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Pardon Hurts Ford for '76

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In August, Gerald R. Ford appeared to many to be a virtually unbeatable 1976 presidential candidate.

Barely a month later—if interviews with voters across the nation by half a dozen Washington Post reporters are any indication—that situation has changed.

Despite relief over the removal from office of Richard M. Nixon and despite an almost desperate hungering to believe in the new President, most of these voters have now adopted a wait and see stance about Mr. Ford.

Few of those interviewed felt a strong commitment toward him.

The changed situation seems to reflect the vastly unpopular way in which President Ford pardoned Mr. Nixon—the merits of the pardon aside.

Post reporters asked 158 voters in 16 barometer precincts across the country what they liked or disliked about President Ford.

Most said they liked him as a person. Reporters heard such comments as:

- "I think the guy has some pretty solid "principles."—from a Pittsburgh advertising man.

- "I like him. He seems much more interested in people and is more responsive to people."—from an elementary school teacher in Nassau County, New York.

- "I like him, his forthrightness, his openness, his family background, his unpretentiousness, the way he talked to the press. Perhaps the word honesty was showing through."—from the 60-year-old manager of a Route 128 re-

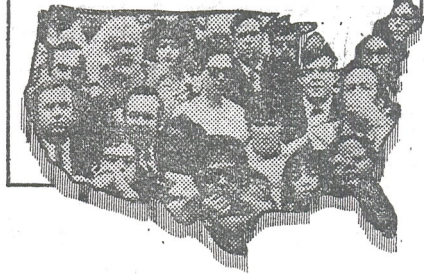
search and development firm north of Boston.

- "He's not worried about making an image; he doesn't care if people see him as he really is. That's good."—from an Akron, Ohio, housewife.

Again and again, reporters heard Mr. Ford described with such words as "solid," "candid," "honest," "nice," "straightforward," "personable."

In short, they indicated a wide-

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spread admiration of the new President.

But there were some things they did not say. Only one of the 158 people described Mr. Ford as "intelligent." No one described him as a leader.

So, while Mr. Ford obviously has an extremely broad popularity base on which to build politically, at least at this point he also appears vulnerable to a carefully targeted opposition campaign.

The pardon has disillusioned many voters. Pittsburgh's Mrs. Oliver McClintock, said that although she likes

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Mr. Ford, "I'm disappointed to be excited for 10 days or two weeks and then have this. . . ."

Even some of the staunchest of Republicans were indignant, and some talked almost sentimentally about Mr. Nixon. A number of voters mentioned that Mr. Nixon was "more dynamic," "more intelligent," "more of a leader," "stronger."

A Nassau County management consultant, who voted for Mr. Nixon in 1968 and 1972, said, "I think that Nixon was far ahead of Ford. He was an astute politician and a very bright individual."

Another Nassau County resident, a lawyer who had voted for Mr. Nixon three times, volunteered that "Nixon was a dynamic character, whether you agreed with him or not. Ford is kind of namby-pambyish. He demonstrates whatever he heard last."

A Leavenworth, Kan. Republican said Mr. Nixon was "a far greater planner."

A Pittsburgh radiologist, speaking in the vast back yard of his palatial suburban home in Edgeworth and who described himself as no fan of Mr. Nixon, said, "To me, Nixon was not all bad. He exercised power very adroitly and accomplished a great deal with it. He knew how to exercise power. . . ."

The doctor wanted very much to like President Ford, but the pardon turned him off.

"That guy started off about as good as he could, as far as we are concerned," he said. "But an irrational decision like that? I would never vote for him under any circumstances. He's too impetuous. This breaks down any confidence I would have had in him."

Another Pittsburgh doctor who lives in Edgeworth said, "I think basically this man [Ford] is a very honest man. But he's probably not as smart as Nixon or Humphrey or, certainly, McGovern." He voted for Mr. Nixon in the last two elections.

Several voters mentioned that they worried about Mr. Ford's ability to make decisions.

Oliver McClintock, a 66-year-old retired salesman, said: "I like him tremendously, his candid approach, his apparent complete honesty. I begin to worry a little, though, about his acting on impulse, which he just did, which he might do in regard to Russia or China."

And Emily George, a retired schoolteacher in Jacksonville, Fla., said, "I did like him, but it turns out he acts before he thinks."

Several voters worried that Mr. Ford was being manipulated by Mr. Nixon.

A young housewife in Plandome Heights, N.Y., said, "I still feel he's being manipulated. I feel Nixon is still controlling this country to a great degree."

"Ford don't do nothing without conferring with Nixon," said retired Seattle truck driver Robert McBride. "Everybody knows that."

Several voters said they felt Vice President-designate Nelson A. Rockefeller was pulling Mr. Ford's strings.

A Lexington, Mass., housewife said she felt that Mr. Ford didn't ick his she felt that Mr. Ford didn't pick his Party did, or maybe the Rockefellers," she said.

Mr. Ford's choice of Rockefeller seems to be generally popular one among voters questioned. This was particularly true in several barometer precincts in the South, Midwest and Far West.

One strong Pennsylvania Republican, who was a delegate to the 1972 convention, felt the Rockefeller selection was "the greatest choice that's ever been made in American politics. I think the governor is just sound as far as domestic-type things and administrative things."

Robert Needham, 36, an investment portfolio manager who lives in Lexington, Mass., said that "considering the alternatives, Rocky is as capable a man as he could have selected."

Jo Ryden, a Tennessee housewife, said she liked the Rockefeller choice because "he isn't in it for the money," and Julian Pinkney, a retired banker in Spartanburg, S.C., said, "He's got so much money he won't steal."

But Rockefeller's wealth cut the opposite way with a few voters.

"There are too many people in office with the power and money Rockefeller has," said Cheryl Daniel, 28, of Denver. "He's very wealthy and most of this country is not."

Said Clarence Smith, 37, an assistant manager of Associated Financial Services in Jacksonville, Fla., who is black:

"He's been so rich, I don't think he can identify with poor people. I think he can only identify with big business and that's not going to help us."

Dan Cochetas, whose finances forced him to drop college in Denver to support his young family, felt that Rockefeller "represents the kind of big business hold we've been under too long. Solutions can't come from business leaders. They have to come from those who are suffering under their hands."

All the voters interviewed were asked their opinions about abortion laws—a majority favored some kind of legal abortion—and only one of the 158 voters (a Leavenworth, Kan., mother of six) tied it politically with either Rockefeller, a strong believer in women's right to abortion, or Mr. Ford, whose wife has favored abortion in certain circumstances.

The clearest impression from the interviews was the relief that voters feel at having Mr. Nixon gone. Each person was asked what difference he or she perceived between him and Mr. Ford.

Few took that question to concern philosophies or policies; those who did saw little difference. Most talked instead about personalities, and many voters tended to analyze Mr. Nixon in psychoanalytic terms.

A manufacturer's representative in Nassau County who voted for Mr. Nixon three times said, "Nixon had sort of an inferiority problem that he always had to try and compensate for. Ford is a much more comfortable person, much easier with himself. He made it as a youngster and he's never had any problems of self-justification."

One of his neighbors, who owns a medical supply business, described Mr. Ford as "an open, easily met individual, whereas Nixon was a reclusive, paranoid personality."

"Nixon worked and worked to get there," said a teacher. He was a much more dedicated person, but he did isolate himself too much and didn't re-

spect other people's opinions. I don't think Ford is that type. He's more modest and unassuming."

"He's more congenial than Nixon," said Judy Smith, a 32-year-old medical receptionist in Denver. "Nixon always did seem to be hiding behind something. He'd never bring you into his kitchen like Ford does."

Elizabeth Ditsworth, the wife of an Arizona State University professor, said, "I think Nixon is mentally ill and Ford is ordinary and rational."

One voter in Pittsburgh said, "We've all got light sides and dark sides. Nixon's dark side attracted all these people around him that was part of his ego complex. These people were merely extensions on his dark side."

A theme that coursed through the interviews was that people now distrust a President who is a "loner," who arrives at decisions by consulting a narrow range of advisers, which helps to explain the dismay at the pardon decision.

"I don't think the people would let him put a moat up around the White House," said a young New York housewife. "They'd vote him out in 1976."

A Massachusetts factory manager said Mr. Ford's "approach to everything is almost completely the opposite of Nixon's. He doesn't seem to be a loner like Nixon was."

"Ford's far more appealing; he's warmer; he's less egocentric; he's more willing to listen to viewpoints that may not fall into line with his," said a young Massachusetts banker. "He's not so concerned with personal loyalty, he has a much better relationship with congress, and he doesn't believe in government by crisis, which seemed to be Nixon's viewpoint."

But even though Mr. Ford in comparison with Mr. Nixon looks good to many voters, their commitment to him on the whole is shallow.

Even before the pardon, said one national pollster, his country-wide support was "very broad but it was extremely soft — lukewarm." More than twice as many people in a poll he recently took considered themselves moderate supporters as did those who felt they were strong supporters.

But those who already oppose Mr. Ford tend to do so relatively vigorously.

"I had some reservations when he was named Vice President," said a 31-year-old Massachusetts housewife. "Any enemy of Douglas (Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, whom Ford as a Representative tried to impeach) is not a friend of mine."

Another Massachusetts housewife said that "after his last move (the pardon), I don't like him."

A New York advertising man who voted for Mr. Nixon last time said of Mr. Ford, "I think he's stupid. He didn't even let time play for him. The good will that we needed has suddenly dissipated into the same old raucous shriek. . . ."

But comments like these do not represent the majority of those interviewed. Perhaps more typical is that of a 61-year-old Houston resident, a former schoolteacher, who is a Democrat.

"I'm trying to like President Ford," he said, "but I'll have to wait and see. I don't want to talk against him—I want to cooperate with him."

NEXT: Inflation, the No. 1 problem.