

San Diego's Response to Katrina's Devastation

By John Nienstedt – 8/9/05

Introduction

Americans have been glued to their televisions and radios seeking information on the devastation and human tragedy wrought by hurricane Katrina. Questions about government's preparedness and rescue efforts have been raised, sometimes heatedly. Are San Diegans as gripped by the situation as the rest of the nation and what is their take on these difficult questions? The latest KPBS/Competitive Edge Research poll – conducted one week after New Orleans' levees broke – shows that San Diego County residents are riveted. They are also critical of the federal relief effort, but give low marks to the response from local and state governments as well.

Tragedy sometimes brings out the best in society and the poll shows that just over half of San Diegans have donated to the relief efforts. Based on poll responses, San Diego households have been extremely generous, perhaps donating over a quarter billion in aid countywide in the past week. Local residents differ in their views on how looters should be dealt with during calamities. The most common response is that looters should be arrested and released. Others would order police to shoot to kill looters while a significant number of residents would officially ignore the looting citing extraordinary circumstances. Finally, San Diegans have long endured some of the highest gasoline prices in the nation. A large majority view recent price increases as unjustified and driven by greed on the parts of oil companies and gas dealers.

San Diegans Generally in Rapt Attention to Katrina News

Three months ago the KPBS/Competitive Edge poll found 40% paying close attention to San Diego politics during a time of scandal and crisis. Now the poll shows that 52% are

paying very close attention to news coming from halfway across the nation. Another 40% are paying somewhat close attention, so this storm-of-the-century story is generating significant interest from nine-in-ten County residents. A national ABC News/Washington Post poll found exactly the same proportion paying attention last Friday.

The survey also reveals some fascinating insights into the dynamics of this racially-charged story. With two-thirds of New Orleans being African-American, race has been an undercurrent since news coverage began focusing on rescue efforts. Does this story matter more to blacks than whites? It's a tough question but the answer is no. If anything, white San Diegans are paying closer attention than blacks and other ethnic minorities. Fifty-six percent of whites say they are following events very closely; for blacks the figure is just 33% and half of Hispanics are paying very close attention. The big surprise: just 21% of Asian-Americans are paying very close attention and 36% say they are following Katrina coverage not too closely or not at all. Asians account for just 2% of New Orleans's population.

The results also show that younger adults are not nearly as focused on recent events in the Gulf States as middle-aged folks who, in turn, are not quite so attentive as the elderly. Among 18 to 34 year-olds just 39% are paying very close attention, while 56% of 35 to 64 year-olds are paying close attention and 69% of those over 65 are as riveted. This likely has a lot to do with the amount of leisure time each age group has. Older folks tend to watch much more TV and are voracious news consumers in general.

Lower income earners are also less likely to be paying close attention to hurricane Katrina stories. Slightly more than one-third of those earning less than \$20,000 annually are paying very close attention while 14% are pay little or no attention. The numbers are also down for those in the \$20,000 to \$40,000 category. Since the tragedy in New Orleans falls disproportionately on the poor there (where, by the way, 28% live

below the poverty line), less attentiveness on the part of poorer San Diegans is a surprise. Then again, those less well off may not be able to afford the luxury of devoting time to news accounts of other people's misery and are less able to access the Internet for non-stop coverage. As we saw in the June poll, lower income earners are more likely to avoid news altogether.

Perhaps the biggest surprise is that attentiveness has almost nothing to do with whether or not a resident has a loved one in the affected region. Those with friends and family in Katrina's wake – who amount to 24% of the County's population (and 28% of the nation's) – as well as those without are paying close attention. This speaks to the overriding human dimension to the story and folks are not self-centered when it comes to interest in the Katrina tragedy.

Feds Criticized, but So Are Local Efforts

As other national polls have documented, San Diegans generally fall in line with the criticism leveled at the federal government's response to the situation. Though 37% rate the response as good or excellent, 18% rate it as poor and 22% say it is an outright failure – a harsh verdict for first world country accustomed to helping other nations deal with disasters. But San Diegans do not let state and local officials off the hook either. Only 26% say their efforts have been good or excellent and 35% give them a poor or failing grade.

What is fascinating is that while a person's perception of the federal relief effort is closely tied to a person's ideology – that is, conservatives are charitable and liberals are blistering – ideology has no significant effect on the evaluation of the local efforts. So the federal effort is mainly being viewed through a political prism while the local effort is not. The survey also shows that those paying closer attention are harsher in their criticism of *both* relief efforts so the media exposure has not been kind to either the feds

or the local officials.

The one other interesting finding is that rapper Kanye West's missive that "George Bush doesn't care about black people" apparently strikes a chord with African-Americans here. Among them, a sobering 46% rate the federal response as failing. In comparison, only 21% of whites say it is a failure and just 14% of African-Americans rate the state and local response as a failure.

Generosity Rampant in San Diego

Seemingly from the moment the flooding began and images of stranded and suddenly homeless Big Easy residents streamed into living rooms, charitable efforts were underway. Our data shows that, a week into the crisis, half the County's residents have donated something to the victims of hurricane Katrina. The average donation is calculated to be \$508, but that is surely inflated by not only the urge to appear socially responsible (what researchers call "social desirability bias") and by one respondent's \$48,000 donation but by the possibility that many respondents are answering for the household. Removing the outlier and controlling for a household effect gives us a total donated for the County of \$300 million. There is no way to independently gauge the accuracy of this figure, but even if the amount were half that much, it is staggering for such a short period of time. It should be noted that 15% refused to answer when asked how much in money and goods, if any, they had donated.

One reason that so many have donated is because those with loved ones in the affected areas are giving at an impressive rate: 72% of them have donated to the cause.

But the giving is certainly not limited to those with a personal stake in the crisis. As one would hope and expect, those with more are indeed more likely to make a contribution. A robust 62% of those earning more than \$80,000 annually have given something to the

effort; just 35% of those earning less than \$40,000 have donated.

Those who are paying more attention to the crisis – and who have therefore been exposed to more appeals for assistance – are far more likely to donate than those who are not following the situation closely. Only about 30% of the latter have donated anything.

Finally, it is interesting to see that women are far more likely to give to the cause than are men. While 58% of females have contributed, a nearly identical percentage of men have not!

What Do You Do With a Looter?

Respondents were asked how they would deal with looters of non-essential items if they were Mayor of (separately) either crippled New Orleans or devastated San Diego after a major disaster. There were surprisingly only minor differences between these hypothetical Mayors of the Big Easy and America's Finest City. Regardless of the city, about one-in-six said they would give orders to shoot looters on sight and about one-quarter said they would ignore looters under these extreme circumstances. The most frequent response is that looters should be arrested and released with 32% and 44% giving those responses for New Orleans and San Diego respectively. So, if anything, local residents would deal a bit more severely with San Diegans than they would with New Orleaners, but the differences here are minimal.

As would be expected liberals would tend to ignore those looting non-essentials while ideological conservatives would tend to deal more harshly with them. While nearly half of the very liberal residents would turn a blind eye, 38% of those on the far right would order police to shoot to kill.

It is interesting to find that, when all other variables are controlled for, those paying more attention are *less likely* to issue the shoot to kill order.

The results also reinforce some stereotypes: older residents prefer a sterner hand (with 35% saying shoot to kill and just 17% preferring to ignore looters) and women being much more likely to ignore looting in this situation than men.

Race also plays a role in attitudes towards looters. Nearly all African-Americans would either deal with looters mildly or not at all (44% say they would ignore them) in these extraordinary circumstances.

San Diegans Grinding Their Teeth Over Gas Prices Again

San Diegans love to drive their cars in this freeway culture, but they hate to pay higher prices gas. The post-Katrina price boost is just the latest gas-related problem to confront motorists here. So it is no surprise that most (55%) San Diegans *strongly* feel that oil companies and gas dealers are taking unfair advantage of the situation and 14% feel the same way only more mildly. Just 10% believe the increases are justified while 16% blame other factors. Polls show that people across the nation feel the same way as 72% believe gouging is taking place.

The sense that gouging at the pump is occurring is strongest among low to moderate income earners. Among those making less than \$80,000 a year, over 60% are firmly convinced stations and oil companies are taking advantage of Katrina to boost prices. But upper income residents are not convinced. Just 40% of those making more than \$100,000 strongly agree that gouging is occurring.

Conclusions

Hurricane Katrina has leveled more than just buildings along the gulf coast. It has

caused many Americans and San Diegans alike to sharply criticize officials supposedly in charge of assisting citizens in need. Katrina has also exposed fissures – ethnic, income-related and even gender-based – in our society. The plain fact is that on many of the subjects dealt with in the poll, African-Americans do not see things the same way as others. Certainly much of this is due to the fact that the calamity befell a largely black city. Had the damage been centered on Denver and the scenes of the stranded contained mainly white faces, it is implausible to argue that we would see the same attitudinal differences between blacks and others. That said, the federal government and the President apparently have a huge repair job, not just with the devastated areas but with black America.

As for gender, observing the stereotype of the compassionate woman may somehow be quaint, but it is not comforting to find strong evidence that men are seriously deficient when it comes to giving in times of crisis. Perhaps the finding here that men are far less likely to donate to Katrina victims can be explained by another stereotype: that women control the household purse-strings. If not, men have some soul-searching to do.

But focusing only on what is dividing America is a bad idea. Many of the results are heartening. Though we recognized the possibility that San Diegans would deal more harshly with “others” than with their own, a test of that hypothesis showed that is not the case. And, in fact, despite the prevailing official orders of “shoot to kill,” those anti-looting measures would not be widely adopted if San Diegans were in charge.

It is a poor cliché for these times, but every cloud has a silver lining. In this case, the outpouring of sympathy and compassion in the form of donations is truly amazing. While those with relatives in the area are more likely to donate, the survey clearly shows that residents with no tie to the region are giving generously to the victims. Those are the sorts of actions that will bind up the physical wounds, as well as those to America’s

spirit, that Katrina has inflicted.