

Generosity regardless of skin color

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Since the levees protecting New Orleans broke there has been a lot of consternation across America as well as here in San Diego. The federal government's efforts in response to the tragedy were inadequate, many say. African-Americans as a group have been searingly critical of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Bush administration and President Bush personally.

From a recent ABC News/Washington Post poll: Did race and poverty affect the speed of the rescue effort? Sixty-nine percent of whites say no; 71 percent of blacks say yes. Does Bush care about black people? Sixty-five percent of whites say yes; 68 percent of blacks say no. These responses from African-Americans are what red-hot anger looks like in public opinion polling. It is clear that most blacks believe racism reared its ugly head in this case.

One wonders whether the anger felt by most blacks toward Bush now extends to the people -- overwhelmingly white -- who voted for him. Pollsters did not ask this question but, in these heated times, perhaps blacks feel abandoned by white America. Using data culled from the latest KPBS/Competitive Edge Research Poll, we can tell whether such sentiment is on the mark.

Do whites in San Diego County care as much about the Katrina story as blacks do? If racism were broadly present in this community, we would tend to see whites less interested in the news story of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. After all, two-thirds of New Orleans residents are black.

However, the results show that the news story did capture the hearts and minds of whites. White San Diegans have paid as much attention to this story as they did to the Columbine High School shootings in 1999 and only slightly less than the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. In fact, attention paid by whites to the Katrina disaster significantly surpasses the attention paid by non-whites, even when the higher average income of whites is taken into account.

What about the poverty angle? Are rich white San Diegans less interested in a tragedy affecting a city where 28 percent of the residents live below the poverty line. The answer here again is no. Affluent whites (those making more than \$80,000 annually) were just as riveted as everyone else, and, because they tend to have more means, may actually be more plugged-in to this storm-of-the-century story.

The results also show that generosity in San Diego knows no skin color. Only one week after the disaster began, 48 percent of non-whites said they had donated something to the relief effort -- a staggering number. But 53 percent of whites said they had done the same thing and most had given more than \$100 in goods and dollars. Based on survey data, we estimate that San Diego County had raised over \$300 million by Sept 8.

In our survey, we also went looking for evidence of racism. One question about how looters should be dealt with was asked two separate ways. Half the respondents in the sample were asked to put themselves in the place of the mayor of New Orleans and tell us what orders they would give the police to deal with looters of nonessential items. The other half were asked a similar question except they were put in the position of being the mayor of San Diego. We expected to find, frankly, that respondents would treat looters in New Orleans more harshly than local looters.

Not only are New Orleans residents the "others" in this hypothetical situation, but just 6 percent of San Diego County residents are black. We found the opposite. While 21 percent of whites would issue shoot-to-kill orders in San Diego, only 15 percent would do so in New Orleans. And while 21 percent of whites would officially ignore looters in San Diego, 30 percent would look the other way in New Orleans.

The purpose here is not to engage in ethnic one-upmanship. Rather, it is to point out that, despite perceptions possibly fostered by FEMA's slow response, there is no racial divide when it comes to helping fellow citizens in need. While it does our society no good to put our collective heads in the sand when it comes to issues of race, it is also counterproductive to ignore hard evidence that racism is not rampant.

Americans have done a lot of soul searching and there will surely be more to come in the days ahead. But the spasm of self-doubt should not obscure the good that unites and empowers us.

Credit: Nienstedt is president of Competitive Edge Research & Communication which is headquartered in San Diego.

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