

THE PRESIDENT IS so far behind in the polls that he says he is happy to be running as an underdog and Jimmy Carter has to deny that he is over-confident. The reaction of both candidates to Dr. Gallup and his cohorts underlines again how pervading those fellows are in a national election. In the olden days, there was nothing much to discuss in a campaign but such fringe matters as principles and issues.

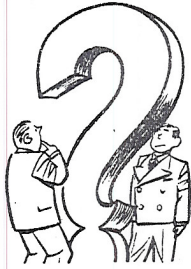
But those shallow days are gone forever. That annoys no end those enrolled in that school of political thought, almost exclusively attended by losing candidates and their friends, that holds the pollsters should be silenced in Presidential election years because they are deciding elections before the voting begins.

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FRRIEND OR FOE of the electoral process, pollsters are here to stay and have become increasingly respectable, reaching even into our better universities. There is *The Public Opinion Quarterly* at Columbia and over at the University of California, James R. Beniger, of the Survey Research Center, has finished a major study.

With true academic restraint, he declines to call the current contest but his findings will both fan the flame of hope in the underdog and bank the fires of runaway optimism of the frontrunner.

Past incumbent Presidents who went on to win another term averaged out with a 63 per cent approval rating in Dr. Gallup's polls. The two Presidents who didn't run (Truman and Johnson)



averaged only 30 per cent. Ford, in his March reading by Gallup, was lower than the winners but higher than the dropouts. Those winners (Roosevelt through Nixon), however, were running 18 percentage points over their closest competitors while Ford in the early polls was only 3 points over Carter and is now 33 points behind him.

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ANY PRESIDENT — though he is suffering in the polls — still has a big advantage when it comes to winning. His ratings can be turned around suddenly by events, some not even of his own making. Beniger dug out of old Gallup: Roosevelt gained 12 points at Pearl Harbor; Nixon 16 points with the Vietnam peace; Kennedy 12 with the Cuban missile crisis; Nixon 9 with his trip to Russia; and Ford 11 with the Mayaguez rescue.

Other events, however, can cut his approval rating, and the move downward can be equally fast: Truman lost 10 when the Chinese were winning in Korea and 13 when inflation took off; Nixon lost 8 after John Dean began telling all about Watergate; and Ford lost 16 for pardoning Nixon.

Especially in foreign affairs, Beniger notes, we tend to identify our nation with our President. Thus Kennedy rose 5 points to his all-time high of 83 per cent approval after admitting he was to blame for the Bay of Pigs fiasco. In fact, the 14 biggest rises in approval all derived from events abroad and all except 5 of the 14 biggest drops were domestically oriented.

The victory trail for Mr. Ford is thus well marked. All that is necessary clearly is for him to be Machiavellian enough to follow it.