

POLITICS: THE WATERGATE EFFECT

In the political wakes that followed this month's off-year elections, politicians in both parties and most press commentators took the position that Watergate had had little or nothing to do with the Republican debacle at the polls. But last week, at the Republican governors' conference in Memphis, Dr. George Gallup, dean of the nation's pollsters, bluntly termed that notion "wishful thinking"—and painted an even gloomier picture of GOP prospects next year.

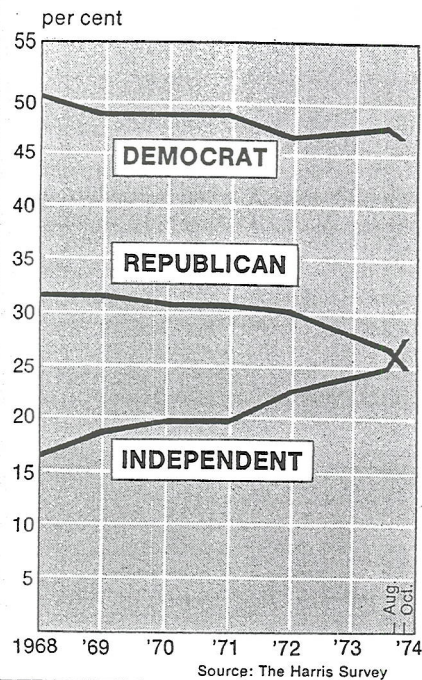
Public support for Republican congressmen, Gallup declared, is "the lowest since 1935," the year the Gallup poll began. In surveys taken last month, only 24 per cent of the nation's registered voters said they would vote for GOP Congressional candidates, Gallup said—and if next year's House elections were held now, Republican losses could be so heavy that "President Nixon could lose his veto power." Democratic gains, he predicted, might exceed the 295 seats won in Lyndon Johnson's 1964 landslide.

Gallup was not alone in his findings. According to the Louis Harris survey, Republican allegiance, which has been gradually eroding for the last four years, took a sudden dip over the last two months, and now stands at an all-time low (chart).

According to the Harris survey, the Democrats have not benefited from the defections, but have suffered a slight decline in allegiance themselves, from 51 per cent in 1968 to 47 per cent now. The largest growth took place among independent voters. Over the last four years, the Harris poll found, voters calling themselves independents have increased from 17 per cent to 28 per cent—meaning that more people now identify with no party at all than consider themselves tied to the GOP. And Gallup made it clear that he believed Watergate was primarily responsible. "Probably at no time in history," Gallup told the governors, "have people felt more frustrated and skeptical of their government."

THE SAGGING GOP

Party allegiance of voters



Source: The Harris Survey

Mackay

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