The Latest Wave Of NFL Protests Is Likely To Be Unpopular. That Shouldn't Be A Surprise.

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Americans, as a rule, only like protests after they're safely ensconced in the history books. Today, there's little question about the legacy of civil rights leader Martin Luther King: 85 percent say he made things better for black Americans, and nearly 70 percent say that his legacy remains relevant today.

But back in the 1960s, when King was actually leading protests, just 36 percent of white Americans thought he was helping "the Negro cause of civil rights." Only 15 percent said that "demonstrations by Negroes on civil rights" were helping that cause.

There's no telling how people will come to see the recent wave of protests in the NFL, or whether the protests will be remembered at all. But recent and historical polling gives us some idea of how Americans view the demonstrations right now.

An August Washington Post/UMass Lowell poll found that 64 percent of self-described sports fans labeled "players speaking out on political issues" as at least a "minor" problem with the NFL. It was viewed as a "major" issue by 36 percent, ranking it just sixth in severity on a list of nine issues.

Two polls conducted earlier this month found little support for quarterback Colin Kaepernick's decision not to stand for the national anthem last year as a member of the San Francisco 49ers, the protest that initially prompted a few players to follow suit and then was emulated *en masse* in the NFL this past weekend.

In a Quinnipiac University poll last fall, 54 percent of Americans disapproved of athletes who refused to stand during the anthem as a protest, with just 38 percent approving. The survey found a "profound racial divide," with black Americans 44 percentage points likelier than white Americans to approve of the protests. An even wider gap yawned along partisan lines, with Democrats 54 points likelier than Republicans to be supportive.

President Donald Trump's decision to weigh in, calling players' decision to kneel "not acceptable," has the potential to polarize views even farther. But even if most Americans disapprove of the protests, far fewer are likely to agree with Trump's call to "fire or suspend" players who take part, based on a survey taken before the most recent demonstrations.

Just 38 percent think that NFL players who don't stand for the national anthem should be fired, according to a YouGov poll conducted last month for the libertarian Cato Institute, with 61 percent saying they should not.

"The public can be tolerant of players' refusing to stand for the national anthem, even while many disagree with what the players are doing," Emily Ekins, Cato's pollster, concluded. That many do disagree with what the players are doing isn't all that surprising.

"There is a unique resentment there that Trump is tapping," George Washington University political scientist Corrine McConnaughy wrote Saturday, pointing to research she'd conducted on the response to hypothetical protests by various racial and gender groups. "In sum: Trump has good reasons to believe the attack on black NFL players protesting is perfect fodder" for his base of supporters.

And beyond just Trump's base, "the public's overall attitude toward mass demonstrations seems to range from skepticism to outright condemnation," Paul Herrnson and Kathleen Weldon of the Roper Center for Public Opinion wrote in 2014, citing negative reactions at the time to everything from the civil rights "sit-ins" at lunch counters to anti-Vietnam War protests. "Even the most popular protest events have support levels that hover below half, and positive responses are rarely higher than negative ones," they wrote.

 "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," Weldon told The Washington Post. "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."