

America's Alienated Majority

By Amitai Etzioni

THE MAN moving into the White House next January will be mistaken if he assumes it is merely the Left, students, and intellectuals who are deeply alienated from the American political system. That, at least, is the conclusion that emerges from a series of recent studies. In 1968, the majority of the public is deeply unhappy with all three branches of our government, and the evidence suggests that a negligible part of the growing disaffection will be dissipated by the elections.

The Supreme Court, of course, has been under increasing conservative fire for some time. This summer, however, a Gallup poll found that 53 per cent of the nation judged the Court to be "fair" or "poor," only 28 per cent thought it "good," and a meager 8 per cent considered it "excellent"—a clear decline of favorable opinion from previous years.

Congress, generally held to be conservative in comparison with the "Warren Court" and therefore less susceptible to anti-liberal sentiment, nevertheless is faring even worse, according to a Harris poll taken last January. Asked "to rate the job the 90th Congress has done," 41 per cent responded positively, revealing a discontented majority of 59 per cent, the highest negative proportion in five years.

The sad story of the buffering

the Executive branch has been taking is well known, but the extent of the confidence crisis is still surprising. The Office of the Presidency traditionally inspires awe in most people. Ever since polls were first taken, a rock-bottom 40 per cent of the public has almost always approved of whatever the President happened to have been doing. Yet in March 1968, on the eve of his announcement that he would not run again, Johnson's support fell through this floor; only 38 per cent of the public liked the way LBJ was handling his job. His "hawk with dove's feathers conduct" of the war pleased even fewer—30 per cent of those polled.

The current disillusionment among the majority of citizens, moreover, extends beyond the immediate personalities involved—Johnson, members of the 90th Congress, the Warren Court—to the institutions themselves. Asked how the leadership in various nongovernmental areas now compares with the past, the public replied affirmatively as far as medicine, science, and business were concerned (all rated "better" by no less than 64 per cent). But the Federal government and politics scored, respectively, a very low 19 per cent and 13 per cent! Over half of those questioned, 55 per cent, felt that "something is deeply wrong with our society."

Ironically, telling evidence of the majority's pessimism has been uncovered in an essentially encouraging study. A 1968 Harris poll, whose main finding was that Negro Americans are not yet giving up hope, reports as an aside that 53 per cent of the *general* public sees the United States as a country in which the "rich get richer and [the] poor get poorer."

Actually, this is an unfair characterization. The number of families below the poverty line has declined each year since 1959, on the average by more than one per cent—admittedly a slow rate, yet moving in the right direction. In addition, those who stay poor do gain greater incomes than previously. That a majority of Americans have a bleaker view of their country than the facts warrant is clearly another indication of their burgeoning alienation.

Elections are supposed to be democracy's answer to such widespread disaffection. And to a degree, this week's elections will discharge the country's mounting tensions. With the unpopular President replaced, the new one can be expected to bask in the confidence of the majority of the public, at the outset anyway. What the mid-1969 polls will say about the Congress and the Supreme Court (assuming the appointment of a new Chief Justice) is more difficult to pre-

dict, although an initial upswing in public confidence is also probable.

After mid-1969, the crystal ball gets very cloudy. To begin with, it is impossible to know how the new Administration will deal with crime, poverty, Vietnam—all the issues that are so difficult to solve. Secondly, no matter what the approach taken, it is likely to further alienate a substantial segment of either the liberals or the conservatives. Finally, and perhaps most important, a large part of today's deep-seated alienation is not generated by specific issues.

On the political level, the problem is that of a very sizable proportion of the voters casting their ballots feeling more or less coerced because they did not get to vote for the man *they* would have nominated. Late in September, Harris asked the following: "Suppose instead of voting in the election you yourself could pick anyone who is living and has been active in politics to be President of the United States, who would you pick from this list?" Only 21 per cent opted for Nixon, and only 8 per cent wanted Hubert Humphrey. Many of the few who named LBJ (6 per cent) or Romney (3 per cent) will not feel too cheated by being restricted to a choice between Nixon and Humphrey. In contrast, those who asked for Rockefeller (12 per cent), McCarthy (7 per cent) or John Lindsay (4 per cent)—and possibly those who named Edward Kennedy (18 per cent)—no doubt feel their man never had a fair chance.

Estimates of how many of the 13 per cent who named George Wallace share that feeling, because of the obvious hurdles faced by third-party candidates, are not readily available. But on the whole, it seems reasonable to presume that many liberals (not to mention the Left) and full-fledged conservatives (not to mention the Right) will soon rejoin the swelling ranks of "frustrated voters." This frustration

embraces both the outcome of the election *and* the process through which it was reached, and it matters little that the conservatives would appear to have less reason for unhappiness than Democratic and Republican liberals.

Interestingly, until the very closing stages of the campaign, Gallup showed Nixon gaining in public stature. The more he acted as if he already was the President, the more he appeared to acquire some of the "charisma" of the office. Voters found him more impressive on television than Humphrey (54 per cent to 28 per cent), more likable (43 per cent to 40 per cent), and even more sincere (46 per cent to 34 per cent). But the new halo reflected mainly his rising *partisan* support. Among Republicans, three out of four gave him their hearts by late September; only four out of every ten democrats warmed up that much to Humphrey. Thus neither man was capable of winning the genuine commitment of the majority.

EQUALLY significant is the fact that the currently disaffected segment of the public does not consist mostly of young people, black Americans, and intellectuals, as some would have it. While much of our youth is deeply dissatisfied with the direction the country has been taking over the last few years, the percentage of those disaffected is not much higher than among older groups of the population. A great deal has been made of the growing proportion of young people in the nation, or of the declining median age, with half the country now said to be 25 years old or younger. But this is not true of the voters, or of the persons whose opinions are polled; children, who are included in the national statistics, are excluded from both modes of political expression. Even so, the average age of voters and respondents to polls has declined over the past years from 47 to 42.

Similarly, Negro Americans constitute only about one-tenth of the population, and they are not *that* much more alienated than white Americans. While on some questions Negroes show a higher degree of dissatisfaction, on many others they do not. For example, on the Harris poll question of whether the United States is a country where "the rich get richer and [the] poor get poorer," 52 per cent of the whites agreed as compared with 57 per cent of the Negroes who were polled.

It is the combination of youth, the more educated persons, members of several minority groups, plus many other Americans which registers in the responses to the polls cited. That is why they show the *majority* of the country to be unhappy.

The new Administration and Congress, consequently, will not be able to restore public confidence in the political leadership and institutions of this country unless it takes account of the legitimate needs and demands of a large and diverse number of citizens who are disaffected. The task is surely a tough one, for catering to some groups to gain their support will intensify the dissatisfaction of the others. Since many of the demands being made are rather difficult to meet on short notice, too, a new measure of candor is essential.

Indeed, public confidence is shaken more by the unfilled promises and millenium rhetoric—coupled with slower than slow reforms and extensive news management—than by the inability of the country's leadership to quickly solve our pressing problems. And the alienation resulting from lack of trust is more difficult to repair than a reaction against incompetence. New competence may be found; when the leadership of one Administration after another is not trusted by a majority of the public, the country's vital political institutions stand threatened.