

STEVEN P. DINKIN A Path Forward

POLITICAL POLARIZATION: THE LATEST THREAT TO WORKPLACE

Here's an election prediction that's easy to make: Feelings of polarization in our country will only deepen after Tuesday's midterms. There will be questions about the integrity of the vote and reports of irregularities or even violence at polling places. With so many close races, half of us may be disappointed. Some of us may be angry.

Those feelings will undoubtedly seep into workplaces. We saw it in 2020, following the murder of George Floyd, and again in the pandemic era, when masking and vaxxing were the issues du jour.

It's unsurprising, really, when you consider that workplaces are a microcosm of our society, where we spend one-third of our lives (perhaps more, in the work-from-home era). As writer Annie Dillard famously said, "How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives."

Remember the good old days, when office conversations about politics (or religion or sexual orientation) were considered taboo?

Those days are long past. With the ubiquity of social

media — where opinions are openly expressed without consequence, no matter how outrageous or cruel — a gag order isn't feasible. Employees will assuredly bring their thoughts, opinions and feelings on a whole range of issues to the workplace, including the outcome of our elections.

It's new and uncharted territory for workplace leaders, who face a mighty task: creating an environment where these conversations can be constructive and even welcome, rather than disruptive and dreaded.

At the National Conflict Resolution Center, we are working with companies and leaders who recognize that political polarization can't be ignored, when it comes to workplace culture.

There are three things to do right now.

First, it's important to understand the current landscape, beginning with a fundamental truth: that the majority of Americans believe more unites us than divides us and are eager to find common ground.

That conclusion came out of a yearlong project by More in Com-

mon, an organization that conducts research to identify and address the drivers of polarization. Their "Hidden Tribes of America" report, published in 2019, revealed seven distinct groups of Americans, based on their views and beliefs — groupings that had nothing to do with demographic measures like age, gender, ethnicity or education.

It's a very different story than what's depicted in media today — an America that's split into two camps, locked in a fight and determined to crush the other.

More in Common collected the views of some 8,000 U.S. citizens. They determined that our most extreme tribes — two right, one left — represent one-third of the population but often dominate our national conversation.

The rest of us reside in the middle — a group of Americans that More in Common has labeled the "Exhausted Majority." Members of these tribes are discouraged by our divisions but open to conversation and compromise. They want to return to the collaborative spirit that characterizes a healthy democracy.

It's important context for workplace leaders who are navigating political polarization. The second (and more challenging) step is to take stock of our own biases, in order to lead inclusively and with neutrality.

We can easily slip into a behavior called "othering," where we (consciously or not) treat a person differently because of who they are or the group they belong to — including their political persuasion. When we "other" someone, we see them as less skilled or intelligent and not worthy of our respect.

And we discount their points of view, instead looking for information that supports our own beliefs. That confirmation bias, as it's called, is a cognitive shortcut that gets in the way of real understanding of a situation.

Workplace leaders need to model a different kind of behavior and be willing to engage with people having diverse thoughts and beliefs.

At NCRC, we teach a technique called "humble inquiry" (a term coined by organizational development expert Edgar Schein),

which is the art of drawing someone out, asking questions you don't already know the answer to, and building a relationship based on interest and curiosity in the other person.

It's foundational to a human-centered workplace, where employees feel a sense of belonging and safety — able to openly discuss difficult topics and disagree with each other (and even you). Creating this type of culture takes time. But it's something workplace leaders should be doing now; after all, it's hard to build relationships in the midst of a crisis.

Tuesday's midterms will show, again, that Americans have real differences and real disagreements with each other. Those differences and disagreements will show up in our workplaces. Let's embrace the conflict as an opportunity to talk — and to find a path forward.

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

CONTEST

FROM **B1** teachers union. "(Williams) has a right-wing, extreme agenda ... that doesn't fit San Diego at all."

Meanwhile, Williams accuses her opponents of hyper-focusing on partisan issues that are not directly related to the school district in order to scare voters and of distorting facts about her in order to win.

Williams, a curriculum company manager whose children who are not yet school age, is one of several conservative parent school board candidates who were motivated to run by frustration with pandemic school closures, enforcement of school mask and COVID-19 vaccine mandates, and the way districts like San Diego Unified are teaching ethnic studies and pursuing education equity.

"It just turned into a bloodbath and free-for-all of partisan politics at the end, which is their strategy for winning. I understand it, but I think it's just unfortunate," Williams said. "It's hard to talk about anything without being labeled."

The major players

The spending, mailers and ads fueling much of the battle between Petterson and Williams are coming from just two political action committees: the San Diego Unified teachers union PAC and a lesser-known PAC with close Republican ties.

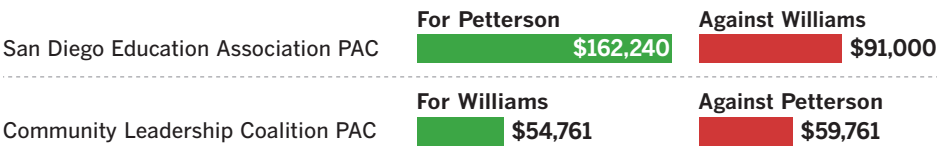
The San Diego Education Association has historically been the biggest spender in the district's school board races and has backed every winning candidate for at least the past 10 years.

The vast majority of the union PAC's money comes from the California Teachers Association's PAC, which has spent \$4.6 million statewide from January to October this year, according to state filings. The San Diego committee has also received tens of thousands of dollars from fellow labor groups including the San Diego County Building and Construction Trades Council and Southwest Regional Council of Carpenters.

The teachers union's close ties with school board members and construction unions has been a frequent

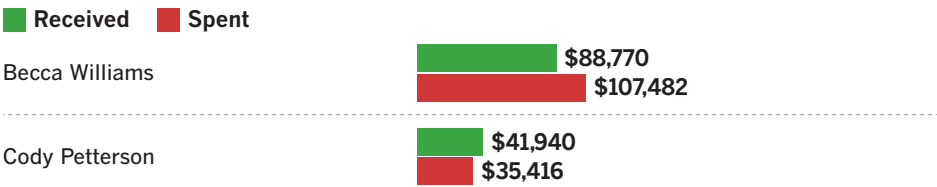
Independent expenditures in the San Diego school board election

Here's how much political action committees have spent year-to-date for and against San Diego Unified School Board candidates Cody Petterson and Becca Williams, who are competing to represent San Diego Unified's sub-district C.



Campaign fundraising by school board candidate

Here's how much the San Diego Unified School Board candidates for sub-district C have personally raised and spent in campaign funds, year-to-date.



Campaign filings data as of Nov. 3, 2022

Source: San Diego County Registrar of Voters

KRISTEN TAKETA & KARTHIKA NAMBOOTHIRI U-T

source of controversy. The main PAC opposing Petterson, who is endorsed by the teachers union and several current San Diego Unified School Board trustees, has portrayed him on mailers as a pawn and puppet of "special interests," while portraying Williams as a "change candidate" who is "not beholden to the special interest groups."

Williams and other conservatives say it's a conflict of interest for teachers unions to back candidates on the school board, because the board approves pay, benefits and working conditions for the union's members. The trade unions that fund the teachers union's PAC also benefit, Williams said, because the board's school bond program funds dozens of school construction projects that employ their workers.

"These are corrupt systems that are designed to benefit people, and it's actually a political club," Williams said.

The union, meanwhile, has long said that its campaign support of school board members does not influence the trustees, and the union merely supports candidates who already share its values.

As of Thursday, the San Diego teachers union's PAC has raised at least \$356,520 year-to-date, according to county filings. It has spent

at least \$162,240 of that on mailers and digital ads in support of Petterson and an additional \$91,000 on paraphernalia opposing Williams. Such independent expenditures are made by PACs without direction from the candidates.

On the other side of the race and supporting Williams is a 4-year-old committee called Community Leadership Coalition that has funded the county Republican Party and has also made independent expenditures for Williams, county assessor candidate Jordan Marks and San Dieguito school board candidate Phan Anderson.

The PAC was previously sponsored by the local Lincoln Club, an organization that says it advocates for businesses and taxpayers. The PAC is run by Francis Barraza, who is the former head of the county Republican Party and past campaign manager for former Mayor Kevin Faulconer and who is now listed as Councilmember Chris Cate's chief of staff. Barraza did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The coalition has received funding from a variety of business and real estate groups, including Associated General Contractors, the Building Industry Association, export businesses and organizations representing rental property in-

vestors and mobile home park owners, according to the coalition's campaign filings.

Williams said it was after she spoke with Associated General Contractors' local chapter that she adopted as part of her policy platform a proposal to eliminate a district agreement that requires building contractors to follow union standards — something the general contractors group opposes, she said.

As the days have counted down to Election Day, both sides have launched accusations at each other.

One of those came Wednesday from Rottenstreich, who issued a news release detailing how one of Community Leadership Coalition's largest donors is Adriana Camberos, a local who was sentenced to 26 months in federal prison for her alleged role in a bogus 5-hour Energy bottle scheme. Camberos was freed early from prison thanks to a controversial commutation from former President Donald Trump.

"I just think that's nuts there is a convicted felon who got a commutation from Donald Trump pumping money into electing a San Diego school board member," Rottenstreich said. "That is outrageous."

Williams said she "has no idea" who Camberos is, and she noted that Camberos'

contribution could have been intended for a different candidate who is also supported by the Community Leadership Coalition.

The coalition has raised at least \$380,000 year-to-date and spent \$54,761 of that in support of Williams, plus an additional \$59,761 against Petterson, according to county filings.

Separate from independent expenditures made by PACs, Williams has out-raised and outspent Petterson in her own campaign, according to county filings. Williams has raised \$88,770 and spent \$107,482, while Petterson has raised \$41,940 and spent \$35,416.

Abortion, religion, vouchers

Petterson and the teachers union said they have been determined to expose Williams' Republican-leaning views to voters.

"If voters actually know who my opponent is, they won't vote for her," Petterson said.

For example, Petterson has written about how Williams is one of more than 80 California political candidates who have signed a "Families First" pledge by the Christian website Biblical Voter. Candidates who sign the pledge promise to "protect innocent human life from conception to natural death," "defend the natural family and natural marriage" and "restore the natural right of parents to determine the best way to educate, raise and care for their children."

Petterson, who is endorsed by Planned Parenthood and says he supports abortion rights, accused Williams of "deeply" religious conservatism and suggested that a school board candidate's views on abortion and religion are inseparable from how they would govern a school district.

"The question of access to age-appropriate reproductive information, facilitating access to health- and life-protective reproductive resources, and fostering an environment that is supportive of young women's reproductive decisions is ABSOLUTELY one that is relevant to a school board and to a school board election," Petterson wrote in a public post on his Facebook profile.

Williams has declined to answer questions from The San Diego Union-Tribune about her views related to

abortion, saying they aren't relevant to a position on the school board.

"For those of you who are his friends it would probably be good to point out kindly that it's not healthy to persecute people based on religious beliefs," Williams wrote in a comment on Petterson's Facebook post. "I stand by everything I said, which is that school boards should get back to focusing on their stated missions and not focus on things like this."

Petterson and the SDEA have also criticized Williams for her stance on vouchers, which are essentially state-funded scholarships for students to attend private and religious K-12 schools rather than public schools. School vouchers are not legal in California and have faced small chances of being allowed here by a liberal-leaning voter population.

Teachers unions and allies have staunchly opposed the idea of vouchers, saying they are a vehicle for destroying public schools by diverting public funding from them.

Williams said she agrees with the idea of private school vouchers because she thinks families should have more choice in where their kids attend school. Public dollars should "follow the child," she said, especially if children are not getting a good education or being treated well at their traditional public schools.

Williams argues that they were not when school districts kept schools closed to in-person learning for prolonged periods earlier in the pandemic.

Unlike Petterson, Williams' strategy has been to avoid talking about partisan issues. In campaign text messages to voters, she has depicted herself as an underdog, calling the teachers union a "corrupt special interest group now spending over \$253,000 to beat up on me."

Williams said others have mischaracterized and spread inaccuracies about her. For example, she said she has been wrongly labeled anti-vaccine; she said she doesn't oppose vaccines but rather believes school districts lack the authority to require students to be vaccinated, as San Diego Unified once did.

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BOAT

FROM **B1** maintain, requiring annual sanding and varnishing to combat saltwater damage. The Ragmeg was one of only 20 or so entries in the annual San Diego Wooden Boat Show each year, and Wilson said she's one of just a handful of wooden boats still docked in the 950-slip Oceanside Harbor.

Germann, also known as "Doc," was 78 years old when he purchased the boat that would become the Ragmeg (an acronym for his and his late wife Mary Ellen's initials). After retiring from his career as an Oceanside oral surgeon, Germann decided to fulfill his lifelong dream of sailing around the world alone before he died. He found the boat for the job — a 1990-era St. Pierre Dory built in Nova Scotia by English shipwright Peter Ellis. She had a teak deck, pine hull, spruce mast, oak thwarts and locust tiller, as well as the tiny figurehead of a Viking on her bow.

Just two weeks after suffering a heart attack, the 80-

year-old Germann set off on his solo nautical adventure from Halifax, Nova Scotia, in May 2003. Over the next two years, with winter breaks at home in Oceanside with his wife, Germann sailed and motored the Ragmeg more than 10,000 miles down the Atlantic Coast, through the Caribbean and Panama Canal and up the Pacific coast to Oceanside. Along the way, both he and the boat suffered some catastrophic injuries (including a second heart attack), near-misses and a near-fatal stranding off the Mexican coast. But Germann wrote in his book about the voyage that in every port he stopped along the way, people would line the dock to ask about his adventures.

When Germann was no longer physically or financially able to keep up the Ragmeg's maintenance, he put her up for sale in 2010. That's when he met Wilson. After retiring from a lucrative career selling pet products to Costco, Wilson wanted to buy himself a new powerboat to keep in Oceanside Harbor. But with a five-year wait for slips, his best



(From left) Keith Wilson, Brooks Iler and Robert Germann set sail in 2013.

option was to buy an existing slip in the harbor for the slip lease and then sell or scrap the old boat.

"It was the cheapest boat in the harbor, but when I told Doc the Ragmeg was going the way of the chainsaw, it crushed him," Wilson said. So instead of buying a new boat, Wilson kept and refurbished the Ragmeg and their friendship blossomed. Together, they built a crew that would become a tight circle of friends.

In keeping with the "Wind in the Willows" theme,

Germann was nicknamed "Ratty" because of his love for sailing. Wilson became "Moley," because he was a landlubber eager for a new adventure. And softspoken Brooks Iler, a 75-year-old retired lawyer from Rancho Bernardo, joined the Ragmeg crew as "Badger," who in the book is Ratty and Moley's quiet but considerate friend.

Iler, who has known Wilson for more than 40 years, said the Ragmeg became the glue that cemented "a significant friendship" that

would expand to include two other men, veteran sailor Grant Cooper of Lake Elsinore and author Greg MacDonald, who wrote a book about the Ragmeg before he died in 2015.

"It has been a nice experience and I think a life lesson in friendship," Iler said. "It was awesome."

After Germann's wife passed away in 2015, he moved into a nursing home in Corona. For the next few years, Wilson and Iler would drive to Corona to pick Germann up to take him for pe-

riodic sails aboard the Ragmeg. When Germann died in 2018, his family asked Wilson to deliver the eulogy at his memorial service.

"He was an interesting guy who told great stories and was such a pleasure to be around," Wilson said. "He called me a pal, which I always interpreted as being more than just a good friend."

Wilson sold the Ragmeg to a man with a young family in Newport Beach who is interested in the boat's history. The new owner is looking forward to showing the Ragmeg at both the San Diego and Newport Beach wooden boat shows next June. He has allowed Wilson to keep a key to the Ragmeg to check on her from time to time and Wilson said he's hoping to have one last "crew party" at the dock in January before she leaves Oceanside Harbor for the last time.

"I'm going to miss her," Wilson said, "but I think she'll hold her own up there in Newport very well."

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