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What polls really show about Kennedy and 1972

NEW YORK — At first glance, Sen. Edward M. Kennedy looks mighty good in the latest Gallup Poll of Democratic presidential possibilities. Of the 1,411 Democrats queried in 280 localities in late November, 29 per cent preferred Kennedy to top the ticket

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next year, as compared to only 25 per cent who opted for the so-called front-runner, Edmund S. Muskie.

But things are not always what they seem — not even the polls, which is a point that needs to be better understood, on the eve of a campaign year in which they will play an important part. It is not a matter of downgrading political opinion surveys, particularly since both Dr. Gallup and Louis Harris, the most widely read practitioners of the art, proved remarkably accurate in advance measurement of the 1968 results.

Rather, the point is that the headline aspect of a particular poll — Kennedy leads Muskie — does not necessarily suggest its true significance; and sometimes what a poll does not show, or emphasize, or the circumstances in which it was taken, are its most useful characteristics. In the case of the recent Gallup findings, for instance:

While Kennedy is five points ahead of Muskie among the Democrats surveyed, it is equally possible to read this poll as showing that substantially less than one-third of them favor a Kennedy presidential nomination next year. It is true that the field is at the moment as cluttered as the Italian parliamentary scene, but 29 per cent does not seem particularly impressive for one of Kennedy's name, heritage and personal glamour.

Middle of road

By contrast, Muskie at 25 per cent, and Hubert H. Humphrey, the party's Old Faithful, at 19 per cent, command between them a solid 43 per cent of the Democrats surveyed. While the poll does not show second choices, that 43 per cent probably is pretty squarely in the middle of the party spectrum, and it is permissible speculation that many Muskie and Humphrey backers, in extremis, would turn to each other's man rather than to Edward Kennedy.

Interestingly enough, moreover, it was not Kennedy but Humphrey who registered the biggest gain. Since the previous poll, in September, the former vice president picked up six points, against a gain of only one point for Kennedy — another suggestion that this poll most nearly favors middle-road Democrats.

Both of these gains, generally speaking, were made at the expense of Muskie. Does that mean Muskie is fading? It may, but the more likely possibility is that it really reflects the difficulty of his having been the "front-runner" for more than two years. During that time, it has been impossible for Muskie to win any victories or otherwise consolidate his position; inevitably, in the same period, he has made some controversial decisions and remarks, offending some Democrats. So it is not really surprising that, as time dulls the memory of Kennedy's experience at Chappaquiddick and if Humphrey's advisers can chain him down, he should begin to score against a candidate who almost necessarily seems to be standing still.

Nothing like a win

There is, of course, nothing there that a Muskie primary victory or two could not cure — particularly since Kennedy will not be running in any of them and, if Humphrey's advisers can chain him down, he will be coming in only in the later primaries.

However any of that may turn out, the new Gallup poll, most importantly, suggests how unlikely it is that anyone other than one of the big three — Kennedy, Muskie, Humphrey — will be nominated next year. Collectively, they were the choices of 72 per cent of the Democrats queried, a fact which reflects not least the power of name identification; for they are the only three potential Democratic nominees already known to all. No one else could show more than 6 per cent — not Mayor Lindsay with all his novelty and glamour, or Scoop Jackson with his solitary position on the right of the spectrum, or George McGovern with his superior organization, or Eugene McCarthy with his standing as the mystic dragon-slayer of 1968.

Finally, this kind of poll really poses a free, almost abstract choice; which man do you prefer out of many? In fact, most primary voters will have to make hard specific choices — Muskie, McGovern or Sam Yorty in New Hampshire, for instance; and so will most delegates, since the field is likely to narrow steadily in the months between now and the Miami Beach convention.

The most specific choice of all, of course, will be made in the polling booth next November, between Richard M. Nixon and Mr. X of the Democrats. The President is leading the field right now but that need not necessarily be the case when — and if — the divided Democrats finally put all their chips on one man.

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