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Title: Compassion and American Public Opinion: An Analysis of the NES Humanitarianism Scale

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Abstract

In this report, Steenbergen evaluates the 1995 Pilot Study humanitarianism items, designed to tap the importance that respondents attach to the quality of compassion in their relations with others. Two batteries of humanitarianism items were tested in the Pilot using a split-sample experiment. In the first version, respondents were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with eight items. The second version was designed to preempt an acquiesce bias by using forced choice items that played a humanitarian response alternative against a non-humanitarian alternative. Steenbergen finds that, as expected, the agree/disagree items suffer from an acquiesce bias. Steenbergen, however, argues that the overwhelmingly humanitarian responses to the forced choice questions indicate that this bias is due more to a social desirability bias than a response set. Steenbergen also finds that the agree/disagree items scale well and all items load significantly on a humanitarianism factor. The forced choice items, on the other hand, scale poorly and a factor analysis confirms the low internal consistency of those items. Turning to the performance of the scale formed from the agree/disagree items, Steenbergen finds that humanitarianism is distinct from equalitarianism, party identification, and ideology. Moreover, regressing the humanitarianism scale against a variety of demographic and attitudinal correlates uncovers few significant predictors, indicating that humanitarianism is a value that cuts across demographic and political lines. Steenbergen next turns to assessing the predicative power of the humanitarianism scale. Looking first at the area of social welfare policy, Steenbergen finds that the scale has a very large effect in determining feeling thermometer levels towards those on welfare and the poor, even controlling for equalitarianism, ideology, party identification, and demographic characteristics. The effects of humanitarianism also extend beyond the domain of poverty. Those who score high on humanitarianism advocate a more socially based solution to the problem of crime than individuals who do not and are more likely to support foreign aid. Thus, Steenbergen concludes, because the humanitarianism items are distinct from existing NES measures and have powerful effects in the expected areas, they should be carried through to future survey efforts.