The Wallace Factor

WASHINGTON—Among some political observers it has become a sport to poor-mouth George McGovern as a presidential candidate. His failings, it is said, have cost the Democrats what should have been a good if not favored position in 1972.

That argument seems less persuasive when one compares the latest Gallup Poll with the figures at this point in the 1968 campaign. Here is the current result, just published:

Nixon 60 1972
McGovern 34
Other & undecided 6

These were the figures reported by Gallup at this time four years ago:

Nixon 43 1968
Humphrey 31
Wallace 20
Other & undecided 6

The big difference is George Wallace (photo). There are always many factors in political choice, but that is the one that leaps out of the comparative figures: The little judge from Alabama is not running in 1972.

Other surveys of voter preference indicate that Wallace could do as well in this election as the last if he were on the ballot. Most important, with Wallace out 80 per cent of his supporters go for Nixon—and would have gone that way last time.

As many as Humphrey

If you take the 1968 Wallace support and distribute 80 per cent to Nixon, you find that the 1968 Gallup table would look very much like today's. In short, George McGovern is attracting about as many votes as Hubert Humphrey—although he is running against an incumbent President who has totally committed the resources of the White House to politics.

But of course McGovern had to do better than Humphrey; to win, almost certainly has to take a good part of the Wallace vote. Back in the primary period his strategists argued that he could. Wallace supporters were alienated people ready for change in America, they said; what was needed was a New Populism to bring them along with traditional liberals.

Probably the theory was romantic all along. The people who tell poll-takers that they like Wallace are very often disaffected from the system, it is true; they condemn politicians of both major parties. But they are culturally conservative. They tend to be for the war, against welfare and social reform and trendy life styles.

The economy and taxation

The one area in which the Wallace people are most strongly for change is the economy and taxation. That should have been an issue overwhelmingly helpful to McGovern, for he was committed to sweeping tax reform. What went wrong? McGovern has simply not dramatized the grotesque inequities that enable the rich in America to get richer at public expense. He has failed to capitalize on the pervasive resentment of our tax system. By careless thinking of his own and bad staff work he seemed to focus attention instead on the welfare problem, where, to put it bluntly, there were no votes to be won.

Anthony Lewis

In the depth opinion surveys, people say that Nixon likes the rich and McGovern the poor. When Wallace supporters and blue-collar workers generally face the choice in those terms, one opinion analyst says, "they would rather identify with successful executives or money men than with what they consider the shiftless poor."

McGovern seen as 'soft'

The failure on that score has been amplified by personality. George McGovern has come through so "soft," when Wallace voters were likely to be open to persuasion only by a reformist candidate who seemed tough. Probably only a Kennedy kind of figure could have done it: perhaps only a Kennedy.

When one understands the importance of the Wallace vote to Nixon, it is even more astounding that there should be a serious effort to attract liberal votes for him. An example at hand, a particularly sleazy one, is a letter sent to some New Yorkers by Leo Cherne, an old Cold Warrior. It calls McGovern an isolationist and says he would "abruptly terminate" American aid to refugees and orphans in Asia.

The mind reels

The lie is so crude that the mind reels: George McGovern wants to end the American bombing that creates the refugees and orphans, and then supply humanitarian aid in large amounts. It is Richard Nixon who has bombed Indochina for the last four years. Is it conceivable that any thoughtful liberal will forget that in a misguided attempt to be hard-nosed?

My own guess is that the election will be much closer than the polls now indicate. But in any case it is certainly in the interest of liberal-minded people—those who worry about wire tapping and economic inequality and American destruction of Southeast Asia—to prevent a landslide that could be taken as a right-wing mandate.