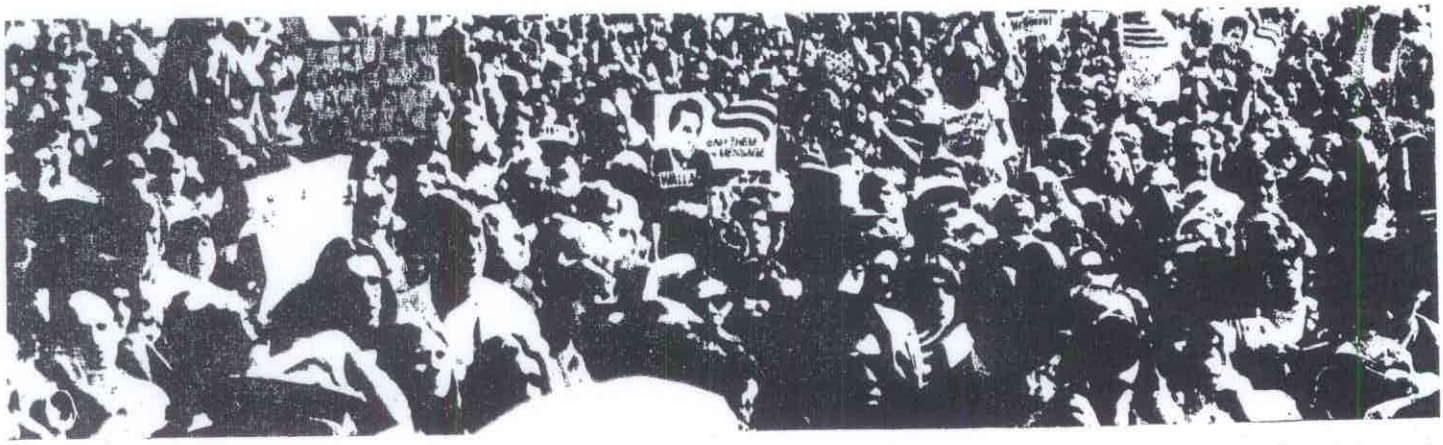


By Haynes Johnson

Washington Post Staff Writer

'N THE NOT-SO-OLD days of American politics, some reporters would measure the ɔpeal of a candidate by a simple and totally ıadequate device: the sight and sound of ıe crowds.

Handsome Jack attracted so many jumpers ıd squealers in some tank town. It was a ıre sign of success. He was a winner. Brave ill could draw only a modest number who stened quietly as he spoke on Main Street. e clearly was a loser.

Gradually, though, the uncomfortable politil truth became apparent: The campaign car-ans with their synthetic rallies and proces-ons, their bands, balloons and carnival at-ıosphere, their bused-in crowds from the union all, retirement home or campus, were all a aud. They told us nothing about the people.

The crowd count and the applause meter ere soon replaced by another gauge, the ıblic opinion survey. The pollsters could tell ; in advance what Americans thought and ır whom they would vote. The pundits wrote ıthoritative pieces about it. Then the new cperts, the political theorists, figured it all ıt for the rest of us.

The American electorate was composed of ardhats, Ethnics, Middle Americans and a ilent Majority that always lived somewhere the center. They were surrounded on the ft by a relatively small number of liberals ıd radicals and on the right by even fewer ınservatives and reactionaries. The Real Ma-ırity or the Emerging Majority could be ıined by employing specific political strategy med at certain blocs of voters in certain ·gions. Follow the Social Issue and wear the .urels of victory.

Giving shape and direction to these diverse ements of the electorate were the real pros, ıe party leaders. Politics was a game; they ere the best players. You had to have them win. "Conventional wisdom" dictated no ıher course.

And that, children, is why Edmund Muskie, everybody's favorite, is about to be nominated by the Democratic Party and why George McGovern, the prairie populist, the five-per-center in the polls and the hopeless candidate in the press, has once again confirmed the old adage about nice guys finishing last.

That is the political fable of our times.

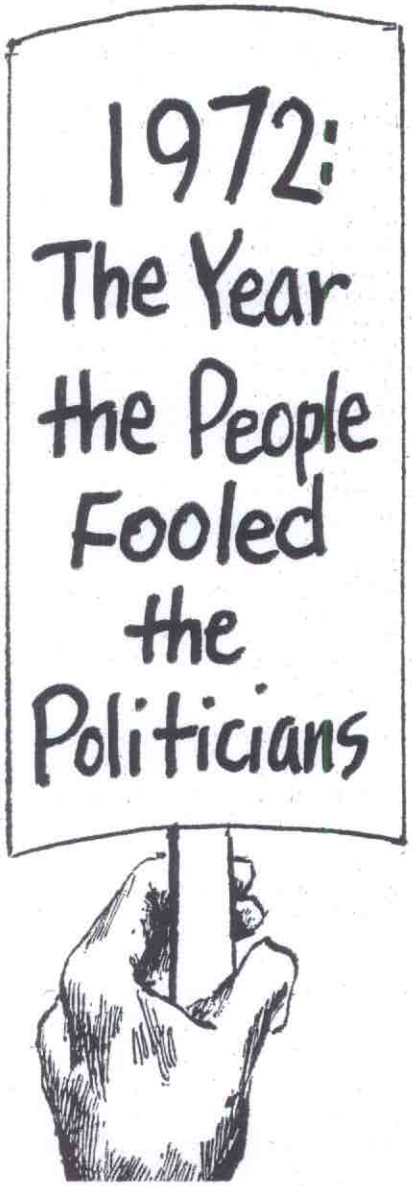
Forget the Labels

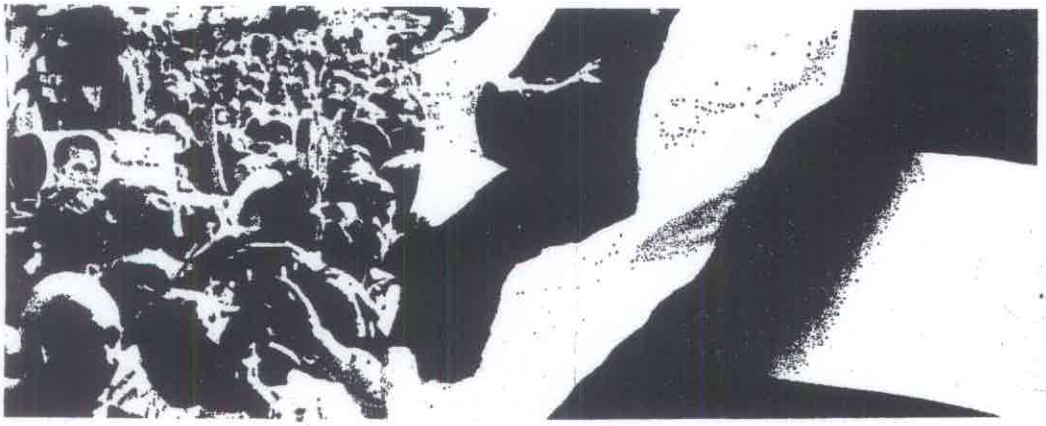
NOW THAT WE are all trying to analyze why we have so egregiously misread so many voters so far this year, it is worth noting that the best explanation came not from a politician nor a pundit nor a reporter, but from some anonymous citizen. This person's hand-printed sign somewhere in California said simply: "1972: The Year the People Fooled the Politicians." It might have added, parenthetically, "And the Press," but that, of course, wasn't necessary.

Actually, the reasons for the misinterpretations are not that hard to find. Here are some that might be put under the heading of the confessions and reminiscences of a political reporter.

Our first lesson in this primer on American politics, 1972, is: Forget the labels, including those of political parties, and the stereotyping of groups that neatly categorize, but do not define, the voting public. Second: Be extremely wary about anything purporting to tell us that Americans are motivated politically solely by specific issues or ideologies. (Permissiveness. Drugs. Crime. Campus Unrest. The Recession. The War. Are there substantial numbers of citizens anywhere, of any party, who are for them? Law and order. Who is against it?) And third: Do not assume the changes seemingly sweeping the country mean we are in the midst of a sudden political revolution.

Change is always upsetting, and sometimes frightening. What we are seeing this year is certainly political change—but of the most encouraging kind. Before the long 1972 presidential year began there was much concern that people were so alienated that they would





not participate at all, that the old order was crumbling rapidly and there was nothing to replace it. Some saw anarchy lurking on the horizon. Some merely found apathy.

None of that has happened. Voters this year are involved. They are showing that they care enough about the country's problems to work within the political process for what they believe. And they are using their ballots and their time with probably more sophistication and independence than at any point in the past. These are signs of robust political health and vitality.

A Decade of Change

MY CONTENTION, based on a decade of travels across the country attempting to assess the American mood, is that we have been witnessing over this period an inevitable evolutionary process of gradual change.

If you had to pick a time to delineate a sharp break with the past, it would be that November day in Dallas in 1963 when John F. Kennedy was assassinated. The trauma of that event set in motion forces that have not yet been stilled. At least, it left a sense of unfulfillment and a question about might-have-been. Were we heading for a true renaissance in which national excellence was the touchstone, or a final disillusionment? Was it shadow or substance? We'll never know.

Lyndon Johnson's great victory the next year held forth the promise and expectation that we were entering a new period of national unity leading toward, in that typically grandiose Johnsonian phrase, a "Great Society." Those hopes were shattered first by urban riots and black revolution and later by the war and finally by the poisonous divisions and demonstrations—and more assassinations—of the last presidential year.

Most Americans were glad to see the 1968 political year end. It had been too long, full of too many bewildering and frightening scenes; it contained too much hope and too much despair for most people to absorb or comprehend completely.

At the end of that campaign I remember one man trying to find meaning in all that turbulence. "You know what I think is lacking in this campaign?" he said. "The people aren't being challenged. They have always responded in the past to a genuine call for sacrifice, but they aren't being asked to do that. No one has reached them. No one has summoned their better nature, and so they remain frustrated, negative and uncertain."

The next few years brought evidence that the country not only still was far from being united, but was also still groping for a kind of leadership in which it could believe. You could still hear citizens expressing a feeling of pessimism about the future. It was, you heard over and over, like the fall of the Roman Empire.

Doubt and Uneasiness

WHEN DAVID BRODER and I made the first of our trips for The Washington Post two years ago examining the attitudes of American voters, we returned struck by one overwhelming theme: A sense of doubt and uneasiness among Americans, accompanied by a deep concern for the future of their children. This feeling existed among all groups of voters—Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives—in all sections of the country.

Aside from personal doubts, such feelings had another implication that bears on the presidential politics of 1972. It affected the way Americans think about politics and political leaders. Many of the voters we met then said they had lost faith in their country's system, in America's ability to solve the problems confronting it.

Last fall, in a more ambitious journey examining not only the attitudes of the people but looking at the political parties as well, we found Americans still doubtful and the entire political process in a state of disintegration. The old two-party system that served America since its inception was in serious decline and, in some areas, was already moribund.

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VOTERS, From Page C1

As we said then:

"Because Americans today are not wedded to any particular man—and certainly to no political party—the 1972 presidential prospects are in an extraordinary fluid state. Compounding the confusion is another political fact. No great war-and-peace or economic boom-or-bust issue dominates the American scene today. The concerns are many and complex. There is thus no unifying theme that either would lead to a major political realignment or propel a man and his party into power. If anything, the political future beyond 1972 promises to be even more volatile, uncertain and fragmented."

Increasing Independence

NO ONE CAN SAY with any certainty just how much alienation exists in America today. Earlier this year the Institute for Social Research at Ann Arbor, Mich., published a study on public satisfaction with life in the United States today. The conclusions are worth noting:

"It is very difficult to estimate from individual acts of anger and protest which attract public notice how widely these attitudes are held in the general population. When we actually ask people how they feel about life in the United States today we find that the great majority express general satisfaction but a significant minority do not and within this minority there are several million people who appear to be seriously disaffected."

The Michigan study did, however, reveal "a widespread feeling that the quality of life in this country has been deteriorating." Four out of five of the people interviewed cited ways in which life was getting worse. Among the factors cited were economic conditions, inflation and taxation, followed by crime, drug use, declining morality, public protests and disorders and environmental pollution. Although it found few people with a wholly pessimistic or optimistic view, when the citizens were asked whether they thought things were getting better or worse, twice as many said worse.

Yet despite all the evidence of general public disaffection, the political events of this year have demonstrated something else about Americans today. They are not so discouraged that they will not participate in the political system. On the contrary, the amount of true citizen participation propably never has been higher. Those who are voting are exercising an independence of judgment that mocks the comfortable assumptions of both the conventional politicians and the wise men of the press. Indeed, independence is the one thing that best characterizes this year.

Seeming Contradictions

A GALLUP POLL on party identification highlights that trend. Today 31 per cent of the voters consider themselves independent. Four years ago the figure was 27 per cent, and four years earlier it was 22 per cent. To look at it another way, the Republican Party today finds inself in the unusual position of controlling the White House at a time when allegiance to the party is as low as it has been since 1940. Gallup's survey of party identification lists 25 per cent of Americans 18 and older classifying themselves as Republicans.

As a result of this increasing independence, in one day in New York Democrats will vote against both an Averell Harriman, a familiar figure from the past, and Gloria Steinem, representing new forces. They will defeat an Emanuel Celler for an unknown young woman, and yet at the same time choose William F. Ryan over Bella Abzug.

And in state after state voters would tell you precisely why they were going to vote for George Wallace in the primary—but under no circumstances support him for president in the fall. "You see," said Mary Truitt, a slight, quiet, retired school teacher working in her garden in the suburbs of Detroit on the eve

of the Michigan primary, "Wallace has been saying the things we want to hear. I wouldn't vote for him in November, so this time I'm going to vote for him in the primary. How else can we make our feelings known?"

Some may find that kind of behavior contradictory. I happen to find it an indication of the most fundamental change affecting America today.

Toppled Assumptions

THIS CHANGE, as I have suggested before, is in personal attitudes and values. You simply cannot talk to Americans today without being struck by one fact: They are asking themselves intensely serious and personal questions about their jobs, their families, their children, their country, their aspirations, their future.

Until this year the change was largely cultural, not political. Now those attitudes about life-styles and a rejection of the rigid positions of the past are spilling over into the political process. Today's electorate is undoubtedly the best educated, best informed, most sophisticated, and most tolerant we have seen.

The way the voters have acted during the 23 Democratic presidential primaries this year has cast doubt on many earlier assumptions about the electorate. As the year began there were many—and I was among them—who doubted whether youth would register and then participate in the elections. They have. It was assumed that Hubert Humphrey had a solid hold on the black voters. He wound up actually losing the black vote in California, the largest state, and a major share of prominent blacks have publicly come out for McGovern. It was assumed that McGovern, from sparsely settled South Dakota, could never attract the union and blue collar voters in the big cities. He was dividing, if not carrying, that vote by the end of the primaries. And it was assumed that endorsements from political leaders could insure the nomination of a widely known and respected American like Muskie. It is doubtful if anyone would be willing to make such assumptions today.

The real message the people are sending the politicians is that they demand more, and they are willing to work to get it. They are not satisfied with the response of big government, big labor, big corporations. They are weary of promises that are not fulfilled, tired of cheap appeals, sick of slogans, not fooled by canned TV spots.

Trust and Faith

AS I SUGGESTED this time last year, "Next year's presidential election promises to be one of the most critical and difficult in our history. The issue, if I'm right, is not the war—or the economy—or crime and permissiveness and youth and drugs—or pollution of the environment—or national priorities—although these are all factors. It is what kind of country America is going to become, and whether the people will believe what anyone tells them."

That last element—trust and faith—is the most important of all. I believe that it, more than anything else, accounts for George McGovern's extraordinary success this year.

One of the most interesting things about the McGovern phenomenon—there we go again with those meaningless labels—is the kind of response to the most quiet, essentially colorless candidate in memory. The people that

come to see him are also quiet. This last week you could see them standing patiently in the rain outside the state capitol in Columbia, S.C., or in the 100-degree heat of Oklahoma City. They are good natured and serious. There are no hecklers. They listen.

These voters are not vociferous. Their applause is warm and polite, not the outbursts that greeted the Kennedys on the campaign trail. In other states, they would affectionately call out to the candidate to loosen his tie or take off his coat. It is almost as if George McGovern, the politician, is incidental; he is merely their instrument.

Where all this will take McGovern and his movement no one can say. But I would suspect that those who still cling to standard political formulas of success or who think the pros have a lock on wisdom are in for more surprises—if not this presidential year, then in the next.

What we may have seen this week in the rancorous and divisive fight over the California delegation to the Democratic convention is the beginning of the splintering of the oldest, largest political party. The prospect for new parties and alignments in the years ahead now has become more than idle speculation.

But win or lose, McGovern has become a symbol to many Americans. No one is able to say exactly what kind of country people want America to become, but my guess is that McGovern's use of that simple—and obviously vague—phrase, "a good and decent land," strikes a deep chord in many. For some, it answers a yearning for a return to a quieter, more tranquil America. For others, it promises the fashioning of a freer, more open society. But they all, I think, want to believe in their country and to respect their leaders and institutions.

In a nation of more than 210 million citizens, and a potential voting electorate of some 140 million, it should be self-evident that there is no single thread or theme that binds the country together. There are many Americas—the America of anger and despair and dissonance, and the America of quiet towns and peaceful cities, of people with faith in the future, of judgment and strength at a moment of crisis. All exist side by side everywhere. The cheap and the noble, the meretricious and the self-effacing are a part of us all.

And before we venture into the foolish business of forecasting the political future, it would be well to remember an incident involving George McGovern last week.

Ordinarily, McGovern is a cautious man. But last Monday he appeared before a press conference to announce that, on the strength of new commitments from black delegates, he had gone over the top in the delegates needed for nomination. He was wrong. As he acknowledged several times during his swing through the South, "We made a mistake."

He was asked about that mistake the other morning in Atlanta. McGovern smiled. "Well, ladies and gentlemen," he said, "we were wrong. But I think a little humility is good for us all."

SUNDAY, JULY 2, 1972