

Pat 9/9/74

... Without a Solid Constituency

CINCINNATI—Although President Ford wins an almost unanimous “favorable” rating from middle and upper-income voters in two strongly Republican suburban precincts here, the shocking fact that these same voters say they know scarcely anything about the man or his policies carries the threat to his popularity of rapid deterioration.

This apparent contradiction stems from the unprecedented way Mr. Ford became President—not following a long presidential campaign which made previous Presidents well known to voters in advance, but by appointment to Vice President and sudden accession to President. That means Mr. Ford, despite phenomenal popularity during his presidential honeymoon, lacks the hard constituent base—party workers and millions of voters who cast their ballots—which his predecessors brought with them when they entered the White House.

A Cincinnati businessman in suburban Madeira, asked whether Mr. Ford would do better on the economic crisis than Nixon, summed it up: “I could not begin to answer that question because I don’t know enough about him. I don’t know anything about him.”

The lack of a durable constituent base, despite his massive honeymoon popularity, carries grave political risks for Mr. Ford. It requires speedy, successful performance—particularly on spiraling inflation and threatening economic disaster—far more so than with a President backed by a national voter mandate.

The demand for just such swift performance, but lacking real confidence that Mr. Ford can produce it, underlined our interviews with 55 voters in

tree-shaded suburban Norwood and Madeira in company with pollster Patrick Caddell of Cambridge Survey Research.

With inflation and the economy labeled the most important national issue by 54 of our voters, only 24 voters—well under half—said they had “more confidence” in Mr. Ford’s ability to deal with the economy than in the disgraced former President. Indeed, even among 1972 Nixon voters who call themselves Republican, Mr. Ford’s confidence ratio on handling the shaky economy was only marginally higher than Nixon’s. Ten of the 25 Republicans who voted for Nixon said they had “more confidence” in Mr. Ford, while three said they had less.

Likewise, not one of the six Democrats in our sample who voted for Nixon agreed that with President Ford in office, the economy would improve over what it might have done with Nixon still President. As one Republican voter, a biochemist in upper-income Madeira, told us: “Ford doesn’t have a single problem today with either party, but that’s because we don’t know yet what he is planning to do.”

Here lies the potentially dangerous threat for the President. Although his honeymoon is now in full bloom, failure to launch a credible administration attack on inflation soon could consume his widespread but shallow popularity in a nasty backlash unopposed by the nonexistent national constituency that would normally come to the aid of a new President.

Moreover, we found only slender indications that Nixon’s demise and Mr. Ford’s accession have had much impact—at least yet—on widening the thin base of the Republican Party.

One out of every three Nixon-Republican voters of 1972 did say they would be “more inclined” in the post-Watergate era to vote for Republican candidates for Congress. But independents who voted for Nixon in 1972—the obvious target for broadening the Republican Party—told us Mr. Ford’s accession would make “no difference.”

That suggests only limited Republican gains in the November election. Republican dissident voters, who could not stomach Watergate and either voted Democratic or stayed home during the disastrous Republican showing in the special congressional election here last spring, are returning to the party. However, this trend stops far short of showing any new Republican increments. Thus, the congressional seat in this formerly rockribbed Republican district is likely to be kept by Democrat Thomas Luken, who won last spring’s special election.

With the President’s prowess on the economy being awaited here with healthy skepticism, his single major policy switch—pledging conditional amnesty for Vietnam draft-dodgers—struck a highly responsive chord. Over 60 per cent of each category of voters—Republicans, Democrats and independents—agreed with the President’s amnesty position.

But compared to Mr. Ford’s overwhelming task on inflation and the economy, amnesty is a trivial diversion. Whether the political base of the President’s overwhelming popularity of the last month can be deepened into a real Ford constituency depends directly on his economic mastery, and time is running short.