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**STABILITY OF SUPPORT FOR THE
POLITICAL SYSTEM**
The Initial Impact of Watergate

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Political cynicism has increased sharply over the last decade (Miller and Miller, 1974). The Watergate affair has apparently heightened an already growing public suspicion of the honesty and sincerity of public officials, but whether it has also resulted in a loss of faith in the integrity of the political order as a whole remains unclear. This paper attempts to assess the initial impact of Watergate on public attitudes toward the political system. In particular, we shall investigate whether the onset of this major political scandal fostered a rise in political alienation. In doing so, we hope to illustrate some of the

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complex interrelationships between political events and public support for the political system.

CONCEPTS AND HYPOTHESES

Political alienation refers to feelings of separation from or rejection of the political system. As we employ the term, alienation involves not merely a distrust of incumbent public officials, but also a lack of confidence in the political order itself. Alienation typically expresses itself as a conviction that, regardless of who holds office, citizens cannot control their government, which is unresponsive to their needs and wishes, and that the political order is therefore unworthy of support. By contrast, political allegiance refers to a sense of identification with the political system. Characteristically, the allegiant citizen is proud of existing governing institutions, feels a sense of belonging to the political order, and believes the political process to be on the whole fair and responsive to public demands.

We have elaborated on these definitions of political alienation and allegiance elsewhere (Citrin et al., 1975). Here two features of our conceptualization require special emphasis. First, alienation and allegiance refer to relatively enduring orientations toward government (Sears and Whitney, 1973). Second, because these attitudes refer to evaluations of the political system *as a whole*, an individual may have an unfavorable opinion of a particular political institution, even one so vital as the presidency, without necessarily being alienated from the political system.

Although attitudes toward the president and the political system are conceptually distinct, the one may influence the other. Indeed, a familiar and popular theory holds that the Watergate affair has dealt a heavy blow to public confidence in the political system because it has exposed dishonesty and illegality in the presidency, traditionally among the most venerated of public offices. By this reasoning, citizens perceive

Watergate not only as evidence that an irresponsible few have acted unwisely or illegally, but also as proof that the system itself is fundamentally flawed.

This interpretation assumes that some process of generalization is at work. For example, it is argued that negative attitudes toward the President are generalized to the presidency, and these attitudes in turn are generalized to the political system as a whole. As Burnham (1973: 80) has contended: "The will to believe dies hard in the United States when Presidents are concerned. Moreover, when it dies something else appears to die with it, namely the consensually accepted legitimacy of the American political system itself."

At the outset of our inquiry we suspected that attitudes toward the president would indeed color attitudes toward the political system. As we progressed, however, we became persuaded that the key question is not whether generalization may occur—for it obviously can—but under what conditions it is likely to occur. Attitude change in response to a political issue such as Watergate depends, in large part, on (1) the complexity of the stimulus event, and (2) the centrality of the attitude in question. The more complex the event and the more central the attitude, the less likely it is that large-scale, unidirectional attitude change will occur.

Complexity of the Stimulus. For a political event to induce large-scale net change in attitudes, a major proportion of the public must perceive it in the same way.¹ This depends partly on the event's complexity. The more complex an event, the more susceptible it becomes to different interpretations: observers may focus more readily on different facets, attach different meanings to the same facet, or in the extreme, throw up their hands in confusion (Katona, 1958).

Plainly, Watergate was a complex issue when it captured public attention, if only because of the many people involved, the number of legal, political, and moral questions at stake, and the number of alleged facts in dispute. One would therefore expect citizens to differ in their initial explanations for Watergate. And the less widespread the agreement on the

meaning and significance of Watergate, the less likely that it would elicit a large-scale shift toward disenchantment with the political system.

The Centrality of Political Alienation/Allegiance. Political allegiance and alienation can be termed central or basic attitudes. Allegiance is an aspect of patriotism, a form of symbolic loyalty and identification that is acquired and reinforced early in the process of political socialization. Alienation also appears to reflect feelings that are deep-seated and relatively intense, since to adopt this orientation one must usually overcome strong social pressures toward allegiance. Feelings of alienation or allegiance thus appear to be more central to the individual's system of beliefs and identifications than opinions about specific issues or personalities of the day. And if, as the evidence suggests, the more central an attitude the less likely it is to change (Converse, 1964, 1970), attitudes toward the political system may remain comparatively stable even as opinions about, say, the president markedly change.

In sum, to the extent that a loss of confidence in the president and the presidency colored attitudes toward the political system as a whole, the Watergate revelations should have led to a marked increase in political alienation. But to the extent that the complexity of the Watergate story and the centrality of the basic sentiments about the political system at stake inhibit such a process of generalization, Watergate would result in little, if any, net change in attitudes toward the political system.

DATA AND MEASURES

This paper is an outgrowth of research on "social indicators" being conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of California, Berkeley. Data were collected at 2 points in time. In summer 1972, a cross-sectional sample of the adult population of the 5-county San Francisco Bay area (Baseline survey, $n = 963$) was given an hour-long personal

interview that included 15 minutes of questioning on political topics. Between February and July 1973, a specially selected subsample of 143 respondents from the Baseline survey was recontacted.² First, an hour-long depth interview on perceptions of politics was tape recorded and later transcribed. Then each respondent was asked to complete a questionnaire and to return it by mail. The Mailback survey included a number of political alienation items previously included in the Baseline survey.

In short, the Baseline survey was completed well before the Watergate scandal became a major issue. By contrast, both the depth interviews and the Mailback survey were administered over an extended period, during which some of the most explosive charges and disclosures of the Watergate scandal captured newspaper headlines.

Initially, the depth interviews did not explicitly address the Watergate issue; however, in late May we added a series of specific questions about this issue to the interview schedule. Only 21% of our respondents were asked such direct questions, but because of our general interest in the sources of political loyalty and estrangement, it was natural for many respondents to comment spontaneously on Watergate. In all, 66% of the respondents given a depth interview expressed an opinion about some facet of the issue.

To assess change in evaluative attitudes toward the political system we employ two measures composed of items asked in both the Baseline and Mailback surveys. The first, constructed from five "forced-choice" item pairs, taps a number of dimensions of alienation and allegiance, including pride in the political system, sense of belonging, government responsiveness, political efficacy, and government credibility.³ Each item pair contained one statement in the alienated direction and another in the allegiant direction; respondents were asked to choose the statement that more closely fitted their views. A respondent's score on the alienation "pair index" was derived simply by summing his responses to its five constituent parts.

This pair format avoids several problems commonly associated with conventional agree-disagree items. The problem of

acquiescent response set is largely overcome because “yea-sayers” (or “nay-sayers”) are required to state their preference for one of two statements, and cannot agree (or disagree) with both. In addition, we eliminated any major order effects by placing the “alienated” statement first in three of the five pairs and the “allegiant” statement first in the other two. Last, since respondents were required to choose between two items rather than merely to agree (or disagree) with one, they should have been less likely to respond reflexively. They were in effect asked to weigh the alternatives and the differences between them, which would reduce the likelihood that they would merely give a ritualistic response.

The second political alienation measure was built from an adjective checklist.⁴ In the Baseline survey, respondents were presented a list of adjectives and asked to select those which in their opinion fitted the national government. Half the adjectives were favorable to the government, the other half unfavorable. All were simple words, presumably familiar to all citizens. Again, we balanced favorable and unfavorable adjectives in order to minimize the problem of acquiescent response set.

Two comments on our measures are in order. First, the circumstances of administration were not the same at both time points. Respondents answered the Baseline questionnaire with the interviewer present, the Mailback survey with the interviewer absent. Second, the item format was not precisely the same in the two waves. In the Mailback, an “undecided” alternative was added to the alienation pairs and adjectives; in addition, the adjectives were converted to a forced-choice format. We draw attention to these methodological changes because they almost certainly inflated the frequency of apparent attitude change (i.e., turnover); however, intensive analysis has persuaded us that these measurement changes had no discernible impact on either the extent or pattern of net attitude change.

Employing two distinct indicators of political alienation enables the researcher to see whether his results are a function of a particular operational definition of his concepts. Thus, to

the extent that we obtain similar results with each measure of political alienation/allegiance, our conclusions acquire additional warranty.

THE IMPACT OF WATERGATE

Between the summers of 1972 and 1973 the American public was bombarded by disclosures of break-ins, “buggings,” “pay-offs,” and “dirty tricks,” followed by charges of a White House cover-up and presidential complicity. Did these revelations of malfeasance on the part of high public officials lead to an erosion of political allegiance among American citizens?

Our data indicate that evaluative attitudes toward the national government tended to be stable during this period. This was true for both of our indices of alienation/allegiance. Table 1 presents these data in tabular form with the indices trichotomized. We can see from summing the diagonals that 55% on the adjective index and a full 70% on the pair index maintained their same positions over the period of our study.

Table 1 does indicate turnover in opinion, but no disproportionate change toward increased alienation. Calculating net change, we see that virtually as many become more allegiant as become more alienated.⁵ For the pair index, the net change score is 3%, and for the adjective index it is zero.⁶ In short, there was no large-scale unidirectional shift toward political disaffection, as the generalization argument suggests. Instead, movement in one direction cancelled out movement in the other, leaving the overall distribution of public attitudes toward the political system essentially unchanged.

Change, of course, occurs. But just as we cannot judge whether a runner is fast or slow unless he races against speedy competitors (or the clock), so we cannot say whether attitudes toward the political system tend to be uncommonly stable—one indication of centrality—except by seeing if they change more or less than a political attitude that we know is highly resistant to change. One such orientation that suggests itself for

TABLE 1
Political Alienation Indices, Summer 1972 vs. Spring 1973

Adjective Index:

Summer 1972	Allegiant	Spring 1973		Total
		Middle	Alienated	
Allegiant	19%	9%	4%	32%
Middle	12	14	9	35%
Alienated	1	11	22	34%
Total	32%	34%	35%	(N=143)

Item Pair Index:

Summer 1972	Allegiant	Spring 1973		Total
		Middle	Alienated	
Allegiant	39%	6%	1%	46%
Middle	11	22	5	38%
Alienated	0	6	9	15%
Total	50%	34%	15%	(N=143)

NOTE: Each entry is calculated as a percentage of the total table (N=143). Some row and column totals do not sum to exactly 100% due to rounding error.

comparison is party identification. A large number of studies have provided evidence that this orientation is remarkably stable, at least in the United States (see, e.g., Converse, 1964, 1969; Shively, 1973). For our sample, the coefficients of stability (test-retest Pearson correlation coefficients) were .77 for the pair index, .62 for the adjective index, and .78 for party identification. In short, over the period of our study attitudes toward the political system were almost as stable as the most stable political orientation—party identification.

It is important to distinguish between observed stability and resistance to change. A mental state or pattern of behavior may

not change over a long period of time and still be exceedingly susceptible to change. For example, a consumer may be a regular patron of a particular shop, and appear fixed in his loyalties, until a marginally more attractive store opens up across the street. Thus, we must ask whether the stability of attitudes toward the political system occurred in a context of strong pressures to change.

Both informal observation and systematic research point to the existence of such pressures during the period of our study. Newspapers and newscasts were constantly reporting on Watergate (see Television News Index and Abstracts, 1973). Nationally televised speeches by the president on Watergate reached millions of citizens. Live coverage (and evening rebroadcasts) of the Ervin committee hearings attracted large audiences. "By early August," Lang and Lang (1973: 54) report, "a Gallup Survey revealed that close to 90 percent of the national cross-section of the population had watched some part of the hearings." Polls indicate that even before John Dean's dramatic accusations of March and April of 1973, 80% of the general public said that they had "heard or read something about Watergate." By the end of May, after two nationally televised speeches by the president and several weeks of the Ervin committee hearings, 95% claimed to know something of the affair (Lang and Lang, 1973).

Our open-ended interviews confirm that by May 1973 Watergate had become highly salient to many voters, rivaling traditional issues such as taxes and crime in the streets. We derived a measure of salience of the Watergate issue by recording spontaneous mentions of Watergate in the course of the hour-long interview. By plotting the number of spontaneous references to Watergate against the date of the interview, Figure 1 shows that the salience of Watergate increased steadily, especially as events unfolded in April and May 1973. Despite numerous opportunities to refer to Watergate, only 12% of the respondents interviewed in January or February raised the issue. Of those interviewed in mid-May, however, 72% spontaneously introduced the issue, often at several different points in the

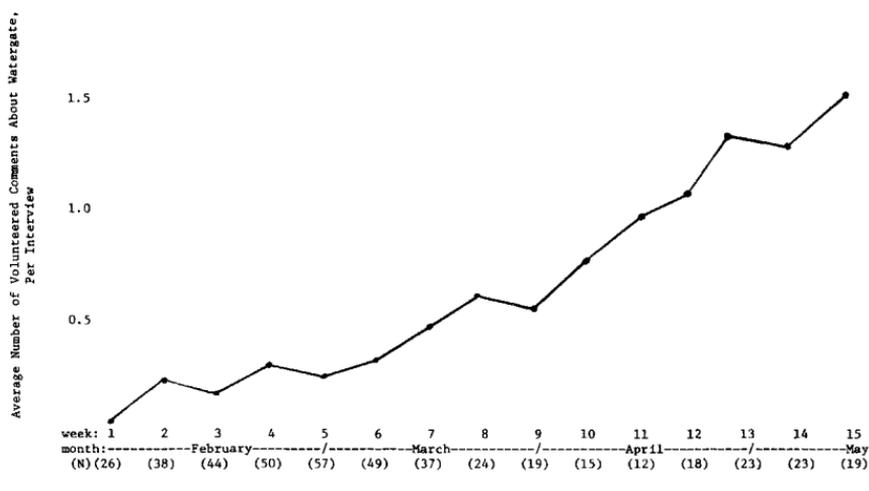


Figure 1: Average Number of Spontaneous Comments on Watergate in Depth Interviews, by Week

NOTE: The addition of specific items concerning Watergate to the depth interview in May depressed the number of comments which could be coded as "spontaneous" so the data for late May and June are not comparable with the earlier figures and have been omitted. In order to smooth out the effects of sampling fluctuations, the technique of a three-week moving average was utilized. The point for week 7 is calculated on the basis of interviews for weeks 6, 7, and 8; week 8 is calculated for data collected during weeks 7, 8, and 9, and so on. Thus the Ns listed at the bottom of the graph sum to a total much greater than the number of interviews completed.

interview. Moreover, those mentioning Watergate invariably described it as important or significant, which argues for the validity of "voluntary references" as an indicator of issue salience.

To judge from our data, awareness and concern for Watergate were virtually a universal phenomenon, in sharp contrast to the widespread ignorance and indifference characteristic of public opinion on many issues. Indeed, the volume of news about Watergate was so great that the customary relationship between education and issue-awareness disappeared. Respondents without a college education were as likely as the college-educated to make unsolicited comments about Watergate. By every available indicator awareness about Watergate appears to be an "across-the-board" phenomenon. We found no evidence that party identification, attitude toward President Nixon, or attitude

toward the political system influenced the likelihood that someone considered Watergate a salient issue. To be sure, we encountered several politically allegiant respondents who suggested that "too much is being made of Watergate" and there was the occasional Republican who admitted that "to be honest, I'd definitely be more concerned if the Democrats were in power." But in the main, the volume of news about Watergate was so great as virtually to eliminate individual differences in receptivity to the flow of information.

There was, then, an uncommon concentration on the Watergate issue by the mass media and an uncommon awareness of it among ordinary citizens, generating strong pressures to change.⁷ And the stability of attitudes toward the political system, in the face of such pressures, suggests that they are indeed resistant to change. One reason for this resistance, we have contended, is the centrality of allegiance-alienation; a second, which we shall now explore, is the complexity of the stimulus-event.

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF WATERGATE

Few studies have explored public perceptions of political events, let alone their impact on public attitudes. Most research on public opinion proceeds as though the meaning of the stimulus-event was relatively unambiguous. In analyzing Watergate, however, we cannot make this common assumption. Indeed, a major contention of this paper is that Watergate initially failed to produce large-scale change in attitudes toward the political system between 1972 and 1973 precisely because it was perceived in several quite distinct (and sometimes conflicting) ways.

At the most rudimentary level of approval or disapproval, public reactions to Watergate were virtually uniform: nearly everyone disapproved. But mere approval or disapproval is only a crude index of public perceptions of the affair. For anyone interested in the impact of Watergate on attitudes toward the

political system itself, it is essential to attempt to discover what “lessons” the public drew from the issue—who was to blame, how it was dealt with once it came to light, and what it signified about the integrity of the political system as a whole.

How did citizens interpret the Watergate affair? Based on an analysis of the depth interview protocols, we identified eight major explanatory themes which help to explain why so many failed to move from condemnation of the Watergate affair to a negative generalized evaluation of the political system. The most prominent theme might be described as *diffuse cynicism about politicians and politics*. It was evident in 47% of the protocols in which Watergate was discussed.⁸ Many respondents shared the opinion of a young salesman, a Democrat who had voted for Nixon:

These acts are definitely illegal, but there have been illegal acts before this . . . there are probably just as many going on now involving quite a few politicians . . . I take it for granted that politicians are going to be on the edge of different acts that are ethically questionable.

A black McGovern voter who scored alienated on a pair index put it more pungently:

This is politics, baby, let's face it. And all the politicians are crooks . . . even the black ones, definitely, yes. There's just no way someone can stay in politics and not be a crook.

When asked if Watergate is something commonplace in American politics, he replied: “Oh, yes. It's just like a jaw and a tooth, I know everyone has one.”

This cynical view of politicians, we should emphasize, is scarcely proof of estrangement from the system. Allegiant and alienated citizens were equally likely to regard Watergate as “just politics, just another example that politicians are greedy, power-hungry, and dishonest.” The comments of the allegiant indicate that cynicism about politicians is quite compatible for many with a strong sense of attachment to the political regime

and community. For those inclined to a cynical view of politicians, which is a long-standing tradition of political thought in America, the early Watergate revelations seem to have been taken as just one more example of the dishonesty of politicians, not as a reason for a radical reevaluation of their attitudes toward the political system as a whole.

Another explanatory theme, in 42% of the protocols, focused on the personal *responsibility of President Nixon* for Watergate. To some extent, this point of view may represent some effort to interpret the affair as an outgrowth of personal failings rather than institutional flaws. But at the time of these interviews the great majority (including Democrats, McGovern voters, and alienated respondents) were reluctant to judge the president as definitely “guilty” on the information then available. Not surprisingly, then, a number of respondents tried to exonerate Nixon and to place the blame on those around him. Some 20% drew, so to speak, *a distinction between the king and the king’s advisers*. This third way of looking at Watergate saw it as due to the untrustworthy men surrounding Nixon who either gave him bad advice, fed him false information, or kept him completely in the dark. As one of our respondents remarked, “Yes, he may be responsible, but only because he’s at the top.”

Some respondents (24%), in their attempt to explain Watergate, drew an explicit *distinction between the incumbent officeholders and the political system itself*. Many who took this position argued that specific individuals, rather than the system of government, were to blame. As they saw it, the misconduct of a few officials did not prove that the system had failed. An inclination to distinguish between incumbents and the system may have served as a shield to protect the political order from the full force of public reaction to the scandal.

The theme of *checks and balances* was also frequently voiced (31%). This point of view distinguished among the parts played by various institutions in the Watergate affair and stressed that, while some components of the political system may have acted shabbily, others—especially the courts, Congress, and the press—performed admirably. In this vein, some of our respond-

ents condemned the break-in and the cover-up, variously blaming them on "politics," the president, or the president's staff. But they also argued that the vigorous investigation of the Watergate affair proved that the political system "works." As a Republican building contractor observed:

Watergate shows that the system works well, because it's come out, and it's been brought out in front of the people. . . . It's great that the system is capable of bringing such a thing to light.

A young Berkeley woman who was classified as alienated before Watergate and who had voted for McGovern also praised the Ervin committee, although she expressed doubt that "in the end everything will come out." Nevertheless, she admitted that Watergate could ultimately lead to beneficial reforms such as curbing the powers of the presidency and changing underhanded campaign practices. In sum, a surprising number of respondents found some silver lining in the dark Watergate clouds.

Another sign of the complexity of the Watergate affair was the sense of *confusion* expressed by some 12% of the respondents when they discussed it. These respondents were unable to explain Watergate or to assign blame for it because they found the whole affair simply too bewildering to comprehend. As one respondent confessed:

You can't tell what the truth is; too many different people are saying different things.

Other respondents (7%) were unable to furnish an explanation not so much because they found the affair confusing as because they regarded it as pointless. The break-in baffled them because Nixon, a sure winner in their view in the coming election, had nothing to gain from it. Watergate, then, was *senseless*. Others (9%), also unable to make sense of the affair, *attributed responsibility for it to the electorate*. As one respondent observed, most citizens fail to pay sufficient attention to politics. In her words,

You deserve the kind of government you get and you get the kind of government you deserve. . . . It's the people who aren't doing their job, not the system.

These explanations, of course, need not be mutually exclusive. One cannot say that people perceive an event differently because in the aggregate they provide several interpretations of it. To see whether there were actually distinct underlying interpretations of Watergate, we factor analyzed the eight themes identified in the depth interviews. Three factors emerged; Table 2 shows the factor loadings (using both varimax and oblimax rotations) for the eight themes.

These three factors represent quite distinct ways of looking at Watergate. Persons scoring high on the first factor tended to draw a distinction between incumbents and the system and to call attention to the checks and balances in the political process. As they saw it, the political system was not at fault; on the contrary, the system was to be commended for bringing the Watergate scandal to light. In short, they blamed the president for Watergate, not the system.

TABLE 2
Factor Analysis of Interpretations of Watergate
(Varimax and Oblimax Rotations)

Interpretations	Institutional Var.	Factor obl.	Personal Var.	Factor obl.	Cultural Var.	Factor obl.
Systems-officials distinction	<i>.61</i>	(<i>.84</i>)	-.06	(.17)	.05	(-.02)
Attribute to Nixon	<i>.76</i>	(<i>.76</i>)	.16	(-.07)	.08	(-.05)
Checks and Balances	<i>.74</i>	(<i>.73</i>)	.22	(-.13)	-.05	(.08)
King's advisors	.15	(.02)	<i>.80</i>	(<i>-.80</i>)	-.00	(-.01)
Senseless	.08	(-.06)	<i>.80</i>	(<i>-.82</i>)	-.01	(-.02)
Politicians-cynicism	.19	(.17)	-.04	(.06)	<i>.64</i>	(<i>-.66</i>)
Citizens' fault	.00	(-.06)	.19	(-.19)	<i>.69</i>	(<i>-.70</i>)
Confused	.10	(.10)	.14	(-.13)	<i>-.60</i>	(<i>.60</i>)

NOTE: The *n* for the factor analysis is 94. The factor loadings for the defining input variables are in italics. The factor loadings generated by the orthogonal varimax rotation are listed first; the loadings for the oblimax (nonorthogonal) rotation follow in parentheses. The eigenvalues for these three factors were all greater than one.

By contrast, a high score on the second factor reflected an effort to deny that the president was culpable. For those who saw Watergate in this light, the president's advisers were to blame rather than Nixon himself. These respondents were also likely to argue that Nixon could not be responsible for so senseless an action as the break-in.

The third factor appears to tap a prominent feature of the popular culture. People scoring high on this dimension emphasized the negative stereotypes of politicians so common to many Western political systems. In their attempt to account for the Watergate scandal, these respondents spoke neither of the presidency nor of the political system. As they saw it, Watergate was "just politics," the shabby sort of thing one ought to expect from the untrustworthy men who run for public office. Whether or not such diffuse expressions of cynicism have deep roots is uncertain; however, the belief that Watergate is basically the fault of the citizenry also loads highly on this third factor. This suggests that some expressions of a diffuse cynicism about politics have a ritualistic quality and that others reflect the influence of a fairly indiscriminate tendency to evaluate social objects negatively.

To assure ourselves that the three factors were indeed independent (rather than merely uncorrelated because of the required orthogonality in the varimax rotation), we performed an oblique rotation on the same data matrix. Even when the statistical requirement of independence is dropped, the same three factors emerge, as Table 2 shows. The magnitudes of the factor loadings differ slightly, of course, but regardless of the rotation procedure employed, all items have high loadings on the same factor and the rank orders of the item loadings on each factor do not change. In short, citizens evidently perceived Watergate in three distinctly different ways—none of which, we might add, constituted an unequivocal stimulus toward disenchantment with the political system.

CONCLUSIONS

Evaluative attitudes toward the political system have proved themselves impressively stable even in a period of political turbulence. Feelings of allegiance and alienation (as we have defined and measured them) appear to be deeply rooted orientations. While other research indicates that some attitudes that appear to be "fundamental" or "basic" are in fact quite susceptible to change, attitudes toward the political system appear to be both impressively stable and resistant to change.

The San Francisco Bay area, of course, is not particularly typical of the country as a whole. Moreover, we have concentrated on the initial impact of Watergate, and it is surely likely that over a longer run the Watergate affair, which eventually culminated in the first resignation of a president in American history, did some injury to public faith in the political system. Last, limitations of sample size precluded a decisive analysis of changers. Other analyses we have conducted suggest, for example, that such variables as attitudes toward the party system prior to disclosure of the Watergate affair, participation in political protests, and party identification all help to explain why some citizens became more critical of the political system while others became more supportive. But the small number of cases (and the even smaller number of "changers") made it impossible to disentangle the (modest) impact of these variables—or even to distinguish reliably their joint effects from those of measurement and/or sampling error.

We are especially encouraged, therefore, that a number of other studies (e.g., Entman et al., 1974), conducted independently, employing different measures of political allegiance-alienation, extending over longer periods of time, interviewing various kinds of populations (from college students to ordinary citizens) in different parts of the country, have uncovered essentially the same finding as our study: over the short run Watergate led to little or no net change in basic evaluative attitudes toward the political system.

Our findings underscore the importance of distinguishing between support for incumbent officials (particularly the

president) and support for the political system. Despite the obvious embroilment of the president's staff in the scandal, citizens retained a fairly high degree of confidence in the integrity of the political system per se. They were able, apparently, to distinguish between incumbents and the regime, to assign blame to one and not to the other.

Attitudes toward authorities (in this case particularly the president) appear to be more responsive to external events than are attitudes toward the system. Presidents may suffer sharp losses in popularity, as Truman did during the Korean War, without a commensurate loss of support for the political system. Conversely, presidents may enjoy sharp surges in popularity, as Kennedy did in his first year in office, without the political system enjoying a parallel rise in support. Evidently, surges or declines in presidential popularity, and change in evaluative attitudes toward the political system as a whole, can have quite different sources.

This is not to say that basic loyalties toward the political system are permanently fixed, altogether immune to events. Surveys conducted over the last two decades suggest that political cynicism has markedly increased. Data collected by the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research indicate that twice as many citizens expressed some unwillingness to take the government at its word in 1972 as in 1964 (Miller and Miller, 1974). Criticism of established institutions—the family, the church, the army, the penal system, and the government—have become staples of writing and conversation. An adversary attitude toward the political system has gained increasing respectability. Indeed, in many circles political disaffection has become the norm, or at least the fashion. How durable these changes are remains to be seen.

Our explanation of the stability of evaluative attitudes toward the political system is obviously incomplete. Throughout this paper we have emphasized two social psychological factors—the complexity of the stimulus-event and the centrality of allegiance-alienation—without examining the role of a more explicitly political factor that we intuitively believe to have

been important. Mass reactions to political events often depend on elite reactions. For whatever reason, political elites were *restrained* in their responses to Watergate.⁹ During the period in which our interviews were conducted, few, if any, significant political leaders sought to inflame public sentiments against the system itself. Thus, one reason why the public may have retained its faith in the political order in the face of Watergate was because no major section of the national leadership tried to destroy that faith.

Finally, our results should not be taken to mean that Watergate has had no influence on mass attitudes or political behavior. Whether it later led to disenchantment with the political system is a question for future research. It was already plain in summer 1973 that the scandal had wounded President Nixon severely, damaged his party at the polls, and fed cynicism about politicians, the parties, and the electoral process. But lack of confidence in the president, the Congress, or the established parties is not equivalent to a lack of commitment to the political system itself. Under some circumstances dissatisfaction with specific political institutions may become generalized, coloring attitudes toward the entire political system. This study suggests, however, that the politically allegiant did not repudiate the American system of government because of Watergate; public support for the political order is more deep-seated, apparently, than many observers have supposed.

NOTES

1. Of course, this is a matter of probability, not necessity. It is logically conceivable that large numbers of citizens could shift their attitudes in the same direction, each for a different reason. Nevertheless, the more diverse their perceptions of the stimulus-event, the *more likely* they are to change in contrary directions, and so to leave the overall distribution of opinion after the event much as it was before.

2. This special subsample was selected to overrepresent respondents who were particularly alienated or allegiant; nevertheless, it does include respondents located at all points along the alienated-allegiant continuum. It should be noted that "weighting" the data so as to make our especially selected subsample more

representative of the cross-sectional sample from which it was drawn in no way alters or qualifies our findings.

3. Item Pair Index: Pair (1) a. Our government officials usually tell us the truth. b. Most of the things that government leaders say can't be believed. Pair (2) a. The way our system of government operates, almost every group has a say in running things. b. This country is really run by a small number of men at the top who only speak for a few special groups. Pair (3) a. The way this country is going, I often feel that I really don't belong here. b. Although our country may be facing difficult times, I still feel that it's a worthwhile place and that I really belong here. Pair (4) a. I am proud of many things about our system of government. b. I can't find much in our system of government to be proud of. Pair (5) a. There is almost no way people like me can have an influence on the government. b. People like me have a fair say in getting the government to do the things we care about.

4. The Baseline survey adjectives and the Mailback questionnaire adjectives include: honest, unfair, helpful, corrupt, kind, fair, stupid, trustworthy, confusing, democratic, disgusting, and efficient.

5. To calculate net change we performed the following two operations on the two processes contributing to net change: "switching" (that is, a switch from one polar position to another) and "swaying" (that is, a switch from a polar position to a middle one and vice versa). Net change among "switchers" = $2x$ (the number of respondents allegiant at T_1 who were alienated at T_2 minus the number of respondents alienated at T_1 who were allegiant at T_2 divided by the total number of respondents).

Net change among "swayers" = the total number of respondents who were allegiant at T_1 and in a middle position at T_2 or in a middle position at T_1 and alienated at T_2 minus the total number of respondents alienated at T_1 who were in a middle position at T_2 and in a middle position at T_1 who were in an allegiant position at T_2 divided by the total number of respondents.

6. The shift on the pair index, curiously enough, is in the direction of *allegiance*. The shift is, however, substantively and statistically insignificant.

7. It would be foolish to suggest that all the information flooding the mass media put the president and the various figures involved in the original break-in and subsequent cover-up and the political system itself in an entirely bad light; however, it would be equally foolish to deny that the ratio of unfavorable to favorable news about leading American officials and the political system did not change during the Watergate era by at least several orders of magnitude, compared to more "normal" times.

8. The themes were initially identified in a thorough, but informal, reading of the transcribed interviews. These themes were then explicitly defined, and professional coders classified all of the respondents in the sample. The n for these percentages is 94, representing the number who made one or more comments on Watergate. The percentages sum to more than 100 because of multiple responses.

9. We are indebted to Jean Padiou for raising this important issue. For an analysis that also accents the significance of political elites—though in this instance emphasizing their lack of restraint—see Polsby (1963).

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