

Kennedy Question Mark

By TOM WICKER

WASHINGTON, July 21—The biggest question mark in the Democratic party today is Edward M. Kennedy. Is he going to be a candidate, or is he not? And if he is, is he the strongest opponent for Mr. Nixon that the Democrats could put up?

The polls tell us certain things about the second question. They suggest that, Chappaquiddick or no Chappaquiddick, Senator Kennedy would be a formidable candidate; but they also suggest that, family name or no family name, he is not necessarily the strongest man to run against the President.

In June, the Louis Harris Poll reported that Mr. Kennedy had made sharp gains among Democrats and independents, from thirteen points in March to 21. The putative Democratic front-runner, Edmund Muskie had slipped in the same period from thirty to 22 points, while Hubert Humphrey had remained relatively even, thirteen points in March and fourteen in June.

Among Democrats alone, Mr. Kennedy had a narrow lead over Mr. Muskie, 25-23, but he trailed among independents, 13 to 22, and by 29 to 17 among those of both groups who were considered most likely to vote. In Mr. Harris' breakdown, Mr. Kennedy was the front runner among city voters, those with grade school education, those 18 to 29 years old, blacks and union members; Mr. Muskie was out front in the suburbs, among college graduates, those over 50, whites and Roman Catholics.

Putting his respondents' first and second choices together, Mr. Harris ranked the three best-known Democrats as follows: Muskie 35, Kennedy 27, Humphrey 22.

Dr. Gallup's findings roughly confirm this general picture. Polling 1,424 Democratic county chairmen from all regions, he found Mr. Muskie out front with 37 per cent among these "pros," trailed by Mr. Humphrey with 15 and Mr. Kennedy with only 11. Among registered Democratic voters, he found Mr. Kennedy ahead with 29 per cent, Mr. Muskie next at 21 and Mr. Humphrey third with 18.

Both polls, matching possible Democrats against Mr. Nixon, rank Mr. Muskie and Mr. Kennedy one-two. The latest Harris rankings show Mr. Muskie polling 42 per cent of the vote among all groups against 40 per cent for the President and 13 for George Wallace. But Mr. Kennedy loses to Mr. Nixon 44 to 36, with Governor Wallace again polling 13.

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Dr. Gallup finds the race virtually even in either case, with Mr. Muskie defeating Mr. Nixon, 41 to 39, and Mr. Kennedy losing to the President by 41 to 42.

Louis Harris has concluded that "there is little doubt that Senator Muskie is a much stronger potential Democratic nominee than Senator Kennedy." Dr. Gallup, on the other hand, led a recent article with an assertion of "the strong and persistent appeal of Senator Edward Kennedy," despite doubts about the Chappaquiddick incident.

Unfortunately, these polls do not tell us much, and are even less conclusive on the question whether Mr. Kennedy will be a candidate in 1972—although one Gallup finding is significant. The 1,424 Democratic county chairmen reported that of all the Presidential possibilities, George McGovern and Mr. Muskie were "working hardest at the grassroots level" for convention delegates (25 per cent apiece); in contrast Mr. Kennedy was dead last, behind even Representative Wilbur Mills, a fact that tends to support his frequent disclaimers that he is a candidate.

But this year is not next year. The one fact that emerges from all these polls, and from virtually every other poll since the 1970 election, is that Mr. Muskie, Mr. Kennedy and Mr. Humphrey are the clear front runners for the Democratic nomination—the best-known and the most-preferred, among the pros and the voters alike. When Dr. Gallup asked the county chairmen who they thought would win the nomination, whatever their personal preferences, the answer was Muskie 57 per cent, Humphrey 19 per cent, Kennedy 12—leaving a total of only 12 per cent for all others.

The plain fact that these "big three" exist raises two important questions about Mr. Kennedy's intentions. Will he be able to resist the immense pressure to run that his position among the front runners is bound to bring down on him? And even if he can, will he be willing to see his party's choice finally come down to one between the other two front runners, both of them older and more centrist figures than he?

If Mr. Kennedy stays out, the polls suggest, that may be just what will happen.