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King family: Don't just wait for another leader

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ATLANTA (AP) -- In the 34 years since Martin Luther King Jr.'s death, people have watched for a new leader to emerge who could carry the banner for political and social justice with as much influence among American blacks.

But as the nation commemorates the civil rights leader's life, his family and activists say counting on a single charismatic figure may be counterproductive.

"I think that what Martin would be happy with is that every person would follow his teachings and not depend on a leader," said his widow, Coretta Scott King. "What he wanted to do was elevate the whole of human kind and (have) individuals understand that they can make a difference."

King's eldest son urges people not to wait but to each push for solutions to the problems that hit black communities particularly hard, such as health-care costs, the growing gap between the rich and poor and the disappearance of affirmative action programs.

"Men or women who are like Martin Luther King Jr. are rare," Martin Luther King III said. "I don't believe we have the luxury to wait around until a Martin Luther King Jr. emerges."

The focus for black activism has changed over the years as well, widening so much in the past three decades that no single leader could have the overwhelming influence King had before his assassination in 1968, some activists say.

"I think that phase of the one leader is beyond us now, and rightfully so," said Alvin Williams, head of Black America's Political Action Committee, a Washington-based conservative lobbying group. "During that time, African-Americans were much more



Martin Luther King Jr. acknowledges the crowd at the Lincoln Memorial for his "I Have a Dream" speech during the March on Washington, D.C., on August 28, 1963.

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similar in their backgrounds and struggles. But today, we're in all facets of American society."

The Revs. Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, as well as other leaders, have had success with many issues, yet their overall impact has never rivaled King's. Sharpton's recent announcement that he would seek the Democratic presidential nomination in 2004 has drawn little interest.

Rather than look to one leader, blacks should concentrate on electing candidates at all levels of government who are sympathetic to their issues, said the Rev. Joseph Lowery, former president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which was founded by King.

To do that, more blacks, especially those who didn't experience life before the civil rights movement, need to vote, he said.

"It's going to take their understanding of what's at stake," Lowery said. "Their future's at stake."

Many analysts have said Republicans won key elections in November because thousands of young black voters stayed home, in part because they felt neither party was addressing their issues.

A recent poll by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies showed that young blacks are less likely to identify with the Democratic party than their elders. Only 63 percent registered as Democrat in 2002, down from 74 percent in 2000.

But they're not turning to the Republican party either. Instead, a greater number are registering as independent.

"Increasingly you have a younger African-American voter who is being much more objective about his or her political choices," Williams said. "They don't like being taken for granted by the Democratic party, but they don't feel comfortable with the Republican party either."

Both parties need to understand the power of the black vote and better address minority issues, Lowery said. Current candidates have to be "bolder, clearer and more progressive in their outreach to young people."

King's son, the current president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, stressed the importance of blacks working with other minority groups to have a stronger voice.

"It's going to be incumbent for African-Americans to form coalitions with Latinos and Asians and even poor whites to make sure that issues affecting working people will be addressed," he said.



Martin Luther King Jr., attends a news conference in Birmingham, Alabama, on May 9, 1963.

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