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Voters Not Vindictive After Watergate

By Jules Witcover
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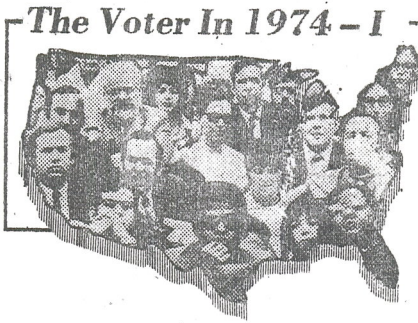
Lee Davis, a 32-year-old newspaper circulation supervisor, sat in his living room in San Jose, Calif., sipping a soft drink and talking over an old movie on TV. He explained why he was not of a mind to punish Republican candidates automatically this fall for Watergate.

"Most Republicans who are going to run for election," said Davis, an independent who voted for Richard M. Nixon in 1972, "had nothing to do with Watergate."

Down the suburban street tucked under the eastern Santa Clara foothills, Oliver Pasquinelli, 56, a produce man, rejected the idea that the way to recover from Watergate is to clean out incumbents of both parties and bring in a whole crop of new faces.

"If a man does a good job he should stay in," he said. "If not, out."

These San Jose neighbors are typical of voters a Washington Post team of six reporters talked to during the last two weeks in 16 states in all regions of



the country. The surveys were made in barometer precincts selected for The Post by demographics expert Richard M. Scammon.

A basic attitude found in these early days after "the long nightmare" of Watergate was a disposition to examine the candidates and cast a discriminating ballot, rather than deliver a knee-jerk verdict against all Republicans, or all incumbents.

This attitude, expressed widely in

158 in-depth interviews by The Post team, suggests that for all the public skepticism about politics that has grown out of Watergate, voters this fall are not so much turned off politics as they have been sobered by events to take their own responsibility as citizens more seriously.

In Seattle, Bill Eley, a 30-year-old railroad worker and Democrat, asked who was to blame for inflation, replied: "The public, for letting the government get away with it." His brother, Tim, 26, also a railroader and a Democrat, blamed a "lack of togetherness" among the people in demanding solutions.

In contrast with the bulk of those interviewed by Post reporters in 1972 who testified to yawning apathy over politics and the electoral process, the voters we talked to this time indicated generally that they're paying attention and intend to take a good look at the candidates before voting.

See VOTER, A6, Col.1

VOTER, From A1

All this does not assure, of course, that, come November, the Republicans will be spared the wrath of the voters after one of the stormiest periods in American political history. The party in control of the White House traditionally loses strength in the off-year congressional elections. What The Post's interviews do suggest is that Republicans have a chance to win, and incumbents of both parts to survive, if they can make their case in this fall's campaigning.

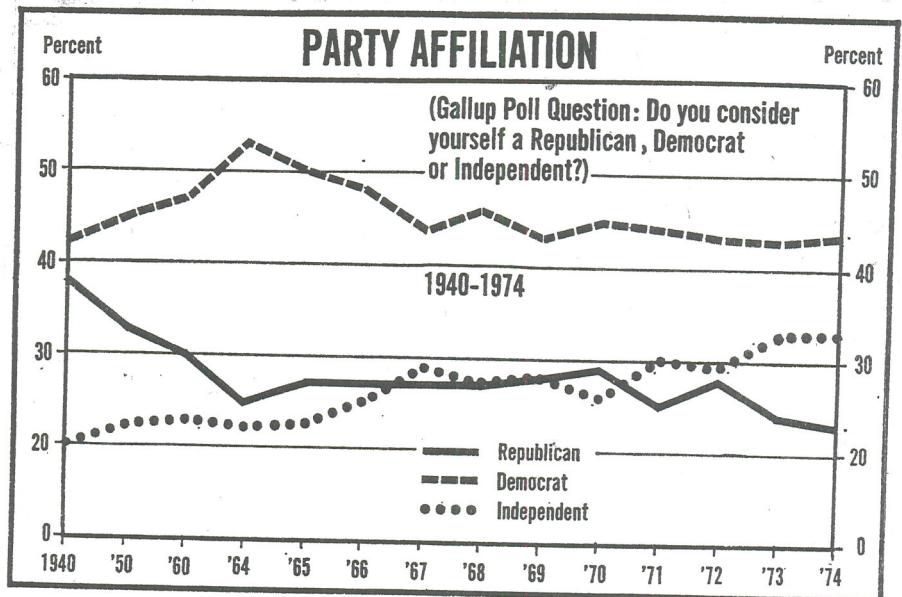
Republicans obviously are more vulnerable to opposition attack in the campaigns just unfolding. Those who proclaimed Mr. Nixon's innocence of impeachable offenses in Watergate until the 11th hour or who support President Ford's pardon of him—which we found to be sweepingly unpopular—may be forced onto the defensive by aggressive challengers.

Though many voters said they were not surprised by the revelations of Watergate and its aftermath—"both parties do it but only one got caught," some continue to say—they did not hide their revulsion. They had a variety of strong words to describe their feelings: "disgust," "dismay," "rotten," "dirty," "corrupt," "terrible," "stupid."

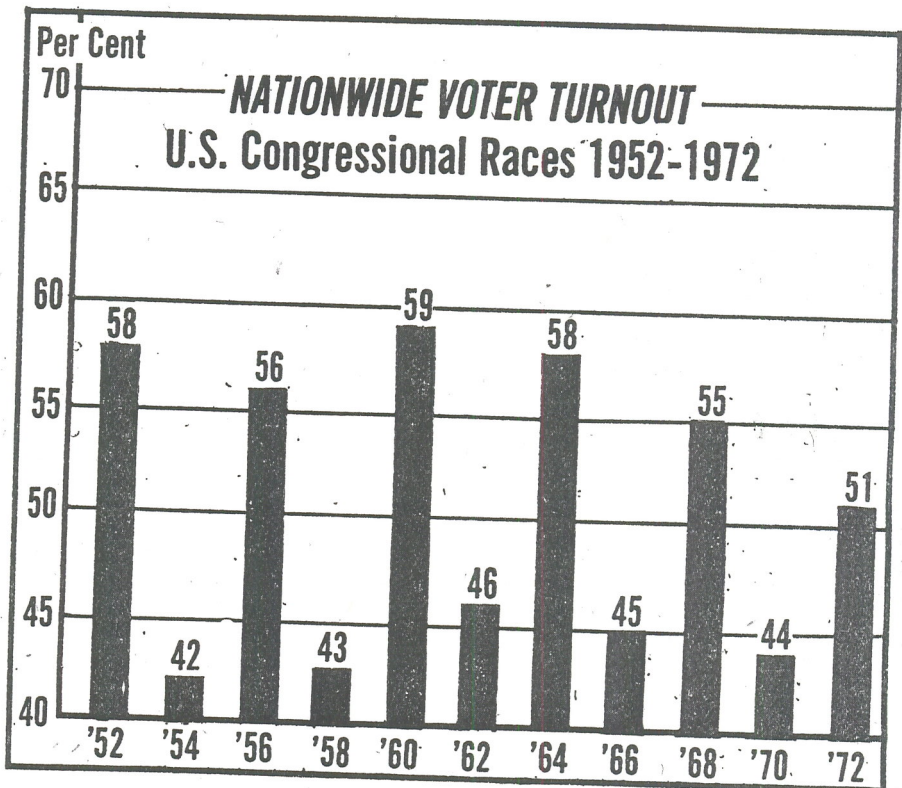
But most hastened to say that the experience had not stampeded them into any throw-the-rascals-out temper or turned them off politics completely. Some said just the opposite in fact.

Out of Watergate, these people suggested, might come a sharpened awareness of the importance of a vigilant and participating electorate, and a reinforced belief in the system to survive and overcome abuses by crooked politicians.

In Des Moines, Homer Vandervelde, 46, a softspoken engineer, said "Watergate has shown me that politics has room for improvement—and that it will be improved." Why? Because, he said, "people can now see that it needs improvement."



Ken Burgess—The Washington Post



Bill Perkin—The Washington Post

In Del. Mr. Cheryl Daniel, 28, said she has "a stronger interest in politics now, because so many bad things have happened, the country is more aware and interested in straightening things out."

In Skokie, Ill., a housewife who watched the House Judiciary Committee during the televised hearings on the impeachment of Mr. Nixon, said, "I've become more impressed with politicians than I was before. They're more intelligent than I thought."

And an Akron management consultant said he had "a stronger feeling now about the potential of the American political system to cleanse itself."

We did encounter those for whom Watergate meant the end of trust in the Republican Party. "Watergate has really turned me off right down to the local Republican running for office," said a young housewife in North Hempstead, Long Island. "I'm very disillusioned and I'd never want my husband to get involved in government."

But the reaction among Republicans seemed more typically reflected by the comment of 66-year-old Oliver McClintock, a retired salesman of industrial coatings in Allegheny County, Pa. Asked if he felt less inclined now to be identified as a Republican, he said: "I probably did until Mr. Nixon resigned; then I took out my little tie clasp with an elephant on it and started wearing it again last week. Before that, I was a little ashamed to wear it."

Throughout our interviews, there ran parallel to the predictable skepticism growing out of Watergate a tenacious hope that there is still reason to believe in politics and politicians.

A majority said they believed most individuals who run for public office are honest—though many tempered that belief by adding, "at least until they get in." Aline West, a retired Spartanburg, S.C., college professor, said, "I think most of them are honest, but it seems a mighty hard place to stay honest."

Significantly for Republicans worried about the taint of Watergate, nearly all the people we interviewed said that when it comes to honesty, there is no difference between the parties; one is no more or less honest than the other.

The desire to believe again was graphically demonstrated in responses to questions about President Ford—how did the voters like him and what, specifically, did they think about his most controversial decision to date—to pardon Mr. Nixon.

In every part of the country, most of those we talked to expressed a favorable reaction to the new President, with one glaring exception: the Nixon pardon. "Until last Sunday [the day Mr. Ford pardoned Mr. Nixon] I thought he was going fine," was the way many of them put it.

What jolted them most about the pardon, voter after voter said, was not so

much that they wanted Mr. Nixon to be convicted and sent to jail, but what Mr. Ford's sudden decision did to their preception of the new President.

"I was impressed until then," said Georgia Andrews, a Tempe, Ariz., school teacher, "but I'm very disappointed now. I don't think he's going to be very different from Nixon now."

Helen Differt, a Tempe housewife, asked what differences she saw between Mr. Ford and Mr. Nixon, said: "Not very much anymore. They're both divisive. Ford fixes his own breakfast, and that's all."

For all that, when asked whether they believed a deal on a pardon was struck between Mr. Ford as Vice President and Mr. Nixon before he resigned as President, most said they did not.

In addition, many of those who said they were not sure expressed the hope there was no deal.

"I'd like to believe there wasn't,"

To try to find out what is on the minds of voters as they approach the November off-year elections, The Washington Post sent six reporters into 16 states in every region. In 158 in-depth conversations with voters in 16 representative precincts selected for The Post by Richard M. Scammon, the voter analyst, the reporters sought views on five specific matters.

Today's report, the first of five, examines how the voters interviewed feel about the political fallout from Watergate and the Nixon resignation.

Subsequent daily reports will deal with reaction to the Nixon pardon, the new administration, the economy and the Democrats and 1976.

Post national staff reporters who conducted the interviews are David S. Broder, Lou Cannon, Stephen Isaacs, Peter Milius, Mary Russell and Jules Witcover. National staff researchers Patricia Davis and Elisabeth Donovan assisted in preparation of the survey.

said Ross Budden, 64, a retired lithograph pressman in Seattle. "That would put Ford right in Nixon's class. I'll give him the benefit of the doubt."

And Lee Davis in San Jose said: "I can only say I hope there wasn't. If there was, it's dirty politics again."

For all the expressed concern among those we interviewed about the grisly side of politics as revealed and confirmed in the Watergate affair, few had ready answers about what can or should be done.

Some, but not a majority, were aware of campaign financing reforms before Congress, most said they favored the reforms when told of them. But an Akron man asked: "What is all that legislation gonna catch you? Five per cent of the fish? Ten per cent?"

Some like one Akron housewife, expressed confidence that sooner or later the system reveals wrongdoing in politics. "Generally all the garbage comes out; most of it does," she said. And others saw a vigilant press as the necessary watchdog.

But many voters saw the solution not coming from others but from themselves, from a public more aware and concerned about who runs for public office and how they conduct themselves when elected.

"The people should have more of a vote, rather than all this appointed business," said Robert McBride, 45, a retired truck driver in Seattle. "The system of picking the Vice President (in event of a vacancy) should be changed. The people should be able to vote in their next President."

And Judy Smith, 32, a medical receptionist in Littleton, Colo., said the best way to clean up politics "is to know more about the people before you vote them in."

In our conversations across the country, the impression was widespread that today — with memories of Watergate and presidential impeachment fresh in mind — this is what voters intend to do this fall. In all the gloom of Watergate, such public concern and participation would be a welcome tonic to both parties and to the country.

A formal scientific poll by the Roper Organization just completed provides statistical underpinning for the impression our interviews drew — that for all the hammer blows of Watergate, ours remains a country of optimists.

Roper asked 2,002 adults whether they felt the momentous week of Aug. 5 — in which Mr. Nixon resigned and Mr. Ford was sworn in to succeed him — was "one of the darkest weeks in the country's history" or "the rebirth of the nation . . . a bright week in our history."

Of the total, only 27 per cent regarded it as a dark week; to 46 per cent it was a bright week, and 24 per cent viewed it with mixed feelings.

The bulk of the off-year election campaign, of course, lies ahead. The charges and countercharges of candidates are just beginning to get through to the public. Those we talked to told us they're listening. If they are typical of the national electorate, it suggests the people are not turned off, after all, to the system that has just undergone, and survived, perhaps its most strenuous internal test in the republic's history.

24 SEP 74
NEXT: The Nixon Pardon