

The Wallace Factor

Much more than a floodtide of sympathy over the despicable attempt on his life went into the victories scored by George C. Wallace in this week's two key Democratic primaries.

That fully half the primary voters in Michigan, stronghold of the United Automobile Workers, recorded their preference for the wounded Alabama Governor is startling testimony to the persuasiveness of his appeals to fear and frustration. His share of the Democratic vote was more than triple the 16 per cent that went to labor's oldtime favorite, Senator Humphrey.

In Maryland, where Mr. Wallace was struck down by bullets on the eve of the primary, four Democrats out of every ten cast their primary ballots for him. Though this result was more in line with forecasts, it also underscored the depths of the discontent that finds inchoate expression in the Wallace column.

What all this will mean at the Democratic Presidential convention or at the polls if Governor Wallace emerges as a third-party candidate, no one can tell while he lies with a pistol slug still lodged at the edge of his spine and no definitive word on how permanent his paralysis will prove.

If he does regain his health, even though confined to a wheelchair, the Governor will remain a formidable campaigner. The four successful Presidential campaigns of Franklin D. Roosevelt made it plain, even in a pre-television era, that losing the use of one's legs need not be a deterrent to political activity.

Mr. Wallace could wage the electronic equivalent of the "front porch campaign" of the McKinley-Harding era when delegations of voters were brought to the candidate rather than the other way round. Via television, he could also reach large numbers of voters without making a physically exhaustive canvass.

In the short term, the Alabama Governor's misfortune may work to the political advantage of Senator McGovern. Although public opinion research in the Democratic primaries suggests that Mr. Wallace and Mr. McGovern in the main attract significantly different voters, there unquestionably are some disenchanting voters who are prepared indiscriminately to vote for any anti-establishment candidate. The absence of Mr. Wallace as an active candidate in the period of his hospitalization may lead such voters to concentrate behind Senator McGovern.

For the longer term, a Wallace third party vote, particularly if it is swelled by a sizable sympathy vote, would harm both Democrats and Republicans in November. The strong probability is that the same five states in the Deep South that went to Mr. Wallace in 1968 would rally to his banner again, thereby depriving President Nixon of those electoral votes.

But the much cloudier question is who would be hurt most in the North, Mr. Nixon or his Democratic rival. Prior to the Michigan balloting, most observers had taken it as certain that a Wallace independent candidacy might well block Democrats from victory in such pivotal states as New Jersey, Ohio, Illinois and Michigan itself, all with big electoral votes. Now doubt is cast on that theory by the post-primary findings of The Times/Yankelovich survey in Michigan that the Alabaman cut much more heavily into the potential Nixon vote than he did into the support that any Democratic nominee might expect. By contrast, Louis Bean, the wisest of political statisticians, estimates that outside the South 70 per cent of the 1968 vote for Wallace came from Democrats.

Having survived an attempted deadly decision by bullets, Mr. Wallace may yet have his opportunity to influence the nation's decision by ballots.