

The Million Man March: Portraits and Attitudes

Robert Joseph Taylor, Associate Professor, School of Social Work, Faculty Associate Institute for Social Research and Center for Afro-American Studies, University of Michigan.

Karen D. Lincoln, Graduate Student, Joint Doctoral Program in Social Work and Sociology, University of Michigan.

Introduction

On Monday, October 16, 1995 black men from across the United States rallied in Washington, D.C. An examination of the weekly magazines, Newsweek, Time and U. S. News and World Reports revealed that the media did not think that a significant number of black men would attend the March. For instance, Newsweek reporters stated that "The Million Man March probably won't live up to its billing" (Smith & Waldman, 1995). The common wisdom as expressed by media pundits was that the March would be a success only if the number of men that attended the March equaled the 250,000 participants of Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1963 March on Washington. Both media pundits and many organizers were surprised by the huge turnout of black men.

The official estimate by the National Park Service of the number of marchers was 400,000. After the March this estimate was heavily criticized. A study commissioned by the ABC television show Good Morning America and conducted by Boston University estimated the number of marchers anywhere between 1.1 million and 675,000.

The purpose of the present analysis is to investigate findings from two surveys that have some relevance to the Million Man March. The major source of information for this article comes from a survey conducted by Ronald Lester and Associates for the Washington Post. Sixty-two black interviewers positioned around the Washington Mall and various subway stations conducted the interviews. This survey had a sample size of 1,047 randomly selected participants of the Million Man March. This article will also present information from a national survey of the black population which questioned respondents about their attitudes towards the March. All of the survey findings presented in this article were reported in the October 17, 1995 edition of the Washington Post.

In trying to ascertain the high levels of participation in the March, it is important to keep in perspective the political climate in the months before the March. The year before the March, Republicans became the majority party in the Senate and House of Representatives. Part of their political message was an elimination of affirmative action and other major social programs and the portrayal of welfare, crime and drug abuse as problems that are caused by black Americans. Other issues in the news during this period were accounts of police brutality in Los Angeles and other major cities, racial inequities in sentencing of criminals, and the O. J. Simpson trial and verdict.

Demographic Profile of Million Man Marchers

The Million Man Marchers tended to be more middle-aged, have higher levels of education, and higher incomes than black men in general. One out of three (33%) marchers were aged 18-30, 42% were 30-44, 20% were 41-60, and 4% were 61 years of age or older. Only 5% of the marchers had less than a high school education, 22% were high school graduates, 59% had some college or were college graduates and 14% had some post graduate education. Only 10% of the respondents reported that their 1994 family incomes were \$14,999 or less. Sixteen percent of respondents had family incomes between \$15,000 and \$29,999, 33% had incomes between \$30,000 and \$49,999, 17% had incomes between \$50,000 and \$74,999, 11% had incomes between \$75,000 and \$99,999 and 8% had family incomes of \$100,000 or more. Consistent with the higher levels of income and education, eight of ten of the marchers was registered to vote. One out of four respondents worked for local, state or the federal government. In addition, four out of ten respondents (42%) were married and another 46% were single. One out of ten respondents were divorced (10%) and 1% were widowed.

There are probably a million reasons why individuals decided to attend the March. Data from the Lester survey indicates that only 5% of the respondents indicated that the single most important reason that they were participating

in the March was to show support for Louis Farrakhan. Three of ten participants (29%) indicated that the most important reason that they participated in the Million Man March was to show support for black families, 25% stated to show support for black men taking more responsibility for their families and communities, 25% to demonstrate black unity, and 7% stated to demonstrate African American economic strength.

Many participants went to the march with family and friends. There were many instances of siblings, fathers with their young children, and fathers with their adult children attending the march. Findings from the survey indicated that 44% of the marchers had other members of their families participate in the march.

Like African American men in general, the participants in the Million Man March had fairly high levels of religious participation. Six in ten respondents indicated that they attended church or religious services at least once or twice a month. Half of the respondents reported that they consider themselves Protestants (52%), 7% indicated Catholic, 6% Muslim, 5% Nation of Islam and 14% indicated that they did not have any religious affiliation. This distribution of religious affiliations among the marchers is quite different than the national profile of black men's religious affiliations. As what might be expected, in comparison to black men in general, higher percentages of marchers were affiliated with the Nation of Islam and American Muslims. In addition, a lower percentage of marchers were Protestants.

Table 1 presents information on the regional distribution of the participants of the Million Man March. As might be expected the largest percentage of participants (29%) came from the Washington D. C. metropolitan area. It is important to note, however, that significant percentages of marchers came from states that are relatively far from the Washington metropolitan area. For instance, 10% of the marchers came from New York, 4% came from Illinois, and 3% came from California.

Women and the March

One of the major debates surrounding the Million Man March was whether black women should have been included in the march. Women were not invited to attend, but instead, were asked to remain at home to pray and teach their children about the importance of self-esteem and family unity. Most women chose not to attend, but a small number attended the event. Many women brought their sons and others supported the march's theme of reconciliation by Black men. The majority of the marchers supported the idea of excluding women. Fifty nine percent of the marchers believed that women should not have been included in the march, compared to 26% of Blacks nationally.

Despite the exclusion of women from the March, several of the speakers were women. Huge applause broke out for poet Maya Angelou and Civil Rights activist Rosa Parks when they each took the stage (The Chicago Tribune, October 17, 1995:A1). The Los Angeles Times deemed the speech by 10 year old Tiffany Mayo as "one of the most stirring speeches of the day" (L.A. Times, October 17, 1995: A10).

Attitudes Towards Louis Farrakhan

Much of the focus of the media was on Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan. Relatively few participants, however, reported that they were responding simply to Farrakhan's call. Twenty nine percent of those interviewed reported that a major reason for their participation was to show support for the Black family, 25% identified the opportunity to show support for Black men as the single most important reason, and 25% reported that their major reason for participating in the march was to demonstrate Black unity.

While only 5% of the marchers identified the opportunity to show support for Farrakhan as their biggest reason for making the trip, a significant number of marchers found Farrakhan to be more influential than other prominent African American political figures. Eighty seven percent reported to have a favorable impression of Farrakhan, compared to 81% for Jesse Jackson, 77% for Benjamin Chavis, and 73% for Colin Powell. A little over half (54%) of the marchers reported having a favorable impression of Bill Clinton, 41% for Jewish people, and 31% for whites.

The survey also suggests that Farrakhan may be an emerging political leader for the African American community. When asked if Louis Farrakhan would become more influential in the African American community as a result of the march, 55% of the marchers responded yes, compared to 34% of Blacks nationally. Slightly over half (55%) of the marchers think that Farrakhan will become more influential among political leaders in Washington, compared to 34% of Blacks nationally.

Limitations of Public Opinion Polls

The findings of the survey published by the Washington Post provide useful information on the demographic profile, religious involvement, and attitudes of the marchers. Like any survey, however, it has several sources of error, including variability and fixed bias (Converse & Traugott, 1986). The reported margin of error of 3 percentage points for the overall results is the standard warning label for published poll results. Such margin of error typically refers to the most obvious source of error--that caused by merely sampling the population as opposed to interviewing each member. The standard label presumes simple random sampling and, therefore, is not a conservative measure. Other sources of variability include sample composition and measurement variability due to interviewer effect and the construction of the questionnaire. Despite the noted limitations that are present in all surveys, the Lester survey clearly provides critical information on the attitudes of Million Man marchers.

Conclusion

This article presented some information detailing the demographic profile and attitudes of Million Man marchers. Whereas most work on Million Man marchers is based on anecdotal information or interviews of a few participants in a particular local area, the Lester survey is a large scale survey conducted during the march. The findings from the survey indicate that Million Man marchers had a higher likelihood of being middle aged, and had higher levels of income and education than the general black male population. Only a few marchers indicated that they attended the march because of Louis Farrakhan, although most of the marchers held favorable views towards him. The marchers also held more favorable views of Farrakhan than the general African American population.

Presently there are a large group of black researchers who are investigating various aspects of the impact of the Million Man March. An over-arching research agenda should include the impact of the march on issues such as male-female relationships, parenting responsibilities and community and political involvement. Research should examine trends in attitudes towards Louis Farrakhan, in particular, whether his level of popularity among the marchers continues after the march. Research in these areas will ascertain whether the Million Man March was a brief period event or whether it will have a lasting impact.

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