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Nixon Lost Backing in Congress

By Alan Ehrenhalt
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Congress opposed President Nixon more often in the first seven months of 1973 than it has opposed any President in the past 20 years.

Congressional Quarterly's special study of presidential support shows that Mr. Nixon won 43 per cent of the 209 recorded votes in which he took a position from Jan. 3 to Aug. 3, 1973. It was the first time since the study began in 1953 that any President has ever lost more often than he won.

That 43 per cent figure marked a drastic change from the 66 per cent recorded by the President in 1972, and from the 74, 77, and 75 per cent ratings he got during his first three years in office. The drop in support was clear in both houses, and cut across regional and party lines.

As expected, Republicans and Southerners were the strongest Nixon loyalists. Sen. Sam J. Ervin Jr., chairman of the Senate Watergate committee, turned out to be the third-ranking Nixon supporter among all the Senate Democrats. But even Ervin was less friendly

this year than last year, dropping from a 70 per cent support score in 1972 to 50 per cent in 1973.

In all, 79 per cent of the returning members of Congress backed the President less frequently this year than last. Mr. Nixon won 44 per cent of his battles in the House, and 41 per cent in the Senate.

One obvious explanation for the change is that Watergate has reduced the President's influence and encouraged members of both parties to vote against him. But interviews with several members of Congress indicate that it may be more complicated than that.

Members who have voted against the President more often in 1973 insist they are reacting to presidential impoundments, vetoes and the threatened demolition of long-standing social programs, not to Watergate.

"I guess he's been wrong more often this year than last," said Rep. Joseph E. Karth (D-Minn.), who backed the President 51 per cent of the time last year and 24 per cent so far this year. "Watergate hasn't had an ounce of influence with me. Legislation has to rise and fall on its own merits."

Republicans who have made a similar change generally feel the same way.

"It's completely issue-oriented," said Rep. Peter A. Peyser (R-N.Y.). "On things like education, minimum wage and Cambodia the administration has just taken a different point of view from mine." Last year, Peyser's support score was 68; as of Aug. 3 this year, it is 41.

Rep. James F. Hastings, another New York Republican whose presidential support dropped sharply, attributed the change to his growing experience with legisla-

tive issues and a new feeling of confidence in his own judgment.

"If anything," Hastings said, "I'd go out of my way to support the administration on a marginal issue because of Watergate. Certainly if they ever needed help on issues, it would be now. . . . But when it comes to certain health care programs, frankly I think I know more than they do."

Hastings conceded that Watergate has contributed to a free-thinking spirit among some members. "All of us have to run next year," he told Congressional Quarterly, "and there is an element of independence that has to be expressed through voting on the floor. . . . I would hope the leaders look toward the future of the Republican Party, not the current administration. I hope to be around here long after this administration is gone."

One member who was at least partially liberated by Watergate is Rep. Charles H. Wilson (D-Calif.). Generally considered a liberal Democrat since his arrival in Washington in 1963, Wilson was redistricted in 1971 into an area he considered more conservative and friendlier to President Nixon than his previous constituency. He began voting more conservatively.

"I was watching my votes more cautiously last year," Wilson explained, "trying to present a more moderate stance until I became more acquainted with the district." This year, no longer fearing a potential backlash from an anti-Nixon vote, Wilson moved away from the President's positions again. In 1972, he supported the President 68 per cent of the time. This year, the figure is 28 per cent.