

Nixon Credibility, Popularity Drop as Watergate Presses

By Louis Harris

By a margin of 63 to 9 per cent, the American people feel that the "White House has not been frank and honest on the Watergate affair," but "has withheld important information about it." As a direct result of the recent Watergate revelations, President Nixon's overall rating with the public has slipped nine points, from 59 per cent positive in March to 50 per cent positive this past week.

On the key dimension of "inspiring confidence personally in the White House," Mr. Nixon's rating has also fallen off sharply, now standing at 53 to 33 per cent negative. Back in February, it stood at 48 to 41 per cent positive.

When people were asked to say in their own words why they feel the way they do about the President, a quarter of the public volunteered that "he has not been truthful, especially about Watergate." This is an unusually high number of spontaneous comments on a single issue.

In a survey taken among a national cross section of 1,537 households from April 18 to April 23, nearly one-third, 32 per cent, of the public expressed the view that "President Nixon personally knew about the attempt to wiretap Democratic headquarters," up from 16 per cent who felt that way last October. However, only 34 per cent are still prepared to say the President "did not

know about the Watergate plans," sharply down from 66 per cent who said that last fall. Another third is not yet ready to decide that question either way.

It is apparent from these results that the jury is very much still out on the Watergate affair on how deeply the President himself might have been involved. But there is little doubt that the whole episode has been damaging to the credibility of this administration.

The cross-section was asked:

"Do you feel that the White House has been frank and honest on the Watergate affair, or do you feel they have withheld important information about it?"

	Total Public
Frank and honest	9
Withheld important information	63
Not sure	28

This result ties in closely with the rating Mr. Nixon received when the cross-section was asked:

"How would you rate President Nixon on his handling of the Watergate political spying case—excellent, pretty good, only fair, or poor?"

	Public Total
Excellent to pretty good (positive)	17
Only fair to poor (negative)	61
Not sure	22

The trend on whether the President "personally knew about" Watergate shows a sharp decline in the number who express confidence that the chief executive was not involved:

"Do you feel that President Nixon personally knew about the attempt to wiretap Democratic headquarters or not?"

	April '73	Oct. '72	Sept. '72
Nixon knew	32	16	11
He did not know	34	66	66
Not sure	34	18	23

On the issue of "handling corruption in government," an already negative rating for the President has become even more negative:

"How would you rate President Nixon on his handling of corruption in government—excellent, pretty good, only fair, or poor?"

	April '73	Feb. '73	Oct. '72
Positive	25	32	32
Negative	64	55	55
Not sure	11	13	13

The impact on Mr. Nixon's personal confidence levels has been most damaging. Periodically, the Harris Survey has asked:

"How would you rate President Nixon on inspiring confidence personally in the White House—excellent, pretty good, only fair, or poor?"

	Positive	Negative	Not Sure
April 1973	33	53	14
March	38	50	12
February	48	41	11
January	38	52	10
December 1972	44	48	8
October	48	45	7
September	50	39	11
April	32	52	16
July 1971	29	56	15

The current low rating for the President on inspiring confidence is nevertheless not the lowest for him since he took office. In fact, a year ago he stood at 52 to 32 per cent negative on this question.

To a degree, his resilience is reflected in his overall job rating:

"How would you rate the job President Nixon is doing as President?"

	Positive	Negative	Not Sure
April 1973	50	49	1
March	59	39	2
February	50	39	1
January	53	45	2
December 1972	59	39	2
April	50	46	4
January	49	47	4
November 1971	53	46	1
July	44	53	3
February	43	54	3
October 1970	54	40	6
February	58	38	4
December 1969	62	36	2