



The Secular Circular

Newsletter of the Humanist Society of Santa Barbara

www.SBHumanists.org

NOVEMBER 2021

Please join us for our featured conference event...

Southern California Secular Coalition Conference November 13 - 9am to 5pm

Register here to receive your personal free Zoom Link: <https://bit.ly/3Bjz0Bi>

Featuring presenters who embody secular values of **Community, Advocacy, Service, and Education.**



Debbie Allen, Executive Director, Secular Coalition for America



Rachel Laser, President & CEO, Americans United for Separation of Church & State



Michael Werner, President, Humanist Foundation



Phil Zuckerman, Pitzer College Professor. Exec. Dir. Humanist Global Charity



Joseph Blankholm, Asst. Professor, Religious Studies, U.C.S.B.



Elle & Bailey Harris, Youth Activists and Authors



Darrel Ray, Founder, Recovering From Religion Foundation & The Secular Therapy Project



Lon Ostrander, President, The Clergy Project



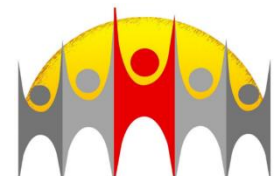
Hank Pellissier, Founder, Humanist Global Charity



Tif Ho, Executive Director, Foundation Beyond Belief



Wafa Bahri, Director, Translations Project, RDF, Center For Inquiry



Allied organizations of the Southern California Secular Coalition

COVID-19 Pandemic Models Update

Dave Flattery will present an update on the state of the COVID-19 pandemic. All are welcome to attend.

When: Sunday December 5 at 3pm Pacific/6pm Eastern.

Zoom link:

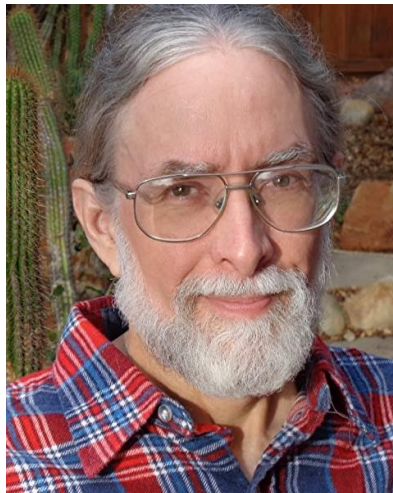
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82598900099>.

Narcissism Broke Our Democracy. Can Science and Math Fix It?

Dr. John Wathey – 10/16/21

By Robert Bernstein

John C. (Jack) Wathey is a retired computational biologist whose interests include evolutionary algorithms, the biology of nervous systems, and electoral reform. He earned his Ph.D. in Neuroscience at U.C. San Diego and has spent most of his career working on computer simulations of protein folding.



Dr. Jack Wathey

Wait. Computational biology and electoral reform? Yes.

Wathey explained that the title of his talk was meant to be provocative, but he worried that it might also be confusing, so he elaborated on it. He is not talking about voter fraud. Because there is none.

He is saying that our electoral process rules are mathematically wrong and result in candidates that most voters dislike.

Charismatic, narcissistic candidates warp the minds of their followers. They will always be with us. Fixing the math problem can help with the latter problem.

Wathey emphasized that this is a non-partisan issue. He showed a photo of the January 6 insurrection. His talk is about defending democracy in a non-partisan way, but he will have to refer to candidates by name.

Consider 2016 candidates Trump and Clinton. They were tied as the two least popular candidates in polling history. 60% rated them unfavorably. How can our process produce two such unfavorably viewed candidates?

His eyes were opened by someone named Danny Kleinman regarding electoral flaws.

In the spirit of transparency, Wathey made a full disclosure: He is a left-leaning centrist, a pragmatist. He just wants society to work better. He is an engineer, not an ideologue. He cares about the truth and his top issue is protecting the Earth.

He quoted the late Senator Moynihan: "Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts."

Wathey reminded us that Biden and Harris won the 2020 election. It is an empirical fact that was documented, verified, certified, and adjudicated in multiple court cases.

False claims of election fraud began in April 2020, seven months *before* the election, and continue to this day. This is a denial of reality following one self-serving man.

How are people so easily fooled? Narcissism. Wathey showed an image of Narcissus from Greek mythology. Narcissus fell in love with his own reflection and eventually died, unable to pull

himself away. He experienced an overdose of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD).

Wathey became interested in NPD in 2009 when he heard an interview with Carol Shelton, the daughter of preacher L. R. Shelton. L.R. Shelton was Pastor of the First Baptist Church in Algiers, a section of New Orleans. He was so abusive that he was eventually excommunicated from the Southern Baptist Convention.

Wathey looked into reports by survivors of other cult leaders and saw a pattern. Cult leaders are charismatic, domineering, project confidence, crave attention and admiration, have a grandiose sense of importance, achievement and entitlement. They boast and lie pathologically, lack self-control, lack empathy, ask for costly sacrifice, have fits of rage, have shallow unstable relationships. And, they have secret feelings of insecurity and shame.

Wathey notes that the God Yahweh of the Old Testament checks all the boxes for NPD! With commandments like "You shall have no other gods before me" and "I am a jealous god" and "Don't take my name in vain".

Wathey hypothesizes that Yahweh was likely modeled after narcissistic leaders of the time.

Biologist E. O. Wilson notes the similarity of gods and cult leaders to alpha males in other primate species. Alpha male primates have their choice of mates to ensure the propagation of their DNA. Followers are easily seduced by charismatic leaders. In humans, leaders with these characteristics often end up in careers in politics, acting, or business. So, is NPD a bug or a feature?

A 2008 study by F. S. Stinson found that NPD is found at some time in the lives of 4.8% of women and 7.7% of men. This is ten times more prevalent than schizophrenia.

A twin study showed that NPD is the most heritable of all personality disorders, with 64% of the variance due to genetic factors.

Why aren't we all narcissists if it has such an advantage? Because of frequency-dependent selection. In plain English, it would not work if there are "too many chiefs and not enough Indians". Evolution selects the right proportion of leaders and followers.

A leader's NPD is only half the issue. Followers are the other half. They tend to have these characteristics: They have a strong need to belong. They fear ostracism. They are willing to sacrifice for a cause greater than themselves.

How does narcissism break democracy? Wathey showed a video of travel expert Rick Steves explaining it. Steves was in Munich and thought about the rise of Hitler to power. Steves showed a "haunting" 1932 photo of Hitler and some of his followers. The photo looked like any other banquet of well-dressed people seated at round tables hearing an interesting after-dinner speaker—it all seemed so normal--except for the swastikas adorning the back walls.

Most of Europe went down the same road of seeking strong leaders at that time. They were in the midst of a global depression and people were eager to follow anyone who offered jobs and a way out. The NPD leaders stoked fear of communists and hatred for immigrants "cutting in line".

The society was primed for a "9/11 moment". In Germany, that moment came when someone burned down the Reichstag (home of the German parliament). The incremental rise of the Nazis then snowballed after that incident. We see the same more recently in Turkey, which started with a failed coup.

Back to the present, 29% of American adults believe that the 2020 election was "stolen" by "voter fraud". What can we do? We can teach children to be better critical thinkers, which will help in the longer term, but we need something now.

Wathey states we need to fix bugs in the electoral system. A partial bug list:

- Electoral College
- Winner-take-all single seat Congressional districts
- Gerrymandering of Congressional districts
- Senate Filibuster
- Corruption made worse by the Citizens United decision
- Low voter turnout
- Voter suppression laws
- The Supreme Court nomination process
- Only one person nominates the vice president.

Wathey suggests we focus on the key defect in American democracy: the primary system itself. Ideally, he would like to see the primary system abolished, but he suggests stopgap measures to allow for incremental change, but only as part of a grander plan to abolish the primary system.

Turnout in Congressional primaries is just 20-35%. This brings out the more motivated, extreme voters, polarizing the parties and resulting in candidates in the general election who are favored by the more extreme elements of the parties. Candidates fear a primary challenge more than they fear the general election.

Presidential primaries are the worst. Anyone can play. In the last Presidential election, six had never been elected to any public office. All were unqualified. One was temperamentally unfit.

The primary schedule is staggered. Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina are early states that are not representative of the nation as a whole yet have disproportionate influence.

“First past the post” voting just gives the wrong answer. Elections are often compared to horse races, but that is not a valid comparison. Want to know which is the fastest horse? Line them all up and go. The first past the finish post is the fastest.

But this does not work for voting unless there are just two candidates. With multiple candidates you

can get a candidate with the most votes (a plurality) who is disliked by most voters.

This is part of how Hitler came to power. The Nazi party only got 37% of the vote in 1932. Hitler's charisma and narcissistic appeal made him stand out just enough to win; however, 2/3 of the voters voted against him.

What is the mathematically best way to decide an election with multiple candidates? Nicolas de Condorcet offered a solution in the late 1700s which involved running multiple paired choices. His solution was impractically complex. A race with 17 candidates would need 136 pairwise votes. There is an easier way to get the Condorcet solution: Ranked Choice Voting (RCV). The idea is to let people rank their choices from best to worst among multiple candidates, which, also reveals who a given voter would select in any 2-candidate contest.

There are several methodologies that can be used to determine the winner with ranked choice voting ballots.

Instant Runoff Voting (IRV) is one solution that is actually used in a number of places, but IRV ignores most of the information on the ballots. It is not guaranteed to find the Condorcet winner and it does not allow a voter to indicate "tied rankings" on the ballot (where perhaps two candidates are tied for fourth choice.)

IRV also can be "gamed" by voting strategically in ways that don't reflect honest rankings. It turns out that there is a version of RCV called the Baldwin method that has three desirable features:

1. It identifies the Condorcet winner
2. It is simple to understand
3. It is difficult to game it

This method was advanced by Joseph M. Baldwin in 1926. It involves counting votes in a series of rounds. In each round, the candidate with the fewest points is eliminated, and the points are re-counted as if that candidate were not on the ballot.

Would the Baldwin method of vote counting have saved Germany in 1932? Probably yes, but we will never know for sure. The Nazis never won a majority in any of the five elections in which they ran.

Could the Baldwin method save U.S. democracy now? Possibly, but it would also mean eliminating the Electoral College which would require a Constitutional change. Is there a way around this?

It is worth noting that there is nothing in the Constitution about parties or primaries. The primary system has only existed in its current form since the 1990s. Before that, candidates were chosen by party bosses in smoke-filled rooms.

RCV would weaken the stranglehold of the two major parties. For most of us this would be a good thing. Psychologist Jonathan Haidt has said that two is the second worst number of parties to have (with one party being the worst!). Two parties trigger tribal emotions.

Perhaps big changes are best made in small steps. One such step would be to move to one national primary that uses the Baldwin method. It would leave the Electoral College in place. Turnout would be greater and more representative. Moderates could win and polarization might be reduced.

Wathey closed with this reference to his idea:

<https://www.watheyresearch.com/electoral-reform-redux/>

and to this explanation of voting theory:

<https://www.princeton.edu/~cuff/voting/theory.html>

He then took questions. I started by asking if "moderates" are a good choice when we have a problem like the Climate Crisis that requires drastic solutions.

He said that it is still safest to honor the will of the voters and that voters can come around to making big changes in a relatively short period of time. In the case of gay marriage rights, we saw a rapid

change from it being a fringe idea to being mainstream.

One participant noted that money buying elections is at least as big a problem as voting methods. Wathey suggested that the influence of money could be reduced if somehow the source of the money was not known by the candidates. The point would be to keep the source of the money a secret from the politicians, so that their votes on legislation would not be influenced by it. Wathey agreed that money in politics is a large and complicated issue.

Harold Hill suggested starting at more local levels. Wathey agreed.

Bill Cook suggested that tribalism must have some adaptive value. Wathey noted that hunter-gatherer societies do benefit from tribalism yet will depose a leader who gets too out of line.

Why would RCV eliminate the threat of electing a narcissistic candidate? Because most people do reject the kind of thuggish behavior that the Nazis and other narcissists use.

Marian Shapiro would like to see RCV applied to our County Board of Supervisors. RCV would eliminate the issue of several candidates from the same party splitting the majority vote and allowing the other (minority) party to win.

The California Gubernatorial Recall process was also mentioned as a process which could result in a fringe candidate with only a small percentage of votes defeating a sitting governor who might have 49% support. Marian recommended attendees watch the proceedings of the California Little Hoover Commission which is holding hearings on the recall process. Marian said it was fascinating, and well worth watching. Here is the [Oct 14 hearing video link](#), the [October 28 hearing video link](#) and a link to participate in the [November 8th hearing](#).

I became aware of these issues after reading the *Scientific American* article "Fairest Vote of All" in March 2004. I have written two related articles for

my Montecito Journal column that you can read here:

<https://www.montecitojournal.net/2020/03/26/voting-paradoxes/>

<https://www.montecitojournal.net/2020/12/03/better-than-democracy/>

An recording of this talk can be found here: <https://youtu.be/7aOzQ0mo21M>.

HSSB Secular Student Activist Scholarships Awarded

Submitted by Judy Flattery

HSSB, along with several other Southern California secular organizations (the Humanist Association of Orange County; Atheists United; and Inland Empire Atheists, Agnostics and Humanists), contributed \$500 towards a \$2000 scholarship to support two worthy secular student activists. The scholarship process was managed by the Secular Student Alliance which awarded 27 scholarships nationwide. These scholarships were supported by many secular organizations across the U.S. Here are the [bios of all the winners](#).

HSSB volunteers read through applications and ranked the student candidates. The following two students will receive funding of \$1000 each for the current academic year. We hope to involve both winners in upcoming HSSB events.

Meet our winners:

Christina is a non-traditional student earning her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Graphic Design at the California Institute of the Arts.

Coming from a Latinx background, Christina was raised in a Protestant family and socialized to believe she was less important than men. She began to question her religious beliefs in high school when she became friends with people

from different backgrounds and different belief systems.

While she was still too young to vote, Christina’s secular activism began in 2008 with the fight against California’s Prop 8, which banned same-sex marriage in the state. Christina began attending Gay-Straight Alliance meetings and protests. More recently, she attended Black Lives Matter protests, and is involved with her local Democratic Socialists of America chapter as well as Planned Parenthood. Christina says being “marginalized by my race, sexuality, and gender has prompted me to accept, celebrate, and fight for others who are similarly marginalized.”



Christina, HSSB/SSA Scholarship Winner

Christina is starting a Secular Student Alliance chapter at the California Institute of the Arts. Local schools have adopted policies that harm marginalized students, especially transgender students, on a theological basis. She attends meetings at City Hall and promotes secularism on a local level in Santa Clarita, which has the largest Mormon population outside of Salt Lake City. Christina's scholarship is sponsored by the Humanist Society of Santa Barbara.

Douglas immigrated from Brazil to the United States in March 2001 as a teen who did not speak English. Six months later, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 changed immigration



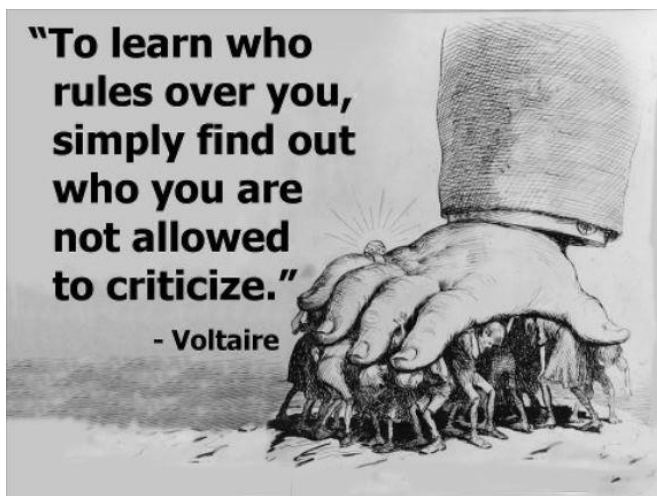
Douglas, HSSB/SSA Scholarship Winner

laws abruptly and he became undocumented.

Recently, Douglas graduated with an associate degree and transferred to U.C. Merced to study environmental engineering, with a hope to lessen the impact humans have on the environment and solve issues related to water usage and the shortage of affordable green housing.

Douglas began to question his faith in 2009 and now identifies as a secular humanist agnostic atheist. Being a non-believer and an immigrant, he has faced unwanted prejudice, preconceived biases, and rejection. He explains, “my experience as an immigrant in this country has taught me to disregard insults and preconceived judgments, similar to daily situations experienced by the unhoused population. That experience has humbled me to reserve judgment and act with compassion to achieve the human well-being goal.”

Douglas volunteers with Atheist Helping the Homeless in Modesto, California. This academic year, he is working to revive the Secular Student Alliance on campus to serve as community support for nonreligious students and promote well-intentioned activism.



Register Now for the Southern California Secular Coalition Conference

HSSB is co-sponsoring a free conference on Saturday November 13 along with other secular

organizations throughout southern California and the Central Coast.

The conference program is built on the C.A.S.E model we first learned about from the Secular Student Alliance. C.A.S.E. is an acronym for

- Community
- Advocacy
- Service
- Education

It was shared as a model that secular organizations can use to make a real difference in the lives of their members and in the world. “Checking all the boxes” of the C.A.S.E. model supports a connected, vibrant, educated, and useful organization.

Conference speakers and sessions are designed with this in mind.

Community: secular organizations throughout our region will introduce themselves and their programs. There will be opportunities to meet each other online in break-out rooms and learn how to participate with other groups, share ideas for enhancing our individual groups, and to expand our personal networks.

Advocacy: Several conference speakers are well-known and well-respected advocates for secular issues and inclusion including Debbie Allen (Executive Director of the Secular Coalition for America), Rachel Laser (President and CEO of Americans United for Separation of Church and State) and Bailey and Elle Harris (authors, youth activists, and recent Santa Barbara residents).

Service: Several secular service organizations will be on hand to briefly describe their programs and humanitarian efforts including representatives from The Clergy Project, Recovering from Religion, Humanist Global Charity, Foundation Beyond Belief, S.M.A.R.T Recovery (evidence-based addiction treatment) and the Translations Project (which translates Richard Dawkins’ books into the languages of Islamic majority countries and provides free access to the texts).

Education: Our own UCSB Asst. Professor, Joe Blankholm will share preliminary results from his recently conducted Secular Communities Survey and Professor Phil Zuckerman of Pitzer College will share his thoughts on the state of the secular movement.

This conference will be free for all attendees. You may attend as many or as few sessions as you wish. Please register in advance at the following website to get a personalized Zoom link for the day. <https://bit.ly/3Bjz0Bi>

Houdini, Seances & Spiritualism

Submitted by Nan Cisney

Nan Cisney recommends the following article from Smithsonian Magazine on [Harry Houdini and spiritualism](#). Thanks, Nan!



Famous photo of Houdini with the “ghost of Abraham Lincoln” in the days before Photoshop.

Save The Date! HSSB Winter Solstice Picnic Event

HSSB will be getting together at Elings Park on Sunday December 18 in the early afternoon to celebrate the winter solstice and looking ahead to longer days and shorter nights. Drinks, plates, and utensils will be provided. Members are invited to bring a dish to pass. We are looking forward to getting together, sharing our lives and stories with each other, and playing a few games. Hope to see you there for a relaxing afternoon get-together.

Thanks to Judy Fontana, NanCisney, and Ann Rojas for organizing this event..

In Memoriam – Bobbie Kirkhart

By Evan Clark, Exec. Dir. at Atheists United

This week our community mourns the death of Bobbie Kirkhart, an irreplaceable atheist icon. As an activist, organizer, author, mentor, and mother,



Bobbie Kirkhart, iconic Los Angeles secular leader and owner of Heretic House.

she tirelessly shaped and guided Atheists United in Los Angeles and its sister organizations around the world for almost four decades. Bobbie always reminded us that humans do not “pass” or “go to a better place” but simply die, reaching the end of a journey we call life. To rephrase a line Bobbie once wrote about another former Atheists United President after their death, “she did not have, nor wish for, a soul, and she does not now live in heaven. She lives in the hearts of many friends, and she resides in the center of Atheists United, the community she worked so hard to build.” Bobbie was a strong supporter of Atheists United, Camp Quest, and Secular Student Alliance.

[Editor’s note: It was at Bobbie’s Heretic House that Dave and I met the gang at Atheists United when we stopped to hear an informal concert by Dan Barker of FFRF and the Voices of Reason

choir. There we met Evan Clark, Bobbie Kirkhart, Dan Barker, the Voices of Reason Choir; were connected with the SoCal Secular Coalition, and developed so many wonderful contacts, and speakers that have benefited HSSB enormously. Thank you, Bobbie, for providing such wonderful networking opportunities at Heretic House.]

“Religion is viewed by the common people as true, by the wise as false, and by the rulers as useful.”

– Lucius Annaeus Seneca

Upcoming Events of Interest to Humanists

All of these events are online except for the UCSB Arts and Lectures events:

- November 4: Michael Steele: *How to Win Elections and Lose the Country*. UCSB Arts and Lectures event. [Michael Steele](#) This event is live.
- November 10: Annette Gordon-Reed: *On Juneteenth: “Freedom Day” and its Importance to American History*. UCSB Arts & Lectures event. [Annette Gordon-Reed](#) This event is live.
- November 13: SoCal Secular Coalition Conference. This is a one-day Zoom event where you can learn how you are a part of large secular community and can become more involved in advocacy. Register here: [SoCal Secular Coalition Conference](#)
- November 16: *Critical Minds: Debunking Myths About Poverty in America*. American Humanist event. [Debunking Myths About Poverty in America](#)
- November 20: Sarah Halverson-Cano and Hussam Ayloush in Conversation on Religion and State. SoCal Secular Coalition event. [Conversation on Religion & State](#)

HSSB Contact Information

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Wayne Beckman, Robert Bernstein, Mary Wilk, Nan Cisney, Jules Bender, Judith Fontana, Hugh Smart

Newsletter Editor & Submission Deadline

Judy Flattery, sbhumanisteditor@gmail.com

Deadline for submissions to the Secular Circular is midnight, the last day of each month. Our web site, www.SBHumanists.org, archives current and past issues of the *Secular Circular*.

Annual HSSB membership dues: \$36 for an individual, \$60 for a couple, \$100 for a Society Supporter, and \$300 (or more) for a Society Patron. Non-members may subscribe to hardcopy of this newsletter for an annual fee of \$20. E-mail copies provided to members and interested non-members at no charge.

To join HSSB: Send your contact information and a check for your membership dues made out to *Humanist Society of Santa Barbara*, to Mary Wilk, P.O. Box 30232, Santa Barbara, CA 93130. For further membership information contact Mary Wilk at mwilk@cox.net.

For more information about HSSB, contact any of the officers at the email or P.O. Box addresses shown above.

Like our Facebook page. Join our Facebook Group.



Watch our speaker videos on [YouTube](#).

- November 23: Bradley Girard: *Speaking of Humanism: Religion in the Supreme Court This Term*. American Humanist event. [Religion in the Supreme Court This Term](#)
- December 8: Kyung-Ji Kate Rhee: *Speaking of Humanism: From Criminal Justice to Human Justice*. American Humanist event. [From Criminal Justice to Human Justice](#)



Humanist Society of Santa Barbara
P.O. Box 30232
Santa Barbara, CA 93130

HSSB Calendar

Tuesday November 9, 5:00 pm. HSSB Board Meeting. Join as early as 4:45pm for dinner & socializing. Zoom link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83592300667>. Members always welcome to attend.

Saturday November 13, 8:00 am – 5:00 pm. Note: Our November HSSB meeting will be on the second Saturday (not our usual third Saturday) and will consist of a day long program co-sponsored by the Southern California Secular Coalition. Register here to get your personalized Zoom link for this educational and inspiring free event: <https://bit.ly/3Bjz0Bi>

Tuesday December 14, 5:00 pm. HSSB Board Meeting. Join as early as 4:45pm for dinner & socializing. Zoom link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83592300667>. Members always welcome to attend.

Sunday December 5, 3:00pm. Dave Flattery. *COVID-19 Pandemic Models Update.*
Zoom link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82598900099>.

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