March 15, 2024, https://www.kpbs.org/news/education/2024/03/15/supreme-court-rules-on-social-media-case-involving-poway-unified-officials.

145   Bridging Divides Initiative and the Anti-Defamation League, *Threats and Harassment Against Local Officials Dataset*.

146   Adam Beam, "California Lawmakers OK Bill to Hide Public Worker Addresses," *AP NEWS*, September 1, 2022, https://apnews.com/article/health-california-public-legislature-1523617244f13792bc5e69d93c038ad6.

147   See Appendix A: Legislation Tracker

148   "SB-596 School Employees: Protection," California Legislative Information, accessed September 11, 2024, https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billStatusClient.xhtml?bill_id=202320240SB596.

B. Introduce or Increase Police Presence

In order to increase confidence in their physical security, some have called for increased police presence at public meetings. Such a policy received a modest level of support from survey respondents.[149] A desire for more police presence varied widely in our research.

At our three community conversations in San Diego and Riverside Counties, participants frequently rejected the need or value of additional law enforcement presence at meetings. Yet interviewees largely described police presence at meetings and police investigations of serious incidents in positive terms. Some said that the police chief[150] or officers[151] stationed at public meetings were professional and acted appropriately to defuse situations when necessary. Others said that their board had a "direct line" to city management and the police for support with threats and harassment.[152]

Other evidence suggests local elected officials rely on the police in other ways. Interviewees reported police finding and arresting persistent stalkers, which resulted in elevated police presence at meetings.[153] Others said that police escorts from contentious meetings back to their car made them feel safer.[154] More than 50 percent of survey respondents reported contacting the police in response to threats and harassment, including 70 percent of men and 85 percent of conservatives.

A Legislative Attempt to Increase Security for Political Candidates

In 2023, a proposed bill reflected the desire for increased safety for California assembly members and senators. AB 37 [see Appendix A: Legislation Tracker] was intended to amend the Political Reform Act and would have allowed candidates and elected officials to use campaign funds to protect themselves, their families or their staff, including security personnel. AB 37 would have mirrored sanctioned spending of campaign funds for security at the federal level on the local level. The bill was ultimately vetoed by the governor due to an unclear definition of security expenses, which could lead to expenditures beyond what a donor may expect. Regardless, the drafting of the bill reflects candidates' and officials' experiences with threats and harassment and the corresponding emotional and financial toll these take.

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149   26 percent among all respondents, 33 percent among women, 22 percent among men, 27 percent among whites and 28 percent among non-whites.
150   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23010, April 30, 2024.
151   Interviews with Respondents #CaTHI23005, April 16, 2024, and #CaTHI23002, April 16, 2024.
152   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23005, April 16, 2024.
153   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23011, May 2, 2024.
154   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23015, April 22, 2024.

At the same time, other elected officials noted that a police presence is not always helpful. One interviewee described an altercation at a meeting to which police refused to respond: "The police didn't intervene until things got very much out of hand. They were parked across the street. The board asked the police to come in, the police refused saying that it was a public meeting, even though the agenda was not a public meeting."[155]

Increased police presence also comes with costs. According to a report by the *Washington Post*, candidates running for House and Senate offices increased campaign spending on security by more than 500 percent (from $1.3 million to almost $8 million) between the 2020 election and the 2022 midterms. House members' spending on security for their offices increased from $675,000 in 2020 to $1.2 million in 2022.[156] Among those who spent the most on security in 2021 were Sen. Raphael Warnock (D-GA, $600,00) and Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX, $364,000).[157] Within the first three months of 2021, Congressional campaigns and political parties spent more on security than they had during the entire course of 2017 — $2.6 million versus $2 million.[158]

Local respondents noted that, in some cases, they were spending their own funds on increasing security at their private residences, including video cameras and ring doorbells. Two who had restraining orders issued noted the extensive time and cost required to pursue these protection measures.

155   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23022, May 21, 2024.
156   G. Morton et al., "Lawmakers Are Spending Way More to Keep Themselves Safe. Is It Enough?" *The Washington Post*, September 18, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/09/18/congress-security-spending-violence-threats/
157   Russ Choma and Sinduja Rangarajan, "Members of Congress Are Spending More Than Ever on Security," *Mother Jones*, June 29, 2021, https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2021/06/members-of-congress-are-spending-more-than-ever-on-security/.
158   Lachlan Markay, "How Much Members of Congress are Spending on Personal Security," *Axios*, February 15, 2022, https://www.axios.com/2022/02/16/congress-spending-personal-security.

C.   Changes to the Brown Act or Board Procedures

The rules governing how public entities engage with the public may themselves be problematic. About 36 percent of survey respondents supported changing board procedures.[159] Some boards are making efforts to manage and regulate public commentary. For example, the San Diego County Board of Supervisors procedure states that no person shall address the board without the permission of the chairperson and that the chairperson may limit the time individuals comment if there are more than ten people waiting to speak.[160] In January 2024, the Board of Supervisors considered and then rejected a rule change that would further limit the amount of time each member of the public had to speak at meetings.[161] Despite attempts at regulation, a 2024 report by San Diego media outlet KBPS highlights the continued increase in the volume of threats during public comment sessions.[162]

While we cannot possibly anticipate the number of ways communities might enact new procedures, many suggestions relate to the specifics of California's Brown Act. The Brown Act was enacted in 1953 to guarantee the public's right to attend and participate in meetings of local legislative bodies and as a response to growing concerns about local government officials' practice of holding secret meetings.[163] The Brown Act defines the type of "meetings" it governs and lays out requirements for these meetings to allow for public participation.[164] Modeled after the Brown Act, the 1967 Bagley-Keene Act applies the same right to state-level boards, committees and commissions.[165] Both acts are intended to increase public participation in local meetings, provide a platform for the public to hold officials accountable, and increase important civil discourse. While originating from positive intent, both Acts are decades old and, some would say, insufficiently adapted to the present day.

With videoconferencing options expanding hugely during the COVID-19 pandemic, some legislative proposals seek to amend the Brown and Bagley Keene Acts to allow for virtual meeting spaces, in part addressing accessibility needs and physical safety.[166] Although shifting meeting spaces online may be seen as a small change, dynamics are impacted significantly when a meeting is held online versus in person, and proposals to institutionalize online meetings have prompted considerable pushback.

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159   Including 40 percent of women, 34 percent of men, 40 percent of whites and 34 percent of non-whites.
160   "Board of Supervisors Rules of Procedure," San Diego County Board of Supervisors, accessed September 11, 2024, https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/sdc/bos/boardrules.html.
161   "San Diego Board of Supervisors Rejects Plan to Change Public-Comment Rules," *NBC News*, January 9, 2024, https://www.nbcsandiego.com/local/county-board-rejects-plan-to-change-public-comment-rules/3400188/.
162   Sharma, "Threats, Profanity, Accusations Skyrocketing."
163   California Government Code § 54950.
164   For example, boards must allow the public to make "unobtrusive" recordings of the meeting, cannot charge an entry fee, and must allow for public comment.
165   See Appendix A: Legislation Tracker.
166   See Appendix A: Legislation Tracker.

In our interviews and conversations, many emphasized the impracticality of allowing every member of the public to have a full voice in meetings. One interviewee remarked to us that school board meetings had gone from one hour long to, in many cases, six.[167] One elected official from out of state who was not in our survey but heard about the research remarked, "I don't need them to stop speaking; they can stand outside city hall and protest all they want… but you can't force me to sit there and listen forever."[168]

While it may not address the volume of threats and harassment, training to respond to disruptions at meetings may provide officials with the tools necessary to conduct meetings despite legislative challenges. For example, the Anti-Defamation League Center on Extremism provides a two-pager toolkit for officials, suggesting practices such as creating sign-ins for meetings, holding to time restrictions, making time for written comments, and establishing clear rules of removal.[169] Furthermore, the toolkit also makes suggestions for how to respond when disruptions occur, discussing communication best practices.[170] We have gathered a few similar resources that may provide officials with ways to regulate board procedure around responding to disruptions. (See Appendix B: Toolkit Tracker.)

D. Public Outreach and Education

The rise of misinformation and disinformation and the propagation of conspiracy theories and extremist ideologies through social media, coupled with the decline of local news coverage and investigative reporting, have all made it more difficult for people to access verified and objective news and information. In every community conversation, we heard support for increased public education on civics, civility and the role of school boards and city councils. Fifty percent of respondents supported the idea of more public outreach and awareness-raising, including 58 percent of women.

Interviewees identified specific, promising opportunities within this broader solution. One said that community members should learn "how we can have better government for everyone" as well as what "elements… make for good dialogue, debate and participation" and how to "set ground rules."[171] Another noted that many of the aggressive tactics "do not get the point across to your board … [education could include training on] how do you effectively communicate with your board."[172]

Further, often the public lacks awareness regarding the precise jurisdiction of elected officials, resulting in animosity directed at school board members or city councilmembers for policies enacted at the state level.

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167   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23010, April 30, 2024.
168   Private conversation with elected official, St. Paul, Minnesota.
169   "Toolkit for Responding to Extremist Disruptions at Public Meetings," Anti-Defamation League, August 2023, https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/2023-08/ADL-COE-City-Council-Recommendations.pdf.
170   "Toolkit for Responding to Extremist Disruptions."
171   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23019, May 13, 2024.
172   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23006, April 24, 2024.

Education programs could take any number of forms, from modules in civics courses about local government to interventions suggested to internet users who search certain terms or make certain comments on social media. The Australian government has a program called eSafety, the first-ever independent regulator dedicated to protecting people online. ESafety uses an international network of organizations, civil society institutions and the private sector to deter online abusers as well as hold them accountable.[173] Other education programs may focus on improving civil discourse, such as the National Governors Association initiative "Disagree Better," which models ways of holding debates in a civil way.[174] For further resources and training, see our compiled toolkit in Appendix B.

173   Ladyane Souza et al., "Viewpoint: Protecting Women Politicians from Online Abuse," *Political Violence at a Glance*, March 9, 2023, https://politicalviolenceataglance.org/2023/03/09/viewpoint-protecting-women-politicians-from-online-abuse/.

174   "Disagree Better," National Governors Association, accessed September 11, 2024, https://www.nga.org/disagree-better/.

E. Training and Cooperation between Local Elected Officials

Boards and board members could also engage in a variety of trainings or cooperative activities designed to help them deal with threats and harassment more effectively. Examples might include preparedness planning, training in de-escalation, enhanced data collection and sharing, or collective representation of their needs to law enforcement or other agencies. The National League of Cities research found that three out of five of the local officials surveyed indicated that their office did not have a formal action plan in place to respond to threats against officials.[175]

California State Senate Bill 553 may provide an opportunity. In effect as of July 2024, the bill will require further steps to respond to workplace violence, including an effective workplace violence prevention plan, the implementation of incident logs, and trainings for employees on violence prevention strategies.[176] Under the bill, restraining orders will be authorized for acts of violence or threats of violence beginning in 2025.[177] However, there is no clear indication as to how these regulations will be implemented for local meeting spaces, and they may apply to cases of threats against and harassment of officials.

Survey respondents had a relatively tepid response to the prospect of providing training or education to boards (with 27 percent support)[178] and to increased cooperation between elected officials (with 21 percent support).[179] Yet, when interviewees were asked about these solutions, most made suggestions about training they would like to see or praised efforts already underway. One interviewee praised videos created by the California Secretary of State that their board watches every other year but said that they would welcome more training, specifically noting, "There isn't a library of these resources."[180] Some interviewees emphasized that training might help mitigate abusive conduct between board members themselves.[181]

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175   Anthony et al., *On the Frontlines of Today's Cities*.
176   See Appendix A: Legislation Tracker.
177   See Appendix A: Legislation Tracker.
178   Including 38 percent among women, 20 percent among men, 24 percent among whites and 35 percent among non-whites.
179   Including 33 percent among women, 12 percent among men, 18 percent among whites and 26 percent among non-whites.
180   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23019, May 13, 2024.
181   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23016, April 18, 2024.

The National League of Cities and the California School Board Association (CSBA) offer some options that fit these needs, although some interviewees remarked that finding CSBA support materials was difficult.[182] Some councilmembers indicated that video training about handling confrontation should be distinct from required learning programs about sexual harassment and other workplace safety topics. [183]

To the north, the Coalition of Oregon School Administrators provides members access to resources aimed at preparing officials for engaging the community in divisive conversations and mitigating harms.[184] Members of the Coalition recently authored the *Call to Courage,[185]* which is aimed at providing strategies for community members and educators to meaningfully engage in conversation. In Appendix B we have compiled a list of similar resources for local officials that may provide guidance on developing a well-rounded training program.

The trainings described above are primarily oriented around the challenge of elected officials facing a hostile public. And, while the majority of threats and harassment do come from the public, a considerable number are coming from other elected officials, whether peers on a board or even members of one's own political party. Ten of our 22 interviewees mentioned that threats or harassment came from colleagues on their board at least once.

Many interviewees also recounted instances in which colleagues supported and defended each other, even across party lines.[186] A 2024 report from the Brennan Center for Justice that examined threats and harassment of local and state officeholders recommended bystander intervention training to ensure officeholders directly condemn the abuses they and their colleagues face.[187] To resist a culture of violence, it is important that colleagues continue to support and defend each other amid rising levels of threats and harassment.

Violent rhetoric from officials contributes to the mainstreaming of violent behavior.[188] The threat or use of violence as a political tool among both supporters and candidates crosses a threshold of civility, jeopardizing individual safety and what should be a modicum of respect between constituents and elected officials and among elected officials themselves. By contrast, holding officials accountable in a respectful way sets a standard of decorum for constituents and enables constructive debate to proceed with the core duty of legislation.

182   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23012, May 2, 2024.
183   Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23006, April 24, 2024.
184   "Resources," Coalition of Oregon School Administrators, accessed September 11, 2024, https://www.cosa.k12. or.us/resources.
185   Sheldon Berman and Luvelle Brown, *The Call to Courage: Sanding Up and Speaking Out against the Assaults on Democracy, Educators, and Students in America's Schools* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2024), https://rowman. com/ISBN/9781538196762/The-Call-to-Courage-Standing-Up-and-Speaking-Out-Against-the-Assaults-on-Democracy-Educators-and-Students-in-America's-Schools.
186   Interviews with Respondents #CaTHI23010, April 30, 2024, and #CaTHI23006.
187   Ramachandran et al., *Intimidation of State and Local Officeholders*.
188   Kleinfeld, "The Rise in Political Violence in the United States."

VI. Conclusion

It is clear that local elected officials in Southern California face a variety of threatening and harassing behaviors, in addition to other forms of intimidation and incivility. It is also clear that the vitriol currently observed at all levels of our governing systems is pervasive, impacting individuals and institutions, the process of legislating, practices of civic engagement and more. Given its ubiquity and frequency, we observed an internalization of such behavior by elected officials who tend to accept threats and harassment as the cost of engaging in politics and acknowledge that such abuse should be expected.

Indeed, many Americans respond to discussions of incivility in local politics by arguing that public servants should "toughen up" or "grow thicker skin," something we also heard in conducting our research. Our research suggests, however, that this framing harms the wellbeing of our representatives and the spirit and functioning of local participatory democracy. By accepting this behavior, we remove expectations of civil civic engagement that follows due process, mutual accountability and respect. Normalizing the deterioration of democracy is exceptionally cynical; we believe that the majority of Americans and residents of Southern California are not, in fact, so cynical but rather are unaware of the depth of the problem.

Local democracy benefits from public service being a pro-social experience. Most of the elected officials in our sample serve as volunteers or for very low pay.[189] They trade their time in public service against work obligations or time with family and friends. Appealing to these officials to "toughen up" is tantamount to asking a person with multiple options for their free time to choose the one that is increasingly unpleasant and dangerous.

Officials with power should not be exempt from criticism regardless of remuneration. Nor, however, should they — or their loved ones — be abused, harassed or attacked. The pressure to accept this uncivil and aggressive behavior, coupled with a lack of awareness of the scope of the problem, places great emotional and physical strain on public servants, which, in turn, undermines the capacity of our collective decision-making. In times of uncertainty, it is crucial to protect and preserve the tools of local democracy that have seen us through — and perhaps to go even further, to reinforce them to weather and withstand threats and risks.

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189   One interviewee broke down the budget specifically and showed that they paid more for childcare during meetings than they earned through their board position's salary (Interview with Respondent #CaTHI23002, April 16, 2024).

Appendix A: Legislation Tracker

In the course of this research, the California Threats and Harassment Initiative team found that certain policy and legislative positions contributed to disagreements and contention between groups at the local level. The research team noted that certain bills were the focal point of debates about school curricula and other culture war issues (for example, AB 1955 and AB 1314, below). Understanding their proponents and detractors provides more robust insight into the ecosystem in which threats and harassment exist. Additionally, legislative efforts to curtail threats and harassment that include criminal codes to penalize perpetrators and hold them accountable, as well as proposals to enhance funding for the protection of candidates, staff and their families give an indication to how the issue is framed and could be addressed. Finally, two proposed bills exploring enhancing financial support for local media provide further context for our brief discussion on the links between local news and democracy. Not all these bills listed below have been chaptered, but they are nonetheless included to offer insight into the positions on, perceptions of and responses to issues linked to drivers of threats and harassment, including school curricula, parental rights, public meeting transparency and the role of the media.

These brief summaries of the bills — their purpose as well as their proponents and detractors — can be considered scaffolding that connects the local context in Southern California to polarizing initiatives at the state level with implications for politicians, nonprofits and other interest groups and stakeholders.

Legislation Related to Education Issues, Sex Education and Parental Rights

Bill Number	Bill Name/ Description	Status	Sponsors	Stakeholder Commentary
SB 48	**Fair, Accurate, Inclusive, and Respectful (FAIR) Education Act.** Requires school districts to include instruction about the role and contributions of people with disabilities; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Americans; and other ethnic and cultural groups. The act prohibits teachers and school districts from promoting discriminatory bias, and it requires districts to adopt textbooks and instructional materials that accurately portray the above groups.	Chaptered 201	Senator Mark Leno (D) (Retired)	SB 48 is the basis of an amicus brief filed by Attorney General Bonta in *Mae v. Komrosky,* a lawsuit in response to Temecula Valley Unified School District's Board Resolution 21, which aimed to prohibit the teaching of "critical race theory," and their policy on parental notification. A.G. Bonta noted that Resolution 21 violates the curriculum and antidiscrimination requirements of the Education Code under the FAIR Act.

Bill Number	Bill Name/ Description	Status	Sponsors	Stakeholder Commentary
AB 1078	**Instructional materials and curriculum.** AB 1078 amended the education code to require that the State Board of Education consider the representation of underrepresented groups, including but not limited to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and ability, in all textbooks used in the state's public schools. The bill establishes a review process for the selection and approval of books. By July 1, 2025, guidance and public educational materials will be developed to ensure that all Californians can access information about educational laws and policies that safeguard the right to an accurate and inclusive curriculum.	Chaptered 2023	Assembly-member Dr. Corey Jackson (D-Riverside) (see website post on AB 1078) Co-sponsor Tony Thurmond (State	The California School Boards Association released a fact sheet to guide local boards on AB 1078 and advise best practices for implementation. The Orange County Board of Education considers the bill to be an unnecessary burden on school boards, noting that local school boards should be responsible for curriculums and books, as the entities "most closely affected by these decisions" (recorded in the Assembly floor analysis). Jen Wiersma, a Temecula Valley Unified Board Member, writes in the *California Globe* that the bill seeks to limit the authority and autonomy of local school boards. In another article, the *California Globe* voices concerns that this bill works to demonize groups opposed to "overly sexualized" materials and is part of an anti-Christian White Nationalist agenda.

Bill Number	Bill Name/ Description	Status	Sponsors	Stakeholder Commentary
AB 329	**Amending the Healthy Youth Act.** Requires comprehensive sexual health education and HIV prevention education (grades 7-12),* and must be medically accurate and age appropriate. Parents/ guardians hold the right to "opt-out" of education. *A school district may provide age-appropriate education prior to grade 7.	Chaptered 2016	Dr. Shirley Weber (now Secretary of State) Assembly-member Cristina Garcia (D-Riverside)	Church United cites the bill as the catalyst for the development of graphic curricula. They describe the passage of the bill as a driver for Protect Our Kids conferences. Pastor Jim Domen suggests that AB 329, in concert with the FAIR Act and other legislation is part of a progressive agenda that indoctrinates children to the "LGBT worldview." The California Women's Law Center supported AB 329 as a means to strengthen HIV prevention and comprehensive and inclusive sex education and to improve student outcomes. The Our Family Coalition, a nonprofit supporting LGBTQ youth and families, was a vocal supporter as well.

Bill Number	Bill Name/ Description	Status	Sponsors	Stakeholder Commentary
AB 101	**Pupil Instruction.** This amendment to the Education Code added one semester of ethnic studies as a requirement for high school graduation from public and charter schools. A model of the curriculum can be found here. This is a first-in-the-nation requirement.	Chaptered 2021 (students in the class of 2030 will be required to take this course)	Assembly-member Jose Medina (D-Riverside), Chair, Assembly Committee on Higher Education	The California Teachers Association supported AB 101 as a landmark piece of legislation that will "have positive effects for all students," noting that ethnic studies is a crucial part of creating well-rounded students. The Editor in Chief of the *California Globe* viewed the legislation as a way to "radicalize and indoctrinate students." Other concerns related to an earlier version of the bill were related to its potential antisemitism. Tammi Rossman-Benjamin (co-founder of the AMCHA Initiative) stated, "While certainly not all in the ethnic studies field fall into this category, there is a vocal and active faction of extremists who have long been seeking to inject their antisemitic and anti-Zionist agenda into our nation's classrooms, and today that faction succeeded."

Bill Number	Bill Name/ Description	Status	Sponsors	Stakeholder Commentary
AB 1955	**Support Academic Futures and Educators for Today's Youth Act**. This bill expands support for LGBTQ families and students, and requires the State Department of Education to develop resources to support families, parents andguardians of LGBTQ pupils. The bill prohibits schools from requiring parental notification regarding changes to their child's gender identity or gender expression without the pupil's consent.	Chaptered 2024	Assembly-member Chris Ward (D-San Diego) Opposed by Rep. Essayli who had introduced AB 1314 on parental rights	The legislation is in response to the more than a dozen California school boards that proposed or passed parental notification policies in just over a year. The law reveals partisan fissures, with Democrats voting in favor and Republican lawmakers opposing the state's purview over school district's enforcement of parental notification policies, noting that schools must be transparent. The California Family Council views the bill as an attempt to create "a wall between the parent and child" and sees it as a way to marginalize parental voices. The Council calls on parents to take action against AB 1955. Texas-based Liberty Justice Center filed a lawsuit challenging the new law on behalf of Chino Valley Unified School District.

Bill Number	Bill Name/ Description	Status	Sponsors	Stakeholder Commentary
AB 1314	**Gender identity, parental notification.** A bill on parental notification, which would give a parent or guardian the right to be notified in writing within three days from the date any teacher, counselor or employee of the school becomes aware that a pupil is identifying at school as a gender that does not align with the child's sex on their birth certificate, other official records or sex assigned at birth.	Inactive as of 2023	Assembly Members Bill Essayli (R-Riverside), James Gallagher	The parental notification issue has been at the center of a number of school board debates and arguments. Assembly Education Committee Chair Al Muratsuchi (D-Torrance) did not allow a hearing on the bill, due to its potential to increase "hateful rhetoric" against LGBTQ youth. The California Legislative LGBTQ Caucus supported this decision. Framed as parental rights versus children's privacy rights; the bill aligned with California's laws protecting students from potential abuse at home. This conflicts with the 14th Amendment, which defers to parents on their children's education and upbringing. For more see: KPBS. The National Center for Law and Policy (NCLP) drafted a letter in support of parent notification policies, noting that "[w]ithholding vital information from parents teaches children a horrible lesson: that it is acceptable to not tell the truth and conceal important information from their parents or legal guardians." While the bill died in early 2024, Rep. Essayli has since drafted model board policy for school boards to pursue

Legislative "Solutions" to Threats and Harassment of Elected Officials

Changes to the Brown Act or Board Procedure

Bill Number	Bill Name/ Description	Status	Sponsors	Stakeholder Commentary
Gov. Code § 54950 (2003 guidelines from Attorney General Bill Lockyer)	**The Brown Act: Open meetings law.** Designed to guarantee the public's right to attend and participate in meetings of local legislative bodies (county and local level). This also includes advanced notice of the meetings and spaces.	Enacted in 1953	Speaker Ralph M. Brown (D) Key partners: the League of California Cities, the California Newspaper Publishers Association	A major spur for the Brown Act were the *San Francisco Chronicle* articles, "Your Secret Government that Exposed 'Secret' Local Meetings." (For more see League of California Cities Guide.) 2003 First Amendment Center opinion piece (on the 50-year anniversary of the Brown Act): "But supporters say it still lacks one thing: teeth. What's more, they say the law has been eroded by court decisions and government officials' efforts to block access to records." California's First Amendment Coalition provides a detailed primer on the Brown Act.

Bill Number	Bill Name/ Description	Status	Sponsors	Stakeholder Commentary
Gov. Code § 11120 (2023 guide from the California DOJ)	**The Bagley-Keene Open Meetings Act Open meetings**. The act is modeled after the Brown Act but applies to state boards, committees and commissions. The act allows for members of the public to directly address the state body on each agenda item (agendas are considered public records). But this does not apply to the California State Legislature.	Enacted in 1967	—	The *California Globe* posted a general article on Frequently Asked Questions about the Act. California's First Amendment Coalition also provides a page dedicated to the Bagley-Keene Open Meetings Act.
SB 544	**Teleconferencing.** The bill seeks to amend Bagley-Keene to allow for remote meetings (making COVID-19 practices permanent). The bill removes the requirement to notify the public of all teleconferencing locations (would only be required to post the location of one physical site).	Chaptered 2023	John Laird (D-Santa Cruz)	The California Privacy Protection Agency supported the bill as a means to increase participation and transparency of government proceedings. The opposition argues that virtual meetings seek to restrict public participation in government meetings and decrease transparency of civil government.

Bill Number	Bill Name/ Description	Status	Sponsors	Stakeholder Commentary
SB 411	**Open meetings.** The bill authorizes a local legislative body in the city of Los Angeles to have a virtual option (until January 2026) without meeting all of the requirements of the Brown Act.		Senator Anthony Portantino (D-San Fernando Valley) Sponsor: Streets for All	The coalition in support (including sponsor Streets for All) writes, "Virtual meetings have allowed much easier access to appointed or elected bodies of local agencies," increasing public participation and reducing traffic. The coalition in opposition (including the First Amendment Coalition) write "SB 411's rewriting of the Brown Act, while tailored to Los Angeles neighborhood councils, would set a dangerous precedent of carving out a category of bodies from the law's key protections for public access and participation." They note the importance of the physical presence of the press and public as a "hallmark of democratic institutions" (recorded in the Senate floor bill analysis).

Bill Number	Bill Name/ Description	Status	Sponsors	Stakeholder Commentary
AB 817	**Open meetings.** The bill would authorize certain legislative bodies to utilize teleconferencing options for meetings (while still maintaining the requirements of being open to the public).	Under	Assembly-member Blanca Pacheco (D-Downey)	A coalition in support (including the League for California Cities) wrote that AB 817 would provide access for "individuals who could not otherwise accommodate the time, distance, or mandatory physical participation requirements to engage locally" (recorded in the Assembly floor bill analysis). A strong opposition group, the First Amendment Coalition, views AB 817 as a threat to open meeting protections, as it "would reduce transparency and accountability" (see their letter in opposition).

Penal Codes: Stricter Penalties and Stronger Prosecution for Threats or Harassment

Bill Number	Bill Name/Description	Status	Sponsors	Stakeholder Commentary
California Penal Code 71	**Threatening Public Employees, Public Officers, School Employees or Officers** Makes it a crime to threaten to inflict bodily injury or property damage upon public officers, public employees, or school officials or employees. Violating PC 71 can be prosecuted as a felony or a misdemeanor carrying incarceration and/or up to $10,000 in fines.* SB 71 increased the limits of small claims action to 12,500 per claim.		Senator Tom Umberg, (D-Santa Ana) and Co-sponsor, Assembly-member Bill Essayli	—
California Penal Code 422	**Criminal Threats Law** Makes it a crime to threaten someone with violence or harm. The threat does not have to be carried out but must be immediate and cause reasonable fear of safety. The charge can be either a felony or a misdemeanor offense.	—-	—-	—
California Penal Code 653m	Makes it a crime to harass or call a person with intent to annoy or to threaten an individual by means of electronic communication.	—	—	—

Bill Number	Bill Name/Description	Status	Sponsors	Stakeholder Commentary
SB 596	**School employees, protection.** This act would amend existing law to make it a misdemeanor for any "person to threaten or harass a school employee during the course of duties."	Vetoed 2024	State Sen. Anthony Portantino (D-Glendale)	Many opposition groups viewed AB 596 as a way to "criminalize parents" for speaking up in places such as school board meetings (see *California Globe article*, list of "threatening bills" from the California Policy Center, Gender and Our Children, and *California Catholic Daily*). The California Teachers Association writes, "Our members believe school employees should be safe from aggressive and violent behaviors as well as physical, verbal, and psychological abuse… efforts benefit the school community by impacting teacher retention and ensuring appropriate conduct." (Recorded in the Senate floor bill analysis.) Governor Newsom's veto justification: These acts can already be prosecuted as crimes, and "we need to be cautious about exacerbating tensions (with) laws that can be perceived as stifling parents' voices... We don't need more gas on this fire — we need more grace, more respectful conversations… especially for those with whom we disagree."

Bill Number	Bill Name/Description	Status	Sponsors	Stakeholder Commentary
AB 37	**Campaign funds, security expenses.** AB 37 extends the use of campaign funds for candidates and elected officials to use for the protection of themselves, their families or their staff in the face of a (potential) threat to a candidate or elected officer in the course of their public duties or activities. AB 37 will mirror what is currently allowed on the federal level.	Vetoed and veto stricken from file, 2024	Assembly-member Mia Bonta (D-Oakland) Senator Scott Weiner (D-San Francisco) co-sponsor	As threats and harassment impact elected officials and candidates for office, more federal funds have been dedicated to their protection. This bill was vetoed based on the definition of "security related expenses." The *California Globe* posted a short article on the vetoing of AB 37, citing the rise in threats against elected officials as the necessitating force behind the bill. The bill was initially vetoed for its lack of clearly defining security expenses and to ensure campaign funds were used in accordance with their intended purpose.

Protecting Journalism and Local Media

Bill Number	Bill Name/Description	Status	Sponsors	Stakeholder Commentary
SB 1327	**Income taxation, credits, local news media, data extraction transactions.** This bill would impose a tax upon "gross receipts derived from data extraction" to help support the production of local news.* *Current version: Fund would be directed for journalism fellowships and grants.	In committee 2024	Senator Steve Glazer (D-Orinda)	SB 1327 "creates a modern financial framework to ensure that newsrooms keep citizens informed and democracy accountable to the people" (Senate floor analysis) and is a response to the loss of journalist jobs and decline in print circulation and news rooms.[190] The fee would be imposed on large tech companies extracting user data, to subsidize local journalist's wages. Opponents see the bill as an attack on business, saying that the bill "reinforces the perception that California is an arbitrary and difficult place in which to do business." (See CalChamber opinion.)
AB 886	**California Journalism Preservation Act.** Would require digital platforms to pay a fee to news outlets when using their content and selling advertising.	Re-referred August 2024	Assembly-member Buff Wicks (D-Oakland) California News Publishers Association (co-sponsor)	Despite the well-understood impact of the loss of local media, and legislative efforts to protect it, the legislation was recently shelved and replaced with a public-private partnership between the state and Google. The agreement commits $250 million (¾ from Google, ¼ from taxpayers) over five years. Money will fund California news outlets and research into an artificial intelligence accelerator, to explore how technology can bolster local journalism. UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism will administer the fund.

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190   Since 2004, California has lost 68 percent of journalists, as well as 25 percent of its newspapers; total print news circulation has dropped more than 50 percent. The Nieman Lab.

Appendix B: Toolkit Tracker

The following appendix is provided to introduce readers to the landscape of potential resources that may be accessed to intervene in, address, mitigate and reverse growing polarization and incivility. The Violence Inequality and Power Lab does not endorse any specific approach or intervention but rather provides this list to help interested parties explore the scope of organizations and opportunities working on mitigating threats and harassment.

Civil Discourse Resources

Resource	Description	Target Audience	Goals	Format
Bridging Differences Playbook

UC Berkeley Greater Good Science Center | Identifies skills and practices to bridge differences between groups. | Various groups of people. | To find ways to mediate, connect and understand in conversation. | Guidebook with list of skills and strategies. |
| Digital Civics Toolkit

Civic Engagement Research Group, UC Riverside | Conducts research, develops resources and engages in education reform efforts that promote equitable, informed and effective youth civic and political participation both in person and online. | Primarily students and teachers or those in the education system. | To improve understanding of civic duty, political participation and discerning facts from dis/ misinformation. | Research reports that examine quantity, quality and equality of civic opportunities and outcomes in public schools. |
| The Call to Courage and various other toolkits and guides

Coalition of Oregon School Administrators | Provides legal and toolkit resources for members with the intention of preparing administrators to deal with challenging conversations.

The Call to Courage is a book discussing how to promote civic discourse in education spaces. | School boards and administrators. | To prepare school boards/ administrators prior to engaging the community in difficult/divisive conversations, mitigating the potential of harm. | Brief resources with approaches to challenging conversations, media engagement techniques and communication tips. |

Resource	Description	Target Audience	Goals	Format
Harnessing our Power to End Political Violence (HOPE-PV) *Horizons Project & 22nd Century Initiative*	Explores political violence — the tactics, strategies and actors — and potential and proven mitigating responses. Particular focus on backfire principles.	Individuals, communities.	To encourage all groups and individuals to engage in mitigating and ending political violence.	A report offering guidance on applying the five backfire principles in the current U.S. context. Addresses topics such as planning tactics, developing effective messaging, and finding allies.
Mapping Civic Measurement *Institute for Citizens and Scholars*	Explores how to effectively engage citizens in building a stronger democracy. Provides tools and a framework for civic readiness and opportunity, particularly for youth. Assesses the state of civic space and measures civic capacity for engagement.	Citizens and practitioners in education, business, philanthropy, community institutions, media, government and civil society aiming to "engage the civic space."	To provide a platform for and encourage an engaged citizenry to contribute to a stronger democracy	A report examining four measures of civic readiness — understand, believe, connect, participate — and correlated tools to heighten awareness around civic engagement opportunities.
T.I.E.R.S. Public Engagement Framework and sample civility policies *Institute for Local Government (non-profit sector of League of California Cities)*	Provides a step-by-step training approach to public engagement at any level. Includes sample civility guides and codes of conduct for different cities that could lead to policy change.	Local government officials.	To improve civil discourse and community engagement in local government for more collaborative and inclusive policy processes.	A framework outlining a three-step process including public engagement assessment, approach and community landscape assessment. Examples of policy changes and toolkits for engagement.

Resource	Description	Target Audience	Goals	Format
Story Exchange and Civic Engagement *Narrative 4*	Discusses how to utilize storytelling to build empathy, for improved understanding and collaboration. In addition, a civic engagement practice to build connection between schools and their communities on shared priorities.	Teachers, youth, community groups and classrooms.	To build empathy, a culture of inclusivity and understanding through storytelling.	A training provided on facilitation (virtual).
Disagree Better Initiative *National Governors Association*	Examines the problems of hyper-partisanship and polarization and offers examples of how to discuss and debate issues of disagreement.	Politicians, community members.	To engage in more productive debates that address and deal with extremist conflict.	Resources and videos that showcase solutions. Through public debates, service projects, public service announcements and a variety of other tactics, citizens will see a more positive and optimistic way of working through problems.
The Better Arguments Project *The Better Arguments Project*	Outlines three dimensions and five principles for improved arguments, one of which is recognizing the power dynamics in an argument and how to redistribute that power.	Community leaders, students, politicians.	To improve civil discourse and work out contentious issues rather than avoid them.	Trainings, methods, toolkits, exercises and guides including for facilitation.
Building Trust Through Civil Discourse *National Institute for Civil Discourse, University of Arizona*	Facilitates workshops that aim to promote bipartisan collaboration and democratic processes.	Local officials.	To improve civil discourse and collaboration within and from public offices.	Workshops and facilitator trainings.

Violence, Inequality and Power Lab

Resource	Description	Target Audience	Goals	Format
Facilitated Dialogue Program *Department of Justice*	Opens lines of communication and develops collaboration across groups of difference through the work of its conciliation specialists.	Community members, organizations, institutions, faith-based entities.	To develop collaboration so communities can produce action plans to address issues.	Facilitated dialogue services and workshops over a few months led by a DOJ Community Relations Specialist. Sessions can be pre-structured or customizable.
Civility Workshops *The Civility Project*	Aims to bring civility to political discourse through day-long or hour-long workshops that encourage "healthy disagreement."	Community members or community leaders.	To foster collaboration across political divides, increase constructive conversations, and create positive personal interactions.	Small group workshops facilitated by a civility project leader.
Partnering Against Hate *Interfaith Alliance*	Promotes safer and more inclusive communities to combat hate, through the use of self-guided toolkits for engaging in interfaith dialogues and creating conversation around political issues.	Religious leaders and individuals.	To help guide faith-based groups and leaders to promote inclusivity and reduce hate speech and crimes.	Reflections and toolkits, mapping potential for community partnerships to collaborate.

Resources for Regulating Meeting Spaces

Resource	Description	Target Audience	Goals	Format
Toolkit for Responding to Extremist Disruptions at Meetings *Anti-Defamation League Center on Extremism*	Provides suggested actions officials can take to moderate public meetings, protect themselves and control disruptive extremist narratives and actions.	Public officials and community members. *(Includes one paragraph for how community members can counter hateful speech and contribute to counter speech.)*	To increase official preparedness for disruptions in meetings and to establish rules that may prevent extremist disruptions. Suggests the following guidelines: sign-in/ID; time restrictions; written comments; rules of removal; meeting prep; constructive responses; communication practice.	Brief two-pager of tips on how to prepare for, conduct and manage public meetings.
Message for Trust and other resources *Partnership for Public Service*	Provides various training and tools for public service leadership to re-establish trust in government institutions through improved communication strategies.	Local officials and board leaders.	To build trust between office holders and community members, offers training and guidance on how to improve civil service and improve peoples' understanding and trust in government workers.	Two-pagers and toolkits and a website dedicated to educational resources.
Empowered Governance Framework and Policy Toolkit *School Board Partners*	Promotes functionality of school boards and board meetings through providing policy toolkits and guidelines.	School board members, teachers, students and administrators.	To create functioning school boards that promote equity and 'kids first' policies, focusing on equitable budgeting, community engagement and board transparency.	A guiding framework, 35+ model policies, case studies, research and practices for board members. Some models limited to members only.
Safe and Welcoming Public Meetings to Bridge Divides: School Board Model Policy *Partnership for the Future of Learning*	This resource provides a model policy template for local school boards to promote inclusive public participation and student representation in meetings.	School board members, local school officials.	To help school boards create more inclusive, safe, and participatory public meetings. The policy aims to increase student involvement, ensure fair public comment opportunities, and foster ongoing community engagement in local governance.	A detailed model policy template with specific procedures.

Resources for Workplace Safety and Preparing for/Responding to Incidents

Resource	Description	Target Audience	Goals	Format
De-escalation, bystander and community safety trainings (by state) *Bridging Divides Initiative*	Identifies various trainings available in each state that focus on community safety, de-escalation and conflict resolution.	Local officials and community members.	To provide access to conflict resolution techniques that promote dialogue and prevent escalation to violence.	Interactive list of trainings and brief guides.
CAL/OSHA Workplace Violence Prevention Guidance and Resources *Occupational Safety and Health Administration of California*	This new bill (SB 553), requires responses to workplace violence (any act of violence or threat of violence in the workplace), including 1) an effective and reviewed workplace violence prevention plan, 2) the implementation of violent incident logs, and 3) training for employees on workplace violence prevention strategies.	All private and public work sectors (but unclear how this may apply to legislative groups or local boards).	To increase the safety of the workplace with a violence prevention plan and to mitigate harms when incidents do occur, by providing tips for employers and employees.	Educational materials, guidelines, planning templates and the law supporting subsequent actions.

Bystander Intervention Training and Hate and Hope Tracker *The Right to Be*	Trains groups and individuals to respond to xenophobic, racist, homophobic or other prejudicial harassment, threats or violence.	Individuals, youth, community members.	To prepare for, prevent and manage a range of harmful situations, including active shooters and online and public harassment.	Guides, workshops and trainings to support bystanders in efforts to counter prejudice, hate speech and bias.

Resources for Online Engagement and Protection

Resource	Description	Target Audience	Goals	Format
Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRL) '360 Digital/ Sherlocks'. *Atlantic Council*	Trains and engages a new generation of online activists, researchers, collaborators to use diverse skills to combat online harms. ,	Students, community members, community leaders, academics, journalists.	To combat dis/ misinformation through the use of open source information by training civil society activists, researchers and academics.	Workshops, training sessions on areas including media literacy, open-source investigative techniques, fact-checking and narrative analysis, social media monitoring.. Hosts informal networking events and on digital governance and tech policy.
Media Literacy Toolkit, 'Knowing the News' *Pen America*	Provides coaching and a guide on best practices for consuming media.	Any individual.	To address and mitigate the spread of disinformation through education.	Trainings on media literacy for the public to identify and prevent the spread of false and misleading information.

Resource	Description	Target Audience	Goals	Format
Online Harassment Field Manual *Pen America*	Provides guidelines for safely countering and rejecting online harassment and misinformation.	Writers and journalists.	To empower and build alliances across the online sphere to prevent and counter hate speech and misinformation and to deescalate abuse.	Guide to safely practice counterspeech online including determining if one should engage at all.
PolitiFact *Poynter Institute*	Provides a quick fact check of social media posts; highlights the ease and regularity of false posts.	Any individual and consumer of online news and information.	To improve media literacy with a quick resource.	Fact-check tool on false claims, dis and mis information online.
Resource	**Description**	**Target Audience**	**Goals**	**Format**
News Ambassadors *Bridge Alliance*	Links journalism students across diverse political and demographic areas to collaborate on stories about contentious issues.	Local newsrooms, journalism students and schools. .	To support the role of media in reporting across political divides, addressing contentious issues without bias and improving understanding across communities.	Specific training for reporters using tools such as conflict mediation and community responsive reporting to enhance journalistic practices.

Backspace Hate Campaign *Anti-Defamation League*	Supports victims and targets of online hate and harassment by raising awareness and passing legislation to better hold perpetrators accountable for their actions online.	Everyday citizens, victims of online hate.	To protect and support online spaces for free speech and inclusivity and to raise awareness of the harms and consequences of online hate.	Educational materials such as steps to mitigate online harassment, report hate to platforms and document harassment.
Digital Defense Checklist *Mayors Innovation Project and Digital Defense Fund*	Includes personal actions for individuals, relevant to both leaders and staff, encouraging active engagement with online accounts and collaboration with city structures and processes.	Public officials and their staff.	To enhance public officials' ability to protect themselves online.	Digital defense strategies, resources and support for effectively reporting and responding to online threats.

Officials' Well-Being Resources

Resource	Description	Target Audience	Goals	Format
'Mental Wellbeing in Politics' and 'Women in Politics' guides *Apolitical Foundation*	Encourages leadership development, democratic innovation and the support of women in politics.	Primarily intended for leaders in	To improve the mental health and well-being of officials by empowering legislators with skills to work collaboratively and engage communities.	An incubator for non partisan political leaders, networking, guides to support political leadership. Includes projects on online violence and gender based violence issues.
Guide for Women in Office *Barbara Lee Family Foundation*	Supports women in politics — their campaigns, election and tenure — with a research-based guide.	Women candidates and elected officials.	To increase the presence of women in policy and politics, and to strengthen and build awareness of the benefits of women in politics. Assists with campaigns, fundraising, overcoming bias and strengthening leadership.	An "essential guide" and various reports that help prepare women for the opportunities and challenges embedded in campaigns and political office.

Photo Citations

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