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Martin Luther King Jr. became involved not just in fights over racial equality but also economic hardship. Ted S. Warren/AP

Martin Luther King Jr. was ahead of his time in pushing for universal basic income

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Each year on the holiday that bears his name, Martin Luther King Jr. is remembered for his immense contributions to the struggle for racial equality. What is less often remembered but equally important is that King saw the fight for racial equality as deeply intertwined with economic justice.

To address inequality – and out of growing concern for how automation might displace workers – King became an early advocate for universal basic income. Under universal basic income, the government provides direct cash payments to all citizens to help them afford life's expenses.

In recent years, more than a dozen U.S. cities have run universal basic income programs, often smaller or pilot programs that have offered guaranteed basic incomes to select groups of needy residents. As political scientists, we have followed these experiments closely.

One of us recently co-authored a study which found that universal basic income is generally popular. In two out of three surveys analyzed, majorities of white Americans supported a universal basic income proposal. Support is particularly high among those with low incomes.

King's intuition was that white people with lower incomes would support this type of policy because they could also benefit from it. In 1967, King argued, "It seems to me that the Civil Rights Movement must now begin to organize for the guaranteed annual income ... which I believe will go a long, long way toward dealing with the Negro's economic problem and the economic problem with many other poor people confronting our nation."

But there is one notable group that does not support universal basic income: those with higher levels of racial resentment. Racial resentment is a scale that social scientists have used to describe and measure anti-Black prejudice since the 1980s.

Notably, in our research, whites with higher levels of racial resentment and higher incomes are especially inclined to oppose universal basic income. As King well knew, this segment of Americans can create powerful opposition.

Economic self-interest can trump resentment

At the same time, the results of the study also suggest that coalition building is possible, even among the racially resentful.

Economic status matters. Racially resentful whites with lower incomes tend to be supportive of universal basic income. In short, self-interest seems to trump racial resentment. This is consistent with King's idea of how an economic coalition could be built and pave the way toward racial progress.



As mayor of Stockton, Calif., Michael Tubbs ran a pioneering program that provided a basic income to a limited number of residents. Rich Pedroncelli/AP

Income is not the only thing that shapes attitudes, however. Some of the strongest supporters of universal basic income are those who have higher incomes but low levels of racial resentment. This suggests an opportunity to build coalitions across economic lines, something King believed was necessary. "The rich must not ignore the poor," he argued in his [Nobel Peace Prize lecture](#), "because both rich and poor are tied in a single garment of destiny." Our data shows that this is possible.

This approach to coalition building is also suggested by [our earlier research](#). Using [American National Election Studies](#) surveys from 2004-2016, we found that for white Americans, racial resentment predicted lower support for social welfare policies. But we also found that economic position mattered, too.

Economic need can unite white Americans in support of more generous welfare policies, including among some who are racially prejudiced. At a minimum, this suggests that racial resentment does not necessarily prevent white Americans from supporting policies that would also benefit Black Americans.

Building lasting coalitions

During his career as an activist in the 1950s and 1960s, King struggled with building long-term, multiracial coalitions. He understood that many forms of racial prejudice could undermine his work. He therefore sought strategies that could forge alliances across lines of difference. He helped build coalitions of poor and working-class Americans, including those who are white. He was not so naive as to think that shared economic progress would eliminate racial prejudice, but he saw it as a place to start.



Martin Luther King Jr. believed Americans of different racial backgrounds could coalesce around shared economic interests. AP

Currently, the nation faces an affordability crisis, and artificial intelligence poses new threats to jobs. These factors have increased calls for universal basic income.

Racial prejudice continues to fuel opposition to universal basic income, as well as other forms of social welfare. But our research suggests that this is not insurmountable.

As King knew, progress toward economic equality is not inevitable. But, as his legacy reminds us, progress does remain possible through organizing around shared interests.

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