

Reston Reports

The 'Losers' Grab for Popularity

By James Reston
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Now that the primary elections are over, the battle for standing in the popularity polls begins.

All the losing presidential candidates will be making the rounds of the State party conventions, trying to pick up enough delegates to stop Nixon and Humphrey.

But in the end, the only hope for Rockefeller, Kennedy and McCarthy now lies in getting to the top in the polls.

Tactics

Governor Rockefeller's strategy, if that is the word for it, is obviously aimed at George Gallup and Louis Harris. To deal with the rising feeling that Nixon has all but won the nomination, the governor is now running around like General West-

moreland proclaiming that "the tide has turned."

The latest in a series of mystifying Rockefeller predictions about his future in American politics is that he will be nominated by the Republicans in Miami Beach next August and will win the election in November. There is, of course, not even a straw of evidence to support such a conclusion at the moment, but this is the sort of thing candidates and baseball managers do when they are looking for customers.

Also, they advertise, and Rockefeller is beginning to try that, too. He has been making television spot announcements which will soon be shown on stations all over the country, and these may have some effect on the polls, for the governor obviously has something to sell. It is his experience and his record of solving difficult

problems and working with politicians of differing loyalties that have impressed so many politicians in both parties, but he has not exploited this experience to the full since he came into the race.

He went into the Federal Government in 1940 — 28 years ago. Since then, he has been coordinator of inter-American affairs, chairman of President Truman's International Development Advisory Board, a reorganizer of the Departments of Defense and Health, Education and Welfare, assistant Secretary of State, Under Secretary of HEW, and the successful governor of a State larger, richer and more complicated than most nations.

Leaders

He is not a brilliant speaker, and this has hurt him in the polls, but he has been an effective administrator, an

imaginative innovator of policy, and a collector and leader of talented men. This is obviously what he will now be trying to make clear by extensive use of televised advertisements, with the hope that he can convince the voters, and thereby the convention delegates, that he can not only win but govern effectively.

Senator McCarthy and Kennedy have the same problem of climbing up the greasy polls, but they do not have the same record to advertise. Nevertheless, they too must rely now, not on friendly persuasion at the various political conventions this summer, but on television appeals — hopefully better than their last so-called debate — to raise their popularity with the mass of the voters.

The war in Vietnam and

the peace talks in Paris, of course, could still be major factors. If the war goes on all summer, with the loss of between 400 and 550 American dead a week, this could revive the peace issue and hurt Humphrey, the spokesman for the administration's war policy.

Paris

On the other hand, if the Paris talks should produce a cease-fire this summer, Humphrey would gain, and Nixon, Kennedy and McCarthy would undoubtedly drop in the polls.

It would be hard to overestimate the influence the popularity polls have achieved in the minds of American politicians. Nobody argues that these devices can tell us which of these men would make the best President; only who is likely to get the votes. But this is enough in

many, indeed in most, cases to be decisive.

And not only in picking the presidential nominees, either. For both parties have already started polling privately to see which vice-presidential candidates, if any, would add voting strength to the two tickets. Would Governor Connally of Texas add more to Humphrey in the south than he would lose in the north? Would Percy of Illinois, or Hatfield of Oregon, or some Southern governor help or hurt Nixon? More than likely, the polls will decide again.

It's an odd way to pick men to govern the most influential nation on earth, but that's the way it is, and the reports of Gallup and Harris will probably be more decisive this year than ever before.