

Help In Context: A Multilevel Analysis of the European Social Survey

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We consider the importance an individual attaches to helping others (the value of help), the degree to which they actually help others in practice, and the extent to which an individual perceives people living locally to be helpful ('local help').

Using the measures: (a) the value of help, (b) whether he/she has helped in practice, and six other civic engagement, happiness and voluntarism variables, we carry out a multilevel analysis of the European Social Survey to assess variations in civic values and engagement. Thus, 'help in context' can be thought of in three ways: (i) the country or local area in which an individual lives, including an individuals' perception of the helpfulness of people living locally; (ii) the demographic characteristics of the individual; (iii) the association of help outcomes with measures of civic engagement, happiness and voluntarism. A multilevel approach allows us to disentangle the country, region and individual level variations in help outcomes as well as being a very convenient framework for dealing with multivariate responses, allowing the relationships between help and the other variables to be investigated in detail at the individual, region and country levels. Figure 1 shows the raw mean variations in the proportions between European countries of the eight measures we are considering in this study.

We find that the value of help varies across European countries at both the country and individual level. There is also considerable variation in the extent to which people help others in practice. Overall, people are more likely to state that helping others is important than actually help other people in practice. However, helping people in practice is more strongly associated, than helping

as a value, with other civic engagement outcomes. One possibility for the difference between help as a value and helping in practice is that barriers are preventing people from helping others. The extent to which an individual thinks people around them are helpful is important when considering the likelihood of someone helping in practice and being involved in other civic engagement. As the person's perception of the extent to which people in their local area help one another increases so does, on the whole, their likelihood of voting, contacting a politician, signing a petition and being involved in voluntary activity.

The findings have important implications for policy makers in relation to renewing civic engagement and in relation to identifying and overcoming the barriers to creating a more civic society.

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