

The 'Secret' Key Issue

Study of Polls Shows Racial Attitudes To Be Critical, With Nixon the Gainer

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 5—Like the dog that, as Sherlock Holmes observed, did not bark, what may be the undelying issue of the Presidential campaign of 1972 never really came out into the open. The surface talk has been about bombing or bugging or inflation. But close analysis of the endless rows of computer tabulations from The New York Times Yankelovich political polls indicates that the decisive issue might have been race—not racism, perhaps—but certainly race. The beneficiary, hands down, is Richard Nixon.

News Analysis

Race based controversies, to be sure, have appeared sporadically, as in the desegregation turmoil in the Canarsie section of Brooklyn in earlier busing disputes in Michigan. But even these were only fragmentary signs.

"The real issue," as the Rev. Jesse Jackson tells his black followers in Chicago, "is not the bus. It's us."

The accuracy of his insight is bolstered by the subtler finding of The Times/Yankelovich surveys. They strongly suggest that race has been a dirty little secret that is neither little nor secret, but central to current politics.

Reluctance to Talk

Americans not like to talk candidly about race to strangers. Usually, when polltakers ask about equal opportunity or civil rights, people dutifully give answers that certify them as good citizens.

But occasionally a survey question is accepted as neutral and then the answers provide a rich core sample of deeper racial feelings.

For example, The Times's surveys asked, "Do you feel that minority groups are receiving too much, too little or just about the right amount of attention?"

Even after four years of what black leaders have assailed as "benign neglect" of minority needs, four of every ten voters answered "too much." And of this group, almost 80 per cent said they would vote for President Nixon.

Light on Democrats

Many of these voters are Republicans, already committed to vote for Mr. Nixon. But the responses cast fuller light on Democrats, whose party has been, for a decade, a flagship of civil rights and equal opportunity.

That tradition is reflected by Democrats who say that they will vote for George McGovern Tuesday. Less than 25 per cent of them think that undue attention is being paid to minorities.

On the other hand, a third of the Democrats—twice the usual rate—say they will defect and vote for President Nixon. Of this group, more than half the whites say that minorities, particularly blacks, have been getting "too much" attention.

The parallel is hard to escape. There are twice as many Democratic defectors as usual, and the defectors are twice as likely to resent minority group gains.

Support for Wallace

A large share—but still less than half—of those apparently defecting for reasons of race say that they would vote for George C. Wallace if the Alabama governor were a candidate again.

Were Mr. McGovern able to hold the defection rate down to normal, the polls now would not be showing a Nixon landslide, but only a slight Nixon lead.

There is a series of issues that, for many voters, add up to race—welfare, job quotas, education, crime. On these, the Democratic defectors express strikingly different views from those of the loyalist Democrats.

'The Welfare Mess'

Who would do the better job of cleaning up "the welfare mess"? Among the defectors, 54 per cent say Mr. Nixon. Among the McGovern Democrats, 8 per cent say Mr. Nixon.

Who would do more for minorities? Among the defectors, 43 per cent say Mr. Nixon. Among the loyalists, the figure for him is 7 per cent.

Who would do best at reducing crime? The Nixon figure among the defectors is 58 per cent, among the loyalists only 25 per cent.

There is a technical explanation for such contrasts, something that analysts call a "halo effect." Having decided to vote for Mr. Nixon, the defectors are likely to justify their choice by giving him favorable ratings on issues.

A Puzzling Campaign

But the halo effect is only a partial explanation. The fact remains that, from the very beginning of the general election campaign, twice the usual proportion of Democrats have decided to vote Republican.

That is one of the major phenomena of the whole puzzling campaign. Another puzzle is why there was so little change over the months. In August, the Gallup Poll gave Mr. Nixon 64 per cent. Today, it gives him 62.

Still another puzzle has been the voters' seeming indifference to the more publicized campaign issues. Only a bare majority cite even the Vietnam war as a major national concern.

The veiled amalgam of race issues offers an answer to all these anomalies. It is a though large numbers of white voters decided, quietly and early, that Jesse L. Jackson was right and that the fundamental issue is "them!"