

Martin Luther King In Life...And Memory

By Sheldon Appleton

Each January, Americans celebrate and honor the memory of Martin Luther King, Jr. Recent surveys show that both black and white Americans respect—even revere—Dr. King as one of the most significant American public figures of this century. Almost four-fifths of those surveyed by Gallup in 1987 expressed a very or mostly favorable “overall opinion” of King, compared to just over a fifth with a mostly or very unfavorable view of him.¹ Not surprisingly, almost all black Americans hold favorable opinions of King—97% favorable to 1% unfavorable according to a 1986 ABC News/*Washington Post* survey of black adults.²

A 1993 CBS News/*New York Times* survey showed that nearly four-fifths of Americans believed King had “made things better for blacks in this country,” while only 4% believed he had made things worse and 10% that he had made no difference. More than two-thirds of those with opinions said that “there had been significant progress toward Martin Luther King’s dream of racial equality.” More than three-fourths believed King had acted “just about right in his efforts to gain equal rights for blacks,” while only 10% thought he had been too forceful and only 7% that he had not been forceful enough.

One of the Greatest Figures in History

A significant group of Americans—too many to be just blacks—see King as one of the greatest figures in history. Only John Kennedy and Abraham Lincoln were mentioned more often in response to a 1986 Roper Organization question asking: “What individual, either living or dead, famous or not famous, would you say best exemplifies your idea of The American Dream?”³

The following year, Peter Hart presented respondents aged 18 to 44 with a long list of Americans “who have been active in public life at some time in the past 20 years. Which two people do you most respect and admire?” A greater percentage of these young and middle-aged Americans (38%) named King than any other figure. Then-President Ronald Reagan and Robert Kennedy were next

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with 25% each. Lee Iacocca, at 17%, was the only other person mentioned by more than 8% of those surveyed.⁴

Even when the scope of the question is expanded in space to the world and in time to a thousand years, King is thought worthy of consideration. A 1992 Yankelovich survey asked “Which person who lived in the past thousand years do you admire most?” Again only Lincoln (12%) and John Kennedy (9%) were mentioned more often than King (5%), with Franklin Roosevelt at 4%, Albert Einstein at 3% and Mahatma Gandhi, Thomas Jefferson, Mother Teresa and George Washington at 2% each! Asked directly whether Lincoln or King “for better or worse, has had the most impact on the course of history in the past thousand years,” 59% chose Lincoln, 36% King, with 4% volunteering that they had an equal impact.⁵

A Look at the Past—A Reviled Man

The overwhelming approval with which King is remembered today stands in ironic contrast, however, to the way he was perceived by white Americans while he was alive and active. A number of survey items asked about King in the mid-sixties show him more reviled than revered—in fact, as one of the most disliked American political figures in that age of public opinion polling.

At least three times, the Gallup Organization gauged public sentiment about King and a number of other public figures through the use of a *scalometer*. Respondents were presented with cards showing a set of ten boxes, starting with a +5, “the highest position or someone you like very much—all the way down to the lowest position of -5—or someone you dislike very much.” Those respondents who felt they knew the public figure were asked to rate this person using the scale.

The first time King was included in the scalometer was May 1963, before he was awarded the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize. Three-quarters of those surveyed felt they knew him well enough to place him on the scale. Of these, just under half placed him on the negative side of the scale and a fourth placed him at -5, the lowest possible point, compared with 14% at +5 (see page 12). Of the ten others rated in the same survey, the only one more disliked was Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev with 95% giving a negative rating and 77% placing him at -5. None of the nine other Americans included received negative ratings from more than 21% of the sample or -5 ratings from more than 8%.⁶

In the 1960s, King Became Even More Widely Criticized Due to His Involvement in the War Protest

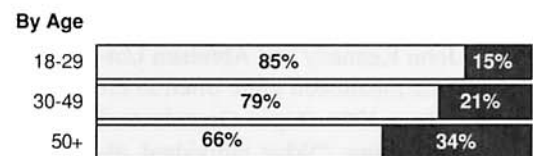
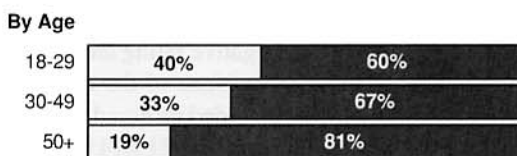
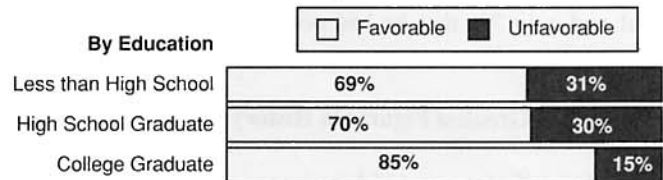
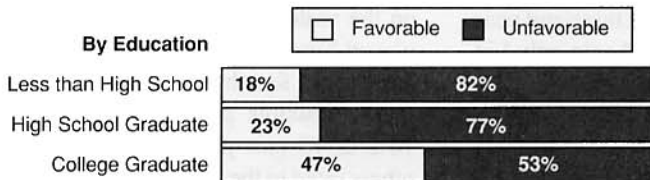
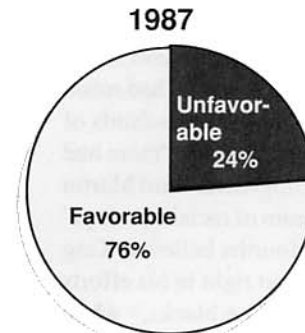
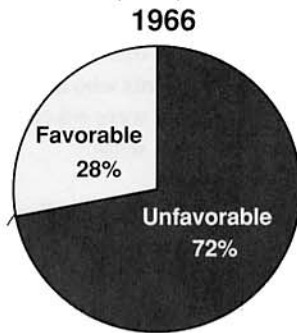
Question: Here's an interesting experiment. You notice that the 10 boxes on this card go from the highest position of plus 5—or someone you like very much—all the way down to the lowest position of minus 5—or someone you dislike very much. Please tell me how far up the scale or how far down the scale you would rate the following men... Martin Luther King?

Scalometer Ratings	1963	1965	1966
+5	14%	13%	8%
+4	7	6	4
+3	11	9	6
+2	8	9	6
+1	13	13	9
-1	6	7	10
-2	5	4	6
-3	4	6	6
-4	6	4	5
-5	25	30	41

Note: Percentages are of those who placed King on the scale.
Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization, latest that of August 18-23, 1966.

From the 60s to the 80s: A Big Shift in Thinking about King

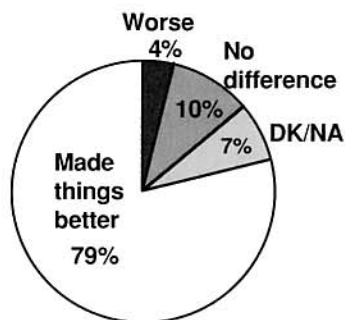
Question: I'd like your opinion of some people and organizations... Please tell me which category... best describes your overall opinion of who or what I name....Martin Luther King, Jr....very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable, very unfavorable, can't rate, never heard of (1987)?



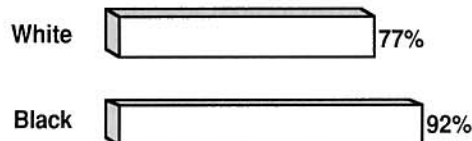
Note: Data are white evaluations of Martin Luther King. Responses of "can't rate" and "never heard of" have been omitted. The 1966 data were derived by collapsing the positive and negative scalometer ratings for King. For exact question text for 1966 see the top of the page.
Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization, latest done for the Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press, April 25-May 10, 1987.

Across Racial Lines: King Did Make a Difference

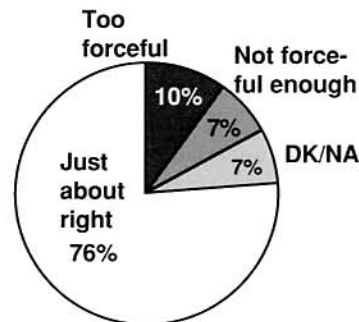
Question: Overall, do you think Martin Luther King, Jr. made things better for blacks in this country, made things worse, or don't you think he made a difference?



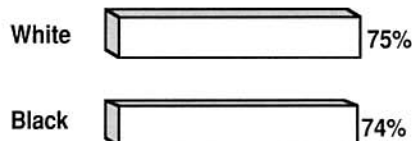
Those responding "made things better"



Question: Looking back, do you think Martin Luther King, Jr. was too forceful, not forceful enough, or just about right in his efforts to gain equal rights for blacks?



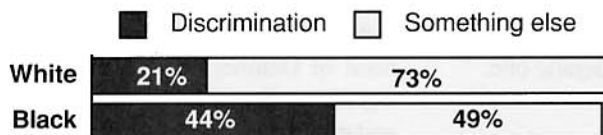
Those responding "just about right"



Source: Surveys by CBS News for the *New York Times*, March 28-31, 1993.

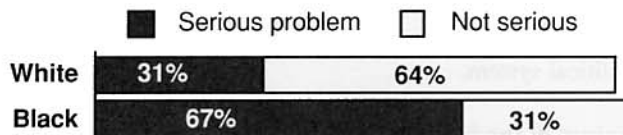
Of Course, Black/White Splits Remain Large on Some Issues

Question: On the average, blacks have worse jobs, income and housing than white people. Do you think this is mostly due to discrimination against blacks, or is it mostly due to something else?



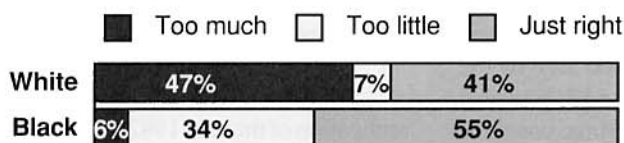
Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization for *CNN/USA Today*, August 23-25, 1993.

Question: How serious a problem do you think racial discrimination against blacks is where you live... a very serious problem, a somewhat serious problem, not too serious, not at all serious?



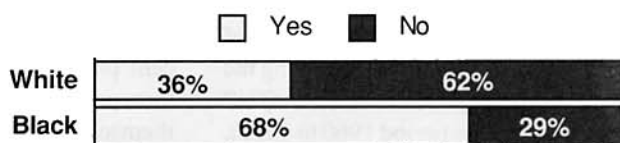
Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization for *CNN/USA Today*, February 8-9, 1993.

Question: All in all, do you think black civil rights groups are asking for too much, too little, or just about what they should be asking for?



Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization for *CNN/USA Today*, August 23-25, 1993.

Question: If there were to be a peaceful parade, march or picketing in your town or area in favor of equal rights for blacks, would you take part?



(Continued, please see page 47)

Martin Luther King—continued

Two years later, in May 1965, after King had won his Nobel and soon after he led the Selma-to-Montgomery march for voting rights, he was included in another Gallup scalometer. Ratings were also obtained for five other Americans, two foreign political leaders and for the two major US political parties. This time, 90% of those queried ventured to place King on the scale, but the placements were quite similar to those two years earlier. A slender majority placed him on the negative side, with 30% at -5 vs. 13% at +5. Again a Communist leader, Fidel Castro, was almost universally disliked. The other foreigner, Charles DeGaulle, received 57% negative ratings—but only half the share of -5 ratings assigned to King. None of the American leaders came close to King's negatives. The least popular of them was Barry Goldwater, who had been defeated the preceding November in one of the great electoral landslides in American history. Some 39% placed him negatively and 12% at -5. (The other Americans were Dwight Eisenhower, President Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, George Romney and Vice President Hubert Humphrey.) The Republican Party, less popular than the Democrats, was rated negatively by 18% of the sample with 9% at -5. In December 1965, 22% placed the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People at -4 or -5, better than King had fared in May.⁷

One more round of Gallup scalometer ratings, in August 1966, included King, again with five other Americans, the two political parties and Castro. Some 95% of those surveyed placed King on the scalometer, a higher percentage than felt able to place Hubert Humphrey, the sitting Vice President. By this time, King had taken his struggle for civil rights north as well as south, and perceptions of him had turned more negative. Two-thirds of those responding rated him negatively and 41% assigned him the lowest allowable rating of -5. No other American or political party received more than 27% negative ratings or more than 7% at -5.⁸

While these ratings are for the *whole* samples, including blacks as well as whites, clearly few of the negative ratings of King could have come from black respondents. In both 1963 and 1966, Louis Harris carried out surveys of black respondents, asking how good a job leaders and organizations had done "in the fight for Negro rights." In these surveys, 75% and 78% rated King as "excellent," 10% and 13% as "pretty good," 2% and 3% as "only fair" and only 1% each time as "poor."⁹ Similarly, 95% of blacks assigned positive ratings to King on the 1966 scalometer item cited above. Three-fourths chose the highest possible rating (+5) and only 1% the lowest (-5). In contrast, 72% of whites rated King negatively, with 44% placing him at -5.

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In June of 1967, Gallup included King in a presidential preference question: "Suppose the Presidential election were being held today and there were four candidates—Lyndon Johnson, the Democrat; George Romney, the Republican; George Wallace, the States' Rights party candidate; and Martin Luther King, the peace party candidate. Which would you like to see win? Some 41% of the sample chose Johnson, 39% Romney, 11% Wallace, 2% King, with 7% undecided. Less than half of one percent of whites chose King.

Looking through hundreds of Gallup scalometer ratings, it is difficult to find American public figures viewed as negatively as King. In October 1964, a few weeks before losing that year's presidential election, Barry Goldwater was viewed negatively by 52% and placed at

-5 by 24%. In August of 1956, Herbert Hoover received 45% negative ratings and 24% at -5.¹⁰ And Harry Truman, as President, hit lows of 55% negative in November 1951 and 30% at -5 in October 1952.¹¹ In July 1973, soon after his devastating election loss to Richard Nixon, George McGovern was rated negatively by 42%, with 16% placing him at -5. On the heels of Chappaquidick, Edward Kennedy's negatives increased to 24% and his -4s and -5s combined to 11%. In July 1973, in the midst of the Watergate hearings, John Dean, John Ehrlichman and Bob Haldeman were rated negatively by 62 to 68% of all respondents and at -5 by 18 to 22%.

The only scalometer ratings I have found that are as negative as white ratings of King in 1966 are those of Richard Nixon in October 1975 and February 1976, when his resignation, pardon and disgrace were fresh in the public's mind. On those occasions, nearly three-quarters rated him negatively and almost 50% placed him at -5.¹² Moreover, black Americans, most of them Democrats, ranked Nixon lower than whites, so it appears that even Nixon at his nadir was viewed no more negatively by white Americans than Martin Luther King was in 1966.

With the passage of time, it is easy to forget the resistance of white Americans to King's civil rights activism. In August 1964, six months *before* the Selma-to-Montgomery march for voting rights, Gallup respondents believed by nearly a four-to-one margin that "Negroes should stop their demonstrations now that they have made their point even though some of their demands have not been met."¹³ Gallup surveys taken in May and June of 1968, close to the time of King's death, show more whites (48%) feeling that the Johnson Administration was "pushing integration too fast" than believed either that it was moving too slow (18%) or "about right" (22%). Asked whether "Negroes are being treated in this community the same as whites are, not very well or badly?," 73% of whites insisted they were being treated the same and only 3% felt they

were treated badly. And 58% of whites believed “Negroes themselves” were more to blame than white people “for the present conditions in which Negroes find themselves,” compared to only 23% who felt whites were more to blame.

Understanding the Change in Opinion

The change in perceptions of Martin Luther King since the sixties is no doubt due to a number of factors. The 1966 white evaluations of King showed sharp differences by age and educational level (see page 12). Those who had attended college were 2.5 times as likely to rank him positively (47%) as those who had not completed high school (18%), and those under 30 were twice as likely to assign a positive rating (40%) as those age 50 and over (19%). In 1966, the oldest and least educated respondents, who liked King least, each made up 44% of their respective demographic category in the white sample. Responses to the 1987 Gallup survey, using a somewhat different question, also showed the youngest and best educated to be most favorable toward King, but these groupings were now larger parts of the white sample. Those who had attended college comprised only 20% of the 1966 sample, but 40% of the 1987 sample; those under 30 were 19% of the 1966 sample, but 25% of the 1987 sample.

Some of the change in perceptions of King, then, may be attributed to the replacement of older and less educated white Americans by younger, better educated ones. Certainly, too, there has been substantial change in white racial attitudes. But the extent of *this* change should not be exaggerated. In 1993, about half of whites thought “black civil rights groups are asking for too much.” (Only 6% of blacks agreed.) Asked whether the fact that, on average, blacks have worse jobs, income and housing than whites was mostly due to discrimination or to “something else,” three-quarters of white respondents (and a plurality of blacks) chose “something else.”¹⁴ Less than a third of whites (but two-thirds of blacks) felt that racial discrimination against blacks “where you

live” is a very or somewhat serious problem.¹⁵ And only 36% of whites expressed willingness to take part in “a peaceful parade, march or picketing in your town or area in favor of equal rights for blacks.”¹⁶

Another important contributor to the change in perceptions of King is the widespread lack of knowledge about him and the history of the civil rights movement among the young—and even among many of those who lived through it. Perhaps recent media treatment of King has helped to induce selective memory by some middle-aged and older Americans. On the thirtieth anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington at which King delivered his most widely publicized (“I Have A Dream”) speech, 57% of white Americans (and 28% of blacks) admitted that they knew or remembered little or nothing about that event. Only 11% claimed they knew or remembered “a great deal.” Among American adults under thirty years of age, white and black, the percentage confessing ignorance approached three-fourths. Even among those over fifty, well over 40% could not claim even “a fair amount” of knowledge.¹⁷

Though some whites may look back with longing at King’s emphasis on non-violence and his “dream” of integration, in contrast to the preaching of other black leaders then and now, it is important not to forget the history that led from King to the present. If there was an opportunity to build an integrated nation on the basis put forward by King in the sixties, it was an opportunity that was soundly rejected at that time by most white Americans. If such an opportunity should present itself today, it is still by no means certain that most white Americans would recognize and embrace it.

Endnotes:

¹ Survey by the Gallup Organization for the Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press, April 25-May 10, 1987. The 6% who answered “don’t know” or “can’t rate” have been omitted. All data and special breakdowns presented in this article were obtained through the Roper Center, except when a

published source is cited.

² In this case and in some of those that follow, percentages add to less than 100% due to “don’t know” and “no answer” responses being omitted.

³ Survey by the Roper Organization for the *Wall Street Journal*, October 1986. Kennedy was mentioned by 8% of the sample, Lincoln by 6%, King by 5%. Five percent said “my father” and 6% specified another family member. Lee Iacocca and Ronald Reagan were named by 4% each.

⁴ Survey by Peter D. Hart Associates for *Rolling Stone*, September 11-20, 1987.

⁵ Survey by Yankelovich Clancy Shulman for *Time/CNN*, July 22-23, 1992.

⁶ Percentages given for this and other Gallup scalometer items include only those who placed King (or others) on the scale.

⁷ Gallup Opinion Index #62, August 1970, p.17.

⁸ Though King was fourth on the list of men most admired by Americans in 1964 and sixth in 1965, this is a standing which can be achieved by being named by a small percentage of respondents. King was not among the top ten in either 1966 or 1967.

⁹ William Brink and Louis Harris, *Black and White* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), p. 246.

¹⁰ Calculated from John Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion* (New York: Wiley, 1973), p. 280.

¹¹ Calculated from Mueller, p. 278.

¹² Surveys by the Gallup Organization, latest that of February 27-March 1, 1976.

¹³ The other alternative offered was “they have to continue demonstrating in order to achieve better jobs, better housing and better schooling.” No doubt a significant proportion of the fifth of the sample who chose this alternative were black Americans.

¹⁴ Survey by the Gallup Organization for *CNN/USA Today*, August 23-25, 1993.

¹⁵ Survey by the Gallup Organization for *CNN/USA Today*, February 8-9, 1993.

¹⁶ Survey by the Gallup Organization, August 23-25, 1993.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

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