

Black Lives Matter and America's long history of resisting civil rights protesters



Protesters at the courthouse in Selma, Ala., on Feb. 5, 1965. More than 400 demonstrators were arrested and marched off to a compound. (Bill Hudson/AP file)

One year ago this week, protests erupted in Baltimore following [the death of Freddie Gray](#) in police custody. After yet another high-profile death of an unarmed black man connected to police, there were riots, peaceful demonstrations and proclamations from activists that black lives matter.

The decentralized Black Lives Matter movement burst onto the national scene following the 2014 police shooting of an unarmed black teenager,

Michael Brown, in Ferguson, Mo. Since then, activists have protested police brutality by stopping [Black Friday sales](#), [shutting down rail stations](#) and becoming a fixture on the presidential campaign trail. They have [disrupted Bernie Sanders](#), [confronted Hillary Clinton](#) and [protested Donald Trump](#), [leading to tense confrontations and violent reactions](#).

For these demonstrations, Black Lives Matter activists have received plenty of criticism from political [candidates](#) and their supporters and [surrogates](#).

The majority of Americans haven't embraced the activists' message or strategies, either; fewer than a third of Americans said Black Lives Matter focuses on real issues of racial discrimination while 55 percent said the movement distracts from those issues, [according to a September PBS News Hour/Marist poll](#). Another poll conducted that month by [NBC News and Wall Street Journal](#) found that 32 percent of Americans had mostly positive views of the movement; 29 percent had mostly negative views and 39 percent were neutral.

Such tepid acceptance of black activism isn't surprising. This country has a history of disapproving of civil rights protests and demonstrations. And perhaps nothing better demonstrates that dynamic than the movement of the 1960s.

Today, sit-ins, freedom rides and marches for voting rights are viewed with historical reverence. Schoolchildren across the country memorize Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. Conservatives invoke the moral authority of the civil rights movement [as a model for their own activism](#). Civil rights workers are viewed as national heroes.

But in their day, activists were met with widespread disapproval. A review of polling data



from the 1960s paints a picture of an America in which the majority of people felt such protest actions would hurt, not help, African Americans' fight for equality.

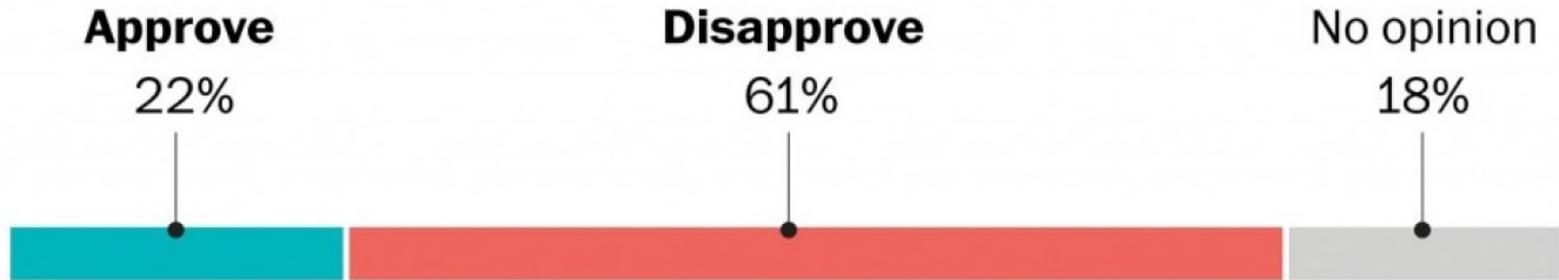
Martin Luther King Jr. at the 1963 March on Washington.
(AP file)

These surveys, compiled by Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at Cornell University, provide a snapshot of the nation's mood throughout the decade. Collectively, they are "a corrective to the blurring of time," said Kathleen Weldon of the Roper Center.

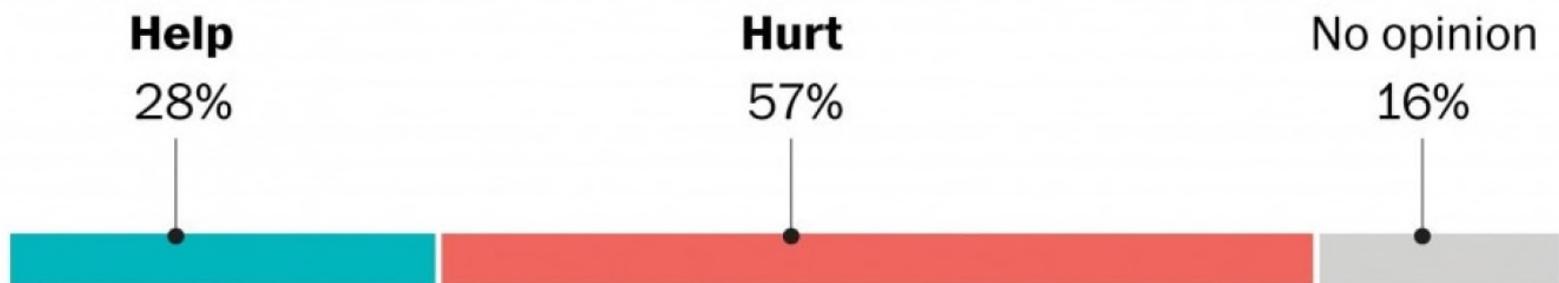
"It's a very clear picture — and not necessarily the picture we like to lay back on time that we see from today; it's not necessarily the story we tell ourselves," she said. "Time passes and people can start to intentionally or not rewrite history, particularly around something that seems as amorphous as public opinion — what everyone believed, what everyone thought."

Freedom Riders, sit-ins (May 1961)

Q: Do you approve or disapprove of what the “Freedom Riders” are doing?



Q: Do you think “sit-ins” at lunch counters, “freedom buses” and other demonstrations by Negroes will hurt or help the Negro’s chances of being integrated in the South?



Note: May not equal 100% because of rounding.

Source: Conducted by Gallup Organization May 28-June 2, 1961, and based on personal interviews with a national adult sample of 1,502. Data provided by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.

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Recognizing the deep opposition toward the civil rights movement’s tactics in its day — “the things we think of normal today and not controversial” — may cause people to “think through what their opinions are about things today, and why they have those opinions,” said Charles Cobb, who was a field secretary for the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee in the 1960s.

Coming to terms with how widespread was the resistance and ambivalence toward civil rights activists is important “because, first of all, it’s the accurate portrayal of history,” said Joyce Ladner, who was deeply involved with SNCC’s organizing in Mississippi.

“When I’m told by people, ‘Thank you for what you did,’ I almost want to look around and see who they’re talking to,” Ladner said.



Mug shots of Freedom Riders, who were arrested in 1961 in Jackson, Miss., for "breach of peace" and refusal to obey a police order after they attempted to use "whites only" restrooms and lunch counters. (Jahi Chikwendiu/The Washington Post)

Ladner said she and others “did it for ourselves. We weren’t aware of history at that time, or that one day it would go down in history, because these events were in the moment. We didn’t have time to focus on long-term strategies.”

Cobb referred to a phrase often used by one of the SNCC's co-founders, Julian Bond: “He used to say that public opinion about the civil rights movement can be boiled down to one sentence: ‘Rosa sat down, Martin stood up and then the white folks saw the light and saved the day.’ ”

Opposition to the movement

In 1961, mobs in Southern cities attacked Freedom Riders, the activists testing the federal ban on bus segregation. Most Americans weren’t on the activists’ side; 61 percent said they disapproved “of what the ‘Freedom Riders’ are doing,” according to a 1961 Gallup Poll.

That same poll found that 57 percent of Americans felt the “Freedom buses,” sit-ins at lunch counters and “other demonstrations” by African Americans would hurt their chances of being integrated in the South. Just 28 percent of Americans said these actions would help.



Freedom Riders are photographed at the bus station in downtown Montgomery, Ala., in 1961. (AP file)

Mass demonstrations by blacks were viewed as even less helpful in a Gallup poll taken two years later.

These numbers don't surprise Cobb, the one-time SNCC field secretary: "It pretty much confirms our sense of public opinion, even back then."

Ladner, who worked on the March on Washington, also wasn't shocked by the historical data. "It was going against the grain of tradition," she said.

The very nature of protest is fighting against the norm, Cobb said. "Whether

it's segregated lunch counters or voting rights or whether it's police violence — that's what protest does, and it challenges with varying degrees of intensity the status quo.”

Such numbers show people were “very uncomfortable with protest,” and especially regarding the potential for violence, said Weldon of the Roper Center.

“They weren't particularly convinced that it was helpful,” she said.



A May 28, 1963, sit-in at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Jackson, Miss., where whites poured sugar, ketchup and mustard over the heads of the demonstrators. (Fred Blackwell/Jackson Daily News via AP file)

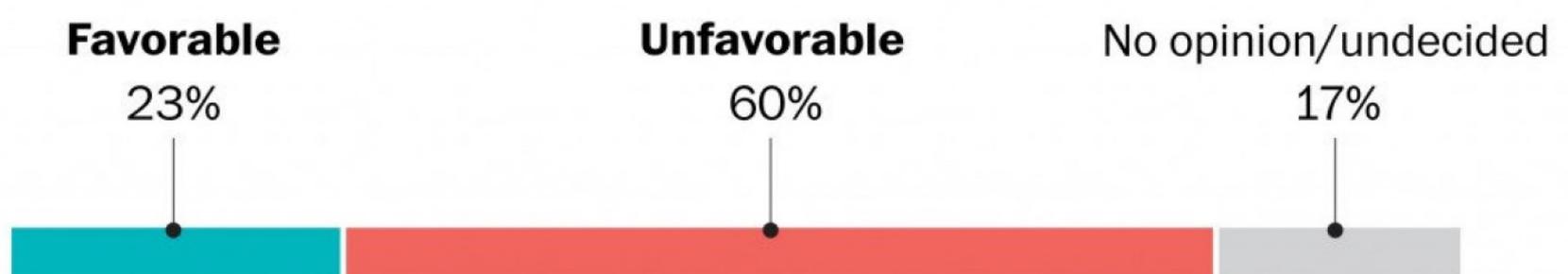
Even the March on Washington — so revered today — wasn't welcomed.

Just before the 1963 march, Gallup asked a nationally representative sample of adults how they felt about the coming event.

Less than a quarter of Americans said they held favorable opinions.

March on Washington (August 1963)

Q: What are your feelings about this [proposed mass civil rights rally]?



Source: Conducted by Gallup Organization Aug. 15-20, 1963, and based on personal interviews with a national adult sample of 1,588. Data provided by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.

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“Even after then, it was still a lot of resistance,” Ladner said. “Three weeks after the march, the church was burned in Birmingham that killed the four little girls,” she said, referring to [the 1963 bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church](#).

The following year— just before Freedom Summer began in Mississippi — Gallup asked whether mass demonstrations by blacks were likely to help or hurt the fight for equality. Nearly three-fourths of Americans said they would hurt.

“People have a great view of what happened in the 1960s,” said Courtland Cox, a one-time SNCC field organizer and is now chairman of the SNCC Legacy Project, “and this country has moved forward and we’ve done all these things. We even elected a [black] president. We thought we were post this,

but the reality is we're not."

Divides across race

While the majority of Americans may have disapproved of protest tactics in the 1960s, that doesn't necessarily represent how black Americans felt.

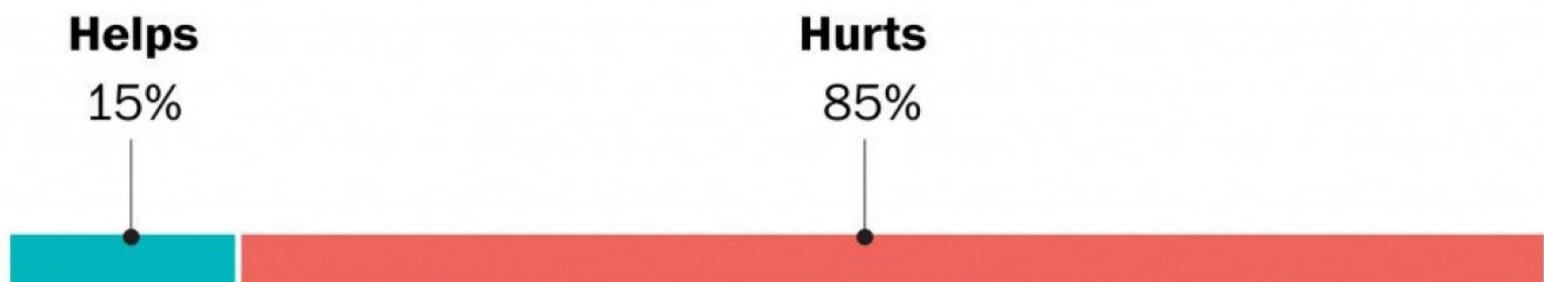
In 1965, two years after the March on Washington, 94 percent of African Americans rated the job Martin Luther King Jr. "has done in the fight for Negro rights" as positive, according to a Harris survey.

But when the polling company asked white adults the next year whether King was helping or hurting the cause, just 36 percent said he was helping; half of whites said he was hurting, while 14 percent said they weren't sure.

The divide was even starker when whites were asked about demonstrations overall; 85 percent of whites in a 1966 Harris survey said such protests actions by blacks would hurt the advancement of civil rights.

Whites on 'demonstrations by Negroes' (October 1966)

Q: All in all, do you feel the demonstrations by Negroes on civil rights have helped more or hurt more in the advancement of Negro rights?



Note: White respondents only.

Source: Conducted by Louis Harris & Associates during October 1966, and based on personal interviews with a national adult sample of 1,250. Sample size is approximate. As reported in the Philadelphia Inquirer. Data provided by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.

It was different for blacks; 70 percent said activities such as sit-ins, store picketing and demonstrations helped the effort to win equal rights, according to a 1969 survey conducted by Newsweek

“For the people on one side of the equation, who sat on the side, who didn’t experience segregation, didn’t experience the various negative laws, everything was fine and what we were doing was a disruption,” said Cox, the SNCC Legacy Project chairman. “In the black community, there was a whole different view.”

When working on voter registration in the Deep South, “we could not have survived if those black communities did not have some sense that we brought value,” Cox said.

As with the Black Lives Matter protests, the civil rights demonstrations of the 1960s included non-black activists.

But in 1966, when Harris asked whites whether they’d think marches and protests would be justified if they were in the same position as blacks, more than half said no.

We can see such racial divides today in how Black Lives Matter is perceived. In the [PBS News Hour/Marist poll](#) from September, 65 percent of blacks said the movement focuses on real issues of racial discrimination. Just 25 percent of whites felt similarly.

There are notable differences between the civil rights movement and Black Lives Matter, including approaches to protests and grass-roots organizing. Some 1960s activists [have significant disagreements](#) with what young people are doing today.

But Cox sees one important similarity: “Both of them were disruptive of people's view of the status quo.”



Black Lives Matters activists block traffic in St. Paul, Minn., on Sept. 20, 2015, to protest use of force by police. (Richard Tsong-Taatarii/Star Tribune via AP)

‘Critical’ to get the word out

Media played a big role in shaping how the public received the methods of 1960s civil rights protesters.

Compared to the technology available today, their tools were rudimentary. Back then, activists utilized phone trees and a network of organizations across the country to spread news about what was happening on the ground.

“No national television crews were coming to Mississippi in 1963,” Ladner said. “It was critical to try and get the word out as quickly as possible.”

The 1965 march in Selma, Ala., demonstrated the power of media in swaying public opinion. Images of peaceful voting rights protesters beaten by

policemen [were broadcast across the country](#).



Alabama state troopers swing nightsticks to break up a march in Selma, Ala., March 7, 1965. (AP file)

Almost half of Americans in a 1965 Harris survey said they sided with civil rights groups “in the recent showdown” in Alabama. Just 21 percent sided with the state of Alabama, while 19 percent answered neither and another 12 percent said they weren’t sure.

“If we didn’t get word to the outside world about what was happening to us, especially when confronted and beaten, we’re losing,” Ladner said. “If we’re isolated and somebody was killed — one man was killed on the courthouse lawn by a state legislator because he was trying to register to vote — if no one outside our town knew, it was all for naught.”

‘Young people, impolite’



Demonstrators staged a protest at the Justice Department on Aug. 27, 1963. (AP file)

Cobb went to a high school in a white working-class Massachusetts town, “and while people were sympathetic to the expansion of civil rights to include black people, at the same time, I think they saw us as young people, impolite.”

Compare that to how King and other older folks were viewed — “much more distinguished, certainly not impolite at any level,” Cobb said.

Back in the 1960s, “it’s young people who’s doing the sitting in, the young people — in their late teens and early 20s, just like the Black Lives Matter people are predominantly young,” Cobb said. “So they might disrupt something Clinton or Sanders is holding. It all resonates with us.”



Protesters stage a die-in near a Baltimore shopping mall on "Black Lives Matter Sunday," Dec. 14, 2014. (Amy Davis /Baltimore Sun)

African Americans in the 1960s debated the movement's tactics and strategies. While 71 percent of black adults in a 1963 Gallup poll said King was moving at the right speed, 21 percent said he wasn't moving fast enough. Indeed, defining what it meant to act with "all deliberate speed" was "a big, big deal," Cox said.

"I could see that in young people like me, that the criticism was not that you were doing it, it was that what was being done was not being done in a way that allowed us to have our vision of how we should be living in America," he said.

Cobb said the general public may not endorse activists' strategies because they aren't affected the issues central to the protests, such as segregation in

the 1960s or police brutality today.

“You can see yourselves in the Black Lives Matter students; you can understand their impatience with police violence,” Cobb said. “Our issue was segregation first, then we engaged in the fight for voter registration. But what we share with the Black Lives Matter people is their impatience.”

He added: “It’s their future, it’s their lives — just the way it was our future and our lives back in the day.”

[Questions About Civil Rights Protests 1960s](#) by [elahewapo](#)