POLITICAL NUMBERS

No Watergate Landslide

by Alan Ehrenhalt

It is comforting as well as logical to assume that somebody will pay the price for Watergate at the polls in 1974. The coming election will be our first real chance to punish the corrupt and to reward the innocent. But whom do we punish? Those directly involved in the scandal like H. R. Haldeman, Egil Krogh, and E. Howard Hunt are not planning to run for office. Instead, the punishment will have to be applied through scapegoating, and the composition of the next Congress may depend on the level of symbolic vengeance to which the voters descend.

The most common assumption is that since Watergate was a Republican crime, 1974 will be a Democratic year. Politicians in both parties are raising the possibility of 40, 60, or even 80 new Democratic seats in the House, and a bumper crop of Democratic senators, as well. That would make 1974 one of those rare midterm elections that determines the course of legislation for years to come.

Alan Ehrenhalt covers national politics for Congressional Quarterly.

It has happened twice since World War II. In 1946 high prices and postwar frustration erased a vestigial New Deal Congress and brought in William Knowland, Joseph McCarthy, Richard Nixon, and a new generation of conservative Republicans. Twelve years later an Eisenhower recession gave the Democrats 17 new Senate seats and installed the mildly liberal Senate we have been living with ever since. The men of 1958–Edmund Muskie, Philip Hart, Frank Moss, Gale McGee–are only now coming into seniority and power. If 1974 brings us another upheaval like 1946 or 1958, we may feel the impact into the 1990s.

While this would be a dramatic denouement to Watergate, it is not likely to happen. There are 34 Senate seats up in 1974. Democrats already hold 20 of these, so this effectively limits their targets of opportunity. In addition, the Democrats seem likely to lose Mike Gravel's seat in Alaska if Walter Hickel decides to come out of retirement and run against him.

Of the Republican 14, Charles Mathias of Maryland and Richard

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Schweiker of Pennsylvania are about as far from Nixon and Watergate as it is humanly possible for a Republican to be. They have the friendship and financial assistance of the AFL-CIO. Although Mathias and Schweiker are concerned, as any prudent Republican would be at this point, it is hard to imagine any Democrat beating them without money or issues. It is equally unrealistic to assume that Arizona will rise up and throw out Barry Goldwater as a protest against White House corruption.

This means that the Republicans will enter the campaign defending 11 seats which they have a reasonable chance to lose. It is foolish to predict any one of these elections nine months in advance, but it seems extravagant to assume that Republicans will lose nearly all of them. Such an electoral debacle would require the defeat of incumbents like Robert Packwood of Oregon, Henry Bellmon of Oklahoma, and Jacob Javits of New York, all of whom are strong political figures in their home states and not dependent on a national Republican tide to sweep them to victory.

An epic change in the make-up of the Senate almost certainly requires that the vulnerable party begin the campaign with a number of potentially marginal seats. We don't have that this year. More likely than an across-the-board disaster for the Republicans is something like this: defeat for several of the weaker Republicans, close calls for some of the stronger ones, an incalculable upset or two, and a Senate three or four votes more Democratic than it is now. Such a change wouldn't be totally insignificant. For example, last year's 49 to 43 vote against reducing military aid to South Vietnam might be next year's 47 to 45 vote in favor of cuts. But it also wouldn't be very dramatic.

The Party's Over

In the House, of course, all 435 seats theoretically are up for grabs. The House is supposed to be the more volatile chamber, reflecting fluctuations in the public mood, and historically it has been. The Republicans gained 120 seats after the panic of 1893 and lost 101 in the Depression year of 1932. Within recent memory, Democrats picked up 38 in the Johnson landslide of 1964 and lost 47 two years later.

But to assume a similar reaction in 1974 would be to argue with the most important political fact of the past decade: voters are not making decisions on the basis of party the way they did in the past. The last three congressional elections, for example, have been held in three remarkably diverse sets of circumstances—a violent year and a close presidential contest in 1968, a mild but broad recession in 1970, and a presidential landslide in 1972. In each case, the partisan turnover in the House has been minimal—four in 1968, nine in 1970, 13 in 1972.

In 1972, for example, Utah voters gave Nixon nearly 70 per cent of their vote, but were discriminating enough to reelect their Democratic governor with an even higher percentage, defeat their only Republican congressman, and still manage to return their Republican attorney general to office by a comfortable margin. And voters in Kentucky, who gave McGovern the lowest percentage of any Democratic presidential candidate since the Civil War, elected a Democratic senator for the first time since 1954.

Special congressional elections provide another barometer of the decline in rigid party-line voting. Since Nixon took office there have been 18 special elections to fill House vacancies, most of them in traditional one-party districts. Virtually all of them have been close. Without an incumbent on the ballot, these constituencies have been about as likely to prefer one party as the other. Wisconsin's Seventh District faithfully returned Melvin Laird to the House for eight elections in a row, with his victory margin in 1968 nearly 2 to 1. But that didn't mean these voters felt Republicans were

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inherently superior; when Laird became Secretary of Defense in 1969, they picked a liberal Democrat, David Obey, to replace him.

Political reporters have failed to keep pace with the public's increasing reluctance to vote a straight party ticket. They still find it convenient to write about midterm congressional elections as if they were a national world series between the two parties, although the voters are ceasing to look at them this way. Such political independence is likely to increase because party identification is weaker among the millions of young voters entering the electorate than it is among their elders. It seems unlikely that even a shock like Watergate will be enough to drive the current generation of voters back to a narrowly partisan view of the world. Republican candidates have been saying, without sounding very convinced of it, that voters are smart enough to know that the party as a whole didn't commit burglary. They are probably right.

A Plague on Both Your Houses

If voters *are* too sophisticated to assume that all Republicans are guilty and all Democrats innocent, they still might express their anger by declaring both sides guilty. If people are as convinced as they seem to be that politicians as a class are crooks, 1974 ought to be a disastrous year for any incumbent.

But consider a curious fact: between 1966 and 1972, public approval of Congress dropped precipitously from 64 per cent to 26 per cent, according to the Gallup Poll. During the same years, the reelection rate for members of the House was about as high as it could go—98 per cent in 1968 and 96 per cent in 1970 and 1972.

What national polls often obscure is that voters do not elect a Congress, they elect individual members, one to a customer. What matters is not how they perceive the institution as a whole, but how they perceive the individual incumbent on the ballot. Les Aspin can campaign in Wisconsin against the swollen defense budget and the refusal of the House to do anything about it. H. R. Gross can campaign in Iowa against the swollen domestic budget and the refusal of the House to do anything about that. Both can win by running against Congress, as long as the voters refuse to believe that their own representative is part of the problem.

In recent years, with the price of a House campaign approaching $100,000 in many districts, and with incumbents receiving about two thirds of the funds, few challengers have had the resources to make an effective case. It is nothing more than human nature that voters tend to prefer the known to the unknown.

These financial problems are likely to be accentuated in 1974. Candidates of both parties, incumbents and challengers alike, are finding it difficult to raise money this year. Traditional contributors, struck by the shoddiness of what they have been buying, are not eager to go back to market. Incumbents who have returned from fund-raising excursions to their home districts have been complaining about this in the congressional cloakrooms. But in fact tight political money really helps them.

When money is scarce, incumbents can live off the fat of their other built-in advantages—the franking privilege, regular television appearances, the staff allowance. If no one had a dime to spend, every incumbent would win. Given our current system of campaign finance, there can be no massive repudiation of incumbents unless significant numbers of voters are willing to vote for candidates they have never heard of.

A shortage of campaign contributions increases the importance of the money that does come in. Neither organized labor nor organized business will stop giving because of Watergate. Nor will the ideological spenders, both left and right, who are likely to feel

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that now is a good time to influence things in their direction.

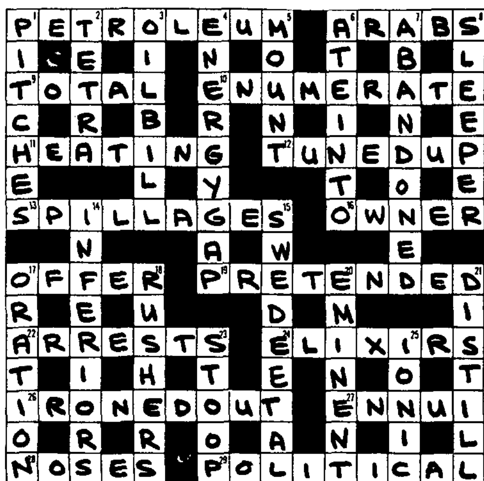
Candidates with these kinds of ties will get their money in 1974. Those who fall in between the cracks—the moderate, the vaguely well-liked, the ones who are everybody's second choice, the congressional-level Muskies of 1974—will be hit the hardest if the faucets are turned off. And they are precisely the kind of candidates who will not be able to make up the difference with volunteers. With the decline of traditional party organizations, it is the ideologically committed (doctrinaire conservatives as well as staunch liberals) and a few special interest groups like labor who provide the bulk of political volunteers.

Money and volunteers offer some clues to who the losers will be in 1974. Turnout is another. If turnout is low in primaries and general elections because the ordinary person has the same frustrated feeling about his vote as the fat cat does about his money, interesting things may happen.

Low turnout is a godsend for the well organized and the highly motivated. Last November in Philadelphia, for example, Republican district attorney Arlen Specter was beaten for reelection even though polls showed him far ahead of his Democratic challenger. Specter was well liked in Philadelphia, but the projections had assumed a normal turnout of 60 to 65 per cent. Instead, the turnout on election day was 43 per cent and he was defeated by the remnants of the local Democratic machine, which had come up with a hard core of 230,000 votes for its candidate. Normally this would not be enough to win, but in 1973 it was. Specter's appeal was broad but soft, and it did not survive apathy.

George McGovern won the 1972 Democratic presidential nomination on the strength of primary victories in states where most of the voters stayed home. In Massachusetts he collected all 102 convention delegates with the votes of less than one quarter of the state's registered Democrats. If people had been allowed to vote from their beds, it is unlikely that he would have won. But McGovern supporters took the primary seriously, and others did not. Muskie and Humphrey were just candidates; McGovern was a cause.

The answer to the January puzzle:



Losers Anonymous

Although 1974 is unlikely to be a political watershed, there will be some turnover of congressional seats. And it is possible to hazard a guess about the characteristics of the most likely losers. Added together, the existing signs about turnout and financing point to defeat in 1974 for a certain kind of incumbent: the complacent veteran; the middle-of-the-roader, the one who has depended for years on a loosely defined sort of good-will, or on a machine he hasn't cranked up in years; the one whose supporters wake up election morning, watch the sun disappear behind a cloud, wonder what's in it for them, and find something better to do than vote.

The prelude to what is coming may have occurred on a day in September, 1970, when three of the most senior and least distinguished Democratic members of the House—Samuel Friedel and George Fallon of Maryland and Philip Philbin of Massachusetts—were all defeated for renomina-

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tion. (The lesson can be equally applied to lackluster Republicans challenged by committed conservatives.) Friedel lost to Parren Mitchell, a black sociologist; Fallon to Paul Sarbanes, a reformist state representative; Philbin to Robert Drinan, an anti-war Roman Catholic priest. All three of those defeats came in primaries where the turnout was low. In Massachusetts only 50,000 voted in the Democratic primary that chose Drinan over Philbin. Two months later, when Drinan won the general election, the turnout was 170,000, but by this time Philbin was available to his traditional supporters only as a rather pathetic write-in candidate.

It is a lot easier to manipulate the turnout in primaries than in general elections, and that was what Drinan's supporters did in 1970, making sure their friends voted and doing nothing to alert anyone else that an election was taking place. Drinan voters saw the primary as a referendum on the Vietnam war and organized in his behalf. Philbin fans saw it as nothing in particular, and most of them stayed home.

There are not many Phil Philbins left in Congress now for the zealous to pursue. A number of them were beaten in primaries in 1972, were forced out by redistricting after the last census, or took advantage of a generous new pension plan when it became available last year. But every Congress has its share of members who stand for nothing in particular, and they may be the ones we decide to punish in 1974.

In many districts, the candidates inflicting the punishment will be the ideologically committed of both parties. Elsewhere, popular local and state political figures may see 1974 as the year to exploit whatever anti-incumbent feeling Watergate has spawned. Take the situation facing a 66-year-old House Democrat named Frank Stubblefield, a druggist from Murray, Kentucky, who was elected in 1958 and has been reelected ever since, usually without serious opposition. He is a quiet man, the sort who rarely comes out strongly on either side of any issue that does not involve tobacco. Also from Murray, Kentucky, is a Democratic state senator named Carroll Hubbard, a 36-year-old lawyer who represents six counties in the legislature. Hubbard is the sort of bright young politician who normally develops into a congressional heir apparent, waits patiently for the retirement of the older incumbent, and then moves up. This year Hubbard is taking the calculated risk he might have otherwise avoided and is aggressively challenging Stubblefield for the Democratic nomination.

That primary will not make a great deal of difference in the make-up of the next Congress, but it may be typical of what is happening in districts around the country. It would not necessarily be fair if the ultimate casualties of Watergate were to be the Frank Stubblefields of Congress, but in a year of low turnout and little interest, they may be the ones who have the most to lose. ■

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Memo of the Month

GO-73 (Rev. 1-65)

ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF LABOR
BUREAU OF EMPLOYMENT SECURITY

MEMORANDUM

Date: April 30, 1971

To: David Gassman
Statistician II

Office:

From: Benjamin Greenstein, Chief
Research and Statistics

Office:

Subject: Hazardous Use of Coffee Pot

The afternoon of April 29, while Mr. Arthur Haverly was on vacation, an electric coffee pot was plugged in in his office and left unattended. It spread noxious fumes through the office and scorched a table belonging to the State.

You admitted that you plugged in that coffee pot and that you did it, although Mr. Haverly had told you that I had requested that it should not be done due to previous adverse experience. When I asked you why you plugged in that coffee pot, although I had requested that it should not be done, you stated that you did not take it that seriously.

I may note also that Mr. Haverly informed me the previous day that he had not authorized you to connect the coffee pot in his office.

The following facts, therefore, emerge:

1. You had used your supervisor's office for cooking coffee without his authorization.

2. You did so, although you knew that I had requested that it should not be done.

3. You had left the coffee pot unattended. For that matter, there may have been a conflict between performing agency work and attending to the coffee pot.

4. You created a fire hazard for your fellow workers and subjected them to noxious fumes.

5. When I asked you why you plugged in the coffee pot in spite of my request to the contrary, you stated that you did not take it that seriously. This is a rejection of supervision.

6. Your disregard of my authority has resulted in discomfort to your fellow workers and damage to State property.

7. On April 30, the day following the above actions and conversation, at 8:25 in the morning, I noted that you had again plugged in the coffee pot. When I pointed out that you were aware that I had asked you not to plug it in, you replied that it is not 8:30 yet. I then told you that I am in charge of the section, even though it is not 8:30 yet.

What should be done with respect to your actions, as specified above, is under consideration. In the meantime you are emphatically requested not to repeat the hazard you created by plugging in the coffee pot.

Benjamin Greenstein

BENJAMIN GREENSTEIN, Chief
Research and Statistics

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