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State Poll

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Press Judged in Watergate Case

By Mervin D. Field

There are signs that more than a year of heavy news coverage of the Watergate affair is making the public somewhat more critical of the role of the press in handling this unprecedented event.

A California Poll statewide survey completed during the first week in May finds an increasing public belief that the press has been unfair and biased in some respects about Watergate coverage. Furthermore, a majority of the public now thinks the amount of coverage is "too much."

Despite these signs of criticism, however, the public continues to reject the notion that the press is being extra hard on President Nixon. Seven out of ten Californians (69 per cent) continue to believe that the news media would work just as hard to try and uncover wrongdoing by any President.

This survey measures current public attitudes toward the press and its coverage of the Watergate affair in a way that permits comparisons with surveys made in 1973.

On the matter of the volume of news coverage by press, radio and TV, half of the California public today thinks it is "too much," but this proportion has not changed much since last August when the torrent of news coverage had not reached the level it has today.

On the fairness issue, however, a smaller proportion of the public today is ready to say the news coverage has been fair and unbiased, and growing numbers are saying they feel it is unfair and biased. The largest number of people still believes in press fairness, however.

Last May, and again this year, the following question was put to representative

samples of the California public: "Do you feel that in the Watergate matter the news media have tried extra hard to uncover a scandal against President Nixon, or do you feel they would work just as hard to try and uncover wrongdoing no matter who was President?"

The results show little change in public attitude — seven out of ten Californians believing the press would have worked just as hard no matter who was president.

THE PRESS EFFORT		
	May 1974	May 1973
Tried extra hard against Nixon	26%	23%
Would work just as hard no matter who was President	69	71
No opinion	5	6

To a significant degree, however, attitudes toward the press are becoming polarized by political party. Democratic party followers are relatively less critical of the press than are Republican party followers. By a margin of 56 per cent to 21 per cent, Democrats think that the press is fair and unbiased about Watergate. Republicans, on the other hand, take an almost reverse position: only 27 per cent say the press is fair and unbiased while 49 per cent say it is unfair and biased about Watergate.

While a minority of Democrats (42 per cent) think the amount of Watergate press coverage is too much, a substantial majority of Republicans (73 per cent) feel this way.

However, even a majority of Republicans (52 per cent) concede to a belief that the news media would work just as hard to try and uncover wrongdoing no matter who was President. Almost four out of five Democrats (79 per cent) take this view.

AMOUNT OF COVERAGE		
	May 1974	
	Dem.	Rep.
Too much	42%	73%
Right amount	43	23
Too little	13	4
No opinion	2	—

FAIRNESS OF COVERAGE		
	May 1974	
	Dem.	Rep.
Fair and unbiased	56%	27%
Mixed	17	19
Unfair and biased	21	49
No opinion	6	5

THE PRESS EFFORT		
	May 1974	
	Dem.	Rep.
Tried extra hard against Nixon	17%	44%
Would work just as hard no matter who was President	79	52
No opinion	4	4

AMOUNT OF COVERAGE			
	May 1974	Oct. 1973	Aug. 1973
Too much	51%	47%	51%
Right amount	34	27	41
Too little	11	22	4
No opinion	4	4	4

FAIRNESS OF COVERAGE			
	May 1974	Oct. 1973	Aug. 1973
Fair and unbiased	44%	55%	50%
Mixed	19	25	17
Unfair and biased	31	17	27
No opinion	6	3	6