

The Nixon polls bring out the unthinkable

By Philip Meyer
Knight News Service

WASHINGTON — The public has come around to thinking the unthinkable: it is time for President Nixon to go.

Sentiment for his impeachment and removal reached a clear majority of those with opinions last week for the first time. It was a continuation of a trend that had been building even before the White House transcripts were made public.

The pro-impeachment majority appeared in the new Harris Survey, taken last Tuesday and Wednesday. The question was, "All in all, do you think President Nixon should or should not be impeached by Congress and removed from office?"

Forty-nine percent said he should be impeached and removed. Forty-one percent said he should not. Ten percent were not sure.

With those who aren't sure left out, 54 percent want the President impeached and removed — a margin well beyond the allowance for sampling error.

The progressive decay of public regard for the President follows the same pattern seen in attitudes toward President Johnson and the Vietnam War, according to University of California Prof. Nelson Polsby.

"It takes a while for people to get used to the idea," he said. "They go at it by developing a kind of mosaic of particular distasteful thoughts, and for a while they don't recognize what their attitude really is. But after a while they do, and that's that."

In April, a poll by Daniel Yankelovich, Inc., for Time magazine showed about the same even split on impeachment that Harris was finding. At the

same time, Yankelovich found very large majorities condemning the President on specific grievances.

For example, 62 percent said Nixon was acting "as if he were above the law."

And 68 percent said he had violated his promise to the American people to get to the bottom of the Watergate affair. Harris has found similar majorities blaming the President on specific points.

Two days after the release of the transcripts on April 30, the Gallup Poll took a phone sampling of 694 adults and asked those who had followed the reports of the transcripts how their opinions of the President had changed.

Forty-two percent said their opinions had become less favorable compared to only 17 percent who said it was made more favorable.

The total sample, including about one-third who had not yet paid any attention to the transcripts, was asked about impeachment. While there was a fairly even split on impeachment, most of those interviewed were not yet ready for the second step in the process: conviction by the Senate and removal from office.

But the new Harris survey suggests that as information about the massive, book-length extracts from White House conversations filters out, more and more people are turning against Nixon.

Politicians evidently sense the same thing.

An initial cautious reaction to the transcripts by members of Congress has been transformed into a chorus of demands, requests, and polite wishes for the President's resignation.

"Even his elite supporters are moving away from him," said Polsby. "That's the real story."