



David S. Broder

Voting for Immobility

AN ELECTION—when all is said and done—comes down to the question of power, and the 1972 election is as much a test of the voters' attitudes toward political power as it is a referendum on Richard Nixon, George McGovern, Vietnam, corruption or any other issue.

My guess is that the results are going to be ambiguous because the public attitude toward governmental power is equivocal and contradictory.

That's been the condition in the United States for many years now, as the vot-

ers have shown repeatedly that they are both attracted and frightened by the exercise of power by their leaders.

More than any other single factor, that ambivalence explains why for 20 years we have had divided government in Washington and many states, why strong executives at every level of government have been ousted or put on short rein.

IN THE 1950s, the voters said they liked Ike—but saddled him with a Democratic Congress. In 1960 and 1968, they elected Presidents by the narrowest of margins and denied them effective majorities in the legislative branch.

Only once in the last 20 years have they delivered a clear mandate. In 1964, they ignored Barry Goldwater's warning that Lyndon Johnson was "so powerful, you plug him in and the whole country lights up," and they gave Johnson both a personal landslide and a compliant congressional majority.

Two years later—when Johnson used that power to pass a massive legislative program, to escalate the Vietnam war and to trigger inflation—they cut back his congressional majority and curbed his authority.

This year the voters seem both to crave strong leadership and to cringe from it.

McGovern has been badly hurt by a reputation for weakness, stemming from the Eagleton incident and the shifts of position on some policy questions. Time after time, voters have told interviewers, "He says one thing one day, and something else the next."

Conversely, it's become clear that Mr. Nixon substantially strengthened his prospects for reelection by three bold uses of executive power: the wage-price freeze; the diplomatic opening with China; and (hard as it is for some of us critics to admit) the bombing-blockade of North Vietnam.

Those three actions converted him, in the minds of many voters, from the hapless, passive President of his first two years in office into a leader who is, as so many

voters say, "trying his best" to shape a satisfactory outcome in an inherently imperfect world.

But even as he is applauded for using his power, Mr. Nixon is feared and distrusted. A significant minority of the voters suspect him of maneuvering the peace talks for his own advantage. Even more clearly, an important bloc of voters now says that Watergate, the wheat deal and the assorted other "scandals" of the Nixon administration fit a pattern of the misuse of power for selfish interests.

IT WOULD BE incorrect, I think, to view this suspicion as a personal problem of this particular President's. It has, I'm afraid, become generic—a distrust of government and of government's essence, the exercise of power.

It shows most clearly in a question Washington Post reporters have been asking voters all year about whether they think the country is better off if the presidency and Congress are controlled by the same party.

Overwhelmingly, the answer is negative. "It's better," the typical voter says, "if it's evenly balanced."

This "equilibrium model" to give it a fancy name, is something new in our political thinking; it is the doctrine of checks-and-balances carried to a point at which immobility becomes the most desirable characteristic of government.

This is a step beyond the ticket-splitting that became so pervasive in the 1950s and 1960s. It is a subtle inclination, on the part of many voters, to employ the ballot box to paralyze the government—so as to minimize the risk of harm from governmental actions.

It is this attitude, I think, that will deprive the Republicans of most of the coattail benefits of the likely Nixon victory. In a deeper sense, it is this ambivalence about power that makes it so difficult for any government to move strongly and forcefully to address the nation's problems in the years ahead.