

*To isolate the long-range effects of Watergate media exposure per se, regression analysis was used to control for the pre-Watergate levels of political effect variables and usual levels of communication behavior. Data were obtained from a longitudinal study of younger and older voters measured during the political campaigns of 1972 and 1974 and in the midst of the Senate Watergate (Ervin Committee) hearings in 1973. The results show little effect of the amount of attention to the broadcast hearings. In contrast, the reading of the accounts of these early hearings in the print media had substantial impact. In addition, print exposure and discussion of the Senate hearings had more effect on the young voters, while usual levels of public affairs newspaper reading and the motivations for using the media appear to have had greater consequences for the older voters.*

## **DECLINE AND FALL AT THE WHITE HOUSE A Longitudinal Analysis of Communication Effects**

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It is difficult not to agree with the notion that Watergate was the "news story of the decade." The extent of coverage, the size of the audiences, and the political repercussions of the scandal provide strong evidence for that conclusion. It would seem

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logical to argue, in addition, that Watergate presents an unusually fine opportunity to study communication effects, since weakness of stimuli is a chronic problem in "real world" communication effects research.

There are a number of reasons, however, why research on the effects of the Watergate news story may *not* contribute much to a theoretical understanding of communication processes and effects. The first problem is that much of the evidence concerning Watergate as a "media event" concentrates only on the vast audience of the hearings *or* on the shifts in public opinion during the period. No real link is made between these two observations. As a consequence, effects are inferred without directly linking individual communication behavior and political effects in the same study.

Even those researchers who have individual data for Watergate media exposure and political effects may be limited in the strength of inferences they can make. It is possible that the large amount of attention paid to the Watergate scandal resulted in a ceiling effect for exposure which would render effects analysis impossible. Media exposure measures that differentiate amount and nature of communication behavior are needed to provide variance in the independent variable.<sup>1</sup>

At first glance, there seems to be little question that Watergate does provide sufficient variance in political behavior. Dramatic shifts occurred during the scandal in responses to national poll questions about Nixon's role in Watergate, general evaluations of the President, and public acceptance of resignation or impeachment.<sup>2</sup> Media effects would be expected to be demonstrated most easily in terms of these kinds of variables—particularly increases in level of information about the scandal and changes in attitudes toward Nixon's duplicity. But the real concern with Watergate's effect on the political order stems not from such short-range effects but rather with attitudes and behaviors of longer duration, such as attitudes toward political parties and the political system, behavior in the 1974 election campaign, and changes in public affairs media habits.

In order to isolate the long-range effects of Watergate media exposure per se, research designs need to separate these effects from other types of changes, such as secular and cyclical. Secular changes were those taking place during the time of Watergate but being wholly or in part independent from the event. Several such secular trends may be cited as starting prior to Watergate and potentially confounding inferences about the effects of the scandal. Various national surveys, reported in DeVries and Tarrance (1972), have shown a decline in the level of party affiliation over the years; and Dreyer (1971-1972) has shown a steady downward trend since 1952 in the capacity of party identification to predict vote direction. The proportion of citizens voting in elections has shown a somewhat uneven decline in the same period, a trend made more remarkable if we take into account the slight rise in the level of education in the country. Finally, there is considerable evidence of a secular trend toward political cynicism and away from trust in government. Miller, Brown, and Raine (1973) report a sharp secular decline in public trust in government since 1958. Watergate may have added to or accelerated these changes, of course, but additional kinds of evidence are needed to make such an inference. One approach is to control for the pre-Watergate level of these variables while looking at the *incremental* effects of level of exposure to Watergate media coverage. This implies that a longitudinal design be used and that pre-Watergate measures are available.

Cyclical trends of political motivation may also lead to false inferences. Although political interest, discussion, and voting turnout might decline from 1972 levels, this decline is not necessarily due to Watergate. Such indicators of political enthusiasm inevitably decline during off-year elections. To separate Watergate effects per se from these cyclical trends, Watergate exposure is introduced as a variable to ascertain whether such exposure accelerated or retarded the cyclical effects.

Studies by Edelstein and Tefft (1974), Chaffee and Becker (1975), and Becker (1976) tend to show some effects of

exposure to Watergate media coverage in the form of increasing knowledge of the scandal events and accepting Nixon's guilt. There is little evidence, however, that exposure to Watergate generalized to more abstract political attitudes, to behavior in the 1974 election, or to emerging patterns of media behavior. On the other hand, several studies of the Senate (Ervin Committee) hearings have presented findings which might be labeled selective exposure and selective perception (Holm, Kraus, and Bochner, 1974; LeRoy, Wotring, and Lyle, 1974; O'Keefe and Mendelsohn, 1974; Chaffee and Becker, 1975). McGovern voters, as contrasted to 1972 Nixon voters, were more likely to watch the hearings, pay attention to them, discuss Watergate, express concern about Watergate, think the hearings were fair, and think Nixon was not truthful. Taken together, they show that controlling for 1972 vote or party affiliation is absolutely essential in the evaluating exposure effects. A zero-order correlation between Watergate exposure and attitudes toward Nixon's resignation may be a spurious artifact of their common antecedent—partisanship.<sup>3</sup>

Legitimate inferences about Watergate media effects cannot be made without analysis of the relationship between the respondent's media behavior relative to those events and various potential political consequences, controlling for prior levels of the dependent variables and political partisanship. With proper controls and adequate caution, we can begin to use data from the Watergate era as the basis for tentative causal inferences about mass communication effects.

#### STUDY DESIGN

During October of 1972, personal interviews were conducted with 389 eligible voters in Madison, Wisconsin. Although student wards were undersampled, the resulting sample was clearly atypical of the nation at large in that McGovern carried the city with 57% of the presidential vote. Since the major focus of the study was on younger people voting for President

the first time, persons under 25 years old were selected at six times their actual proportion. As a result, the younger and older voters have been kept separate in our analyses. While these 1972 interviews were taken some four months after the Watergate break-in, we feel they constitute a reasonable approximation to pre-Watergate (T1) measures. Evidence supportive of this assumption is found in the relatively low levels of importance respondents attributed to "honesty in government" as a campaign issue. As documented more fully in McLeod, Becker, and Byrnes (1974), "honesty in government" received only chance (or slightly below) rankings among six issues presented in the November 1972 round of interviews. The strong salience of the Vietnam War issue accounts for part of the low "honesty" salience, but it received far lower rankings than its play in the local press and national television would have predicted. When asked in 1974 what the salience should have been in the 1972 campaign, two-thirds of our panel respondents now put "honesty in government" in first or second place among the six issues. National survey data also support our assumptions. Less than 3% of Gallup poll respondents mentioned corruption in government as an issue prior to the November election (Erskine, 1973-1974).

In early June of 1973, in the midst of the Ervin Committee hearings and John Dean's testimony, a short questionnaire was mailed to all T1 respondents. Questionnaires (T2) were returned by 283 or 73% of the original respondents.<sup>4</sup> In October of 1974, 189 respondents or 49% of the panel were reinterviewed (T3) along with a replenishing sample of 425 new respondents. Panel drop-out analyses of the marginal percentages of major political variables reveal no serious biases, although the shrinkage of the younger subsample was much greater due to higher mobility. Short, post-election telephone interviews were conducted in both 1972 and 1974, and vote turnout data were obtained for each respondent from the city clerk's records.

A variety of political measures were obtained in both the 1972 and 1974 elections: vote direction, vote turnout, campaigning activity, and interest. Political attitudes of efficacy,

trust, and sense of duty to vote were measured in all three years. Media use and interpersonal communication variables (T1 and T3) included readership of various areas of newspaper content, viewing of various television program types, gratifications sought from political content, reasons for avoiding political material, and political discussion.<sup>5</sup> The critical measures of exposure to media coverage of Watergate, obtained in 1973, included print (newspapers and magazines) and the electronic (television and radio) media separately.

The differing sampling rates for younger and older voters made separate analyses by age group desirable. In addition, previous work on agenda-setting (McLeod, Becker, Byrnes, 1974) and uses and gratifications sought from political content (McLeod and Becker, 1974) had indicated stronger effects among older respondents. Within these age groups, exposure to Watergate broadcast and print media content and Watergate discussion (T2) are seen as a function of both political (party affiliation) and communication (television and newspaper public affairs, political discussion) variables (T1). A combination of Watergate media exposure, Watergate discussions, and political media gratification and avoidances are seen as leading to three types of outcomes: Watergate orientations, changes in general political orientations, and changes in 1974 election campaign behavior over 1972 levels.<sup>6</sup> Since our interest is in change of various criterion variables, T1 levels of these variables, along with presumed antecedent political and communication variables, are introduced first into the regression model. The test for Watergate communication behavior becomes an incremental one—testing for changes in the criterion variables over their 1972 levels.<sup>7</sup> That is, does the level of Watergate exposure and discussion *in excess* of usual levels of communication predict *changes* in political attitudes and behavior? Do they produce changes in current levels of communication behavior? The presence of political content gratifications and avoidances in the model raises an additional question: does the motivational basis for media use help to account for communication effects beyond that which can be predicted from media exposure alone?

**TABLE 1**  
**Levels of Political Criterion Variables for**  
**Young and Older Respondents:**  
**1972, 1973, and 1974**

		Young (N=85)	Older (N=100)	diff.	t(age)
<u>Watergate Orientations</u>					
1. Presidential vote in 1972 and "replay" in 1973 and 1974 (1-3)	1972	2.47	2.15	-.32	-2.20 <sup>b</sup>
	1973	2.52	2.27	-.36	-1.92
	1974	2.64 <sup>a</sup>	2.59 <sup>a</sup>	-.05	--
2. Saliency of Honesty in Government Issue in 1972 and "replay" in 1974 (1-6)	1972	2.97	3.38	+.41	1.59
	1974	4.68 <sup>a</sup>	4.95 <sup>a</sup>	+.27	1.10
3. Nixon helped plan the Watergate break-in (1 Disagree - 5 Agree) <sup>c</sup>	1973	2.58	2.37	-.21	-1.27
	1974	3.22 <sup>a</sup>	3.35 <sup>a</sup>	+.13	--
4. Nixon knew in advance of break-in plans (1 Disagree - 5 Agree)	1973	3.10	2.97	-.13	--
	1974	3.20	3.29 <sup>a</sup>	+.09	--
5. Nixon helped direct the cover-up (1 Disagree - 5 Agree)	1973	3.60	3.41	-.19	-1.05
	1974	4.51 <sup>a</sup>	4.55 <sup>a</sup>	+.04	--
6. Break-in is typical of things people do in campaigns (1 Disagree - 5 Agree)	1973	2.71	2.76	+.05	--
	1974	3.02 <sup>c</sup>	2.70	-.32	-1.92
<u>General Political Orientations</u>					
1. Political Efficacy (4-12)	1972	10.32	10.85	+.53	1.93
	1973	9.86	10.45	+.59	1.91
	1974	10.34	10.97	+.63	2.25 <sup>b</sup>
2. Political Trust (2-6)	1972	4.27	4.70	+.43	1.99
	1973	4.15	4.69	+.54	2.31 <sup>b</sup>
	1974	4.07	4.64	+.57	2.48 <sup>b</sup>
3. Duty to Vote (1 No Duty - 3 Duty)	1972	1.97	2.38	+.41	2.71 <sup>a</sup>
	1973	1.93	2.45	+.52	3.63 <sup>a</sup>
	1974	1.97	2.31	+.34	2.22 <sup>b</sup>
4. Political Interest (1-5)	1972	3.85	3.93	+.08	--
	1974	3.78	4.13 <sup>a</sup>	+.35	3.02 <sup>a</sup>
5. Party Affiliation (1 Republican - 3 Independent - 5 Democratic)	1972	3.90	3.46	-.44	-1.86
	1973	3.56	3.36	-.20	-1.11
	1974	3.73	3.57	-.16	-.67
6. Political Position (1 Right - 5 Left)	1972	3.51	3.31	-.20	-1.53
	1974	3.49	3.23	-.26	-2.09 <sup>b</sup>
<u>Specific Political Behavior</u>					
1. Political Participation (0-4)	1972	.70	1.17	+.47	2.77 <sup>a</sup>
	1974	.63	1.16	+.53	3.37 <sup>a</sup>
2. Campaign Participation (0-5)	1972	1.29	1.22	-.07	--
	1974	2.36	2.28	-.08	--
3. Campaign Literature Information Seeking: Non-Presidential (0-5)	1972	3.04	2.35	-.69	--
	1974	2.99	2.91	-.08	--
4. Congressional Vote Direction (1-3)	1972	2.64	2.57	-.07	--
	1974	2.67	2.53	-.14	--
5. Vote Turnout: Clerk's Records (0-1)	1972	.94	.87 <sup>b</sup>	-.07	-1.61
	1974	.59 <sup>a</sup>	.76 <sup>b</sup>	+.17	2.27 <sup>b</sup>

## RESULTS

The decline of Nixon credibility is well illustrated in Table 1. Nixon support among older voters in a "replay of 1972" question almost reached the low levels of the younger voters by October of 1974. The "replay" questions asked the respondent in 1974 to answer the original 1972 question within the context of: "Knowing what you know now, how would you have responded to this question in 1972?" The other Watergate orientations generally show the same anti-Nixon shift. There is little evidence, however, of marked change in political orientations in Table 1. Such differences that do occur are between younger and older respondents rather than between the 1972 and 1974 waves. The data on Party Affiliation show that, among the young voters at least, Watergate did not help the Democrats. A close inspection of the marginal percentages shows that both parties are weakened almost equally by a movement from strong to weak party identification. Younger respondents show no sign of increased political socialization to older adult levels. The young voters continue to be lower on political efficacy, trust, and a sense of duty to vote after two years. They also show less political interest and noncampaign political participation and were less likely to vote in the 1974 election than the older respondents.

While there is evidence of a two-year increase in anti-Nixon sentiment in Table 1, it is important to note that many of the alleged massive effects of Watergate are not found. Within each age group, little net change from 1972 levels of general political

## NOTES TO TABLE 1

a.  $p \leq .01$ b.  $p \leq .05$  c. Items 3, 4 and 5 and summed to form the extent of Nixon guilt used in Table 2.

NOTE: Young voters are those between 18 and 24 years old in 1972; older voters are 25 years old or older. The numbers in parentheses indicate ranges for the individual items. The t tests reported are two-tailed; t values less than 1 are not reported. Letters in the t (age) column indicate significant differences between age groups within a given year; letters in the Young and Older columns indicate significant differences between 1972 and 1974 levels within the given age group. No comparison was possible for Campaign Participation because of a different time frame used in the question administrations.



TABLE 2  
 Watergate Attitudes (1974): Standardized Regression Coefficients for 1973 Watergate  
 Media Exposure and Interpersonal Discussion, Gratifications and Avoidances

Dependent Variable	R <sup>2</sup> for 1972 Variables:		1973 Watergate Hearings					Total Gratif.	Total Avoid.	Ingrm. R <sup>2</sup>
	Political	Communication	Broadcast Exposure	Print Exposure	Interper. Discussion	Ingrm. R <sup>2</sup>				
Presidential vote and "replay"	.427 <sup>a</sup> (.428) <sup>a</sup>	(.019)	.01 -.11	.23 <sup>c</sup> .02	-.05 .03	(.038) (.014)	.13 -.20 <sup>b</sup>	-.12 -.13	(.022) (.047) <sup>b</sup>	
Honesty in Govern. Young Issue and "replay" Older	(.034) (.012)	(.065) (.016)	.07 .28 <sup>b</sup>	.16 -.22 <sup>c</sup>	.05 -.23 <sup>c</sup>	(.053) (.037) <sup>b</sup>	.06 .17	-.15 -.10	(.019) (.022)	
Extent of Nixon guilt	(.298) <sup>a</sup> (.266) <sup>a</sup>	(.013) (.001)	.02 .09	.10 .08	-.06 .20 <sup>c</sup>	(.006) (.070) <sup>c</sup>	.06 .16	.11 .18	(.012) (.052) <sup>a</sup>	
Watergate as typ- ical of politics	(.154) <sup>a</sup> (.132) <sup>a</sup>	(.052) <sup>b</sup> (.086) <sup>b</sup>	-.07 .05	-.17 <sup>a</sup> .19	.16 .13	(.163) <sup>a</sup> (.042)	-.01 .02	.11 -.04	(.012) (.001)	
Blame: Nixon and entourage	(.138) <sup>a</sup> (.105) <sup>a</sup>	(.097) <sup>c</sup> (.077) <sup>c</sup>	.01 -.03	.34 <sup>b</sup> -.02	.28 <sup>b</sup> -.06	(.247) <sup>a</sup> (.001)	.08 .26 <sup>b</sup>	-.04 -.10	(.005) (.062) <sup>b</sup>	
Blame: System	(.007) (.000)	(.041) (.017)	.09 .05	-.30 <sup>c</sup> -.06	.17 .14	(.037) (.035)	.20 .11	-.02 .23	(.034) (.056)	
Blame: Regime	(.098) <sup>c</sup> (.000)	(.028) (.068)	-.07 .01	-.17 -.11	.07 .17	(.020) (.057)	.30 <sup>b</sup> .24 <sup>c</sup>	-.02 .08	(.080) <sup>c</sup> (.090) <sup>c</sup>	
Blame: Enemies- Mature	(.001) (.001)	(.117) <sup>b</sup> (.055)	.23 <sup>c</sup> .01	-.30 <sup>c</sup> .30 <sup>b</sup>	.08 .11	(.050) (.064)	.20 .31 <sup>b</sup>	.15 .25 <sup>b</sup>	(.058) <sup>a</sup> (.138)	
Blame: Media	(.011) (.046) <sup>b</sup>	(.067) (.036)	.06 .00	-.26 <sup>c</sup> .10	-.29 <sup>b</sup> -.04	(.185) <sup>a</sup> (.009)	-.01 .31 <sup>b</sup>	.19 .16	(.029) <sup>b</sup> (.102)	
Number of Variables =	(2)	(3)				(3)			(2)	

a.  $p \leq .01$ ; b.  $p \leq .05$ ; c.  $p \leq .10$ ; n = 73 (young);  $\geq 18$ ,  $\leq 24$ ; n = 86 (older);  $\geq 25$   
 NOTE: Bracketed entries indicate the variance accounted for ( $R^2$ ) by the given block as an increment above that accounted for by all previous blocks. Tests are incremental F tests for that block. The  $R^2$  for the 1972 Block 1 includes the variance accounted for by the T1 measure of the dependent variable except for the five Blame variables where T1 measures are not available. In those comparisons, one (Party Affiliation) rather than two measures are included in the block. 1972 Block 2 includes measures of television and newspaper public affairs use and political discussion.  
 Unbracketed entries are standardized regression coefficients for each variable controlling for the influence of every other variable. Tests are for the significance of the individual variable.

orientations is shown in the 1974 data. Although the 35% drop in vote turnout among the young in 1974 is probably above normal for an off-year election, the older voters who constitute the majority of all voters have only an 11% decline. This indicates only the lack of any massive *net* effect of Watergate, of course. It does not necessarily mean that Watergate had no *gross* differential effects on people in the audience.

Tables 2 through 4 examine the power of the usual (1972) and Watergate communication variables (1973) to predict changes in political behavior in 1974. The second column in each table indicates the incremental  $R^2$  in the dependent variables predicted by the usual levels of television public affairs viewing, newspaper public affairs reading, and political discussion. It is clear in all three tables that the levels of usual communication behavior do not predict to 1974 attitudes, orientations, and behavior. Only 6 of the 44 total comparisons possible were significant in predicting incremental ( $R^2$ ) change. A closer inspection of the individual beta coefficients (not shown in tables) of the three component measures indicates, however, that customary newspaper reading does predict fairly well, accounting for 8 of the 13 significant relationships of the individual betas. The interpersonal discussion measure accounts for 4 more, and television public affairs viewing accounts for only a single significant relationship.

We have controlled for these usual levels of communication behaviors in order to evaluate the specific contribution of Watergate communication behavior during the 1973 Watergate hearings. The presumption was that usual levels of communication behavior would be strong determinants of communication behavior during the Watergate crisis period. The effects of such control are not likely to be great, however. In analyses not presented in the tables, it appears that only customary newspaper use strongly predicts following Watergate in the print media (.46 young; .43 older). Broadcast communication (.19; .05) and interpersonal political discussion (.12; .25) had much weaker predictive power for their respective Watergate levels.

TABLE 3  
**General Political Orientations (1974): Standardized Regression Coefficients for 1973 Watergate  
 Media Exposure and Interpersonal Discussion, Gratifications and Avoidances**

Dependent Variable	R <sup>2</sup> for 1972 Variables: Political Communication		1973 Watergate Hearings				Total Total Gratif. Avoid.	Ingram. R <sup>2</sup>
	Young Older	Older	Broadcast Exposure	Print Exposure	Interper. Discussion	Incitem. R <sup>2</sup>		
Political Efficacy	.03 (.115) <sup>b</sup> (.078) <sup>a</sup>	-.16 (.105) <sup>b</sup> (.470) <sup>a</sup>	.14 (.014) (.001)	-.02 (.001)	.21 <sup>c</sup> (.014)	-.30 <sup>b</sup> (.023)	-.04 (.023)	
Political Trust	.17 (.016) (.009)	-.12 (.262) <sup>a</sup> (.357) <sup>a</sup>	-.03 (.037) (.038)	-.21 <sup>b</sup> (.038)	.06 (.037)	-.27 <sup>b</sup> (.055) <sup>c</sup>	.05 (.042) <sup>c</sup>	
Duty to Vote	.11 (.062) (.026)	.25 <sup>c</sup> (.282) <sup>a</sup> (.247) <sup>a</sup>	-.35 <sup>a</sup> (.089) <sup>b</sup> (.060) <sup>c</sup>	.31 <sup>b</sup> (.060) <sup>c</sup>	-.09 (.023)	-.14 (.035)	-.22 (.035)	
Political Interest	-.04 (.031) (.031)	.02 (.278) <sup>b</sup> (.273) <sup>a</sup>	.14 (.010) (.037)	.17 <sup>c</sup> (.037)	.24 <sup>b</sup> (.010)	-.10 (.048)	-.04 (.031)	
Party Affiliation	-.01 (.008) (.031)	.39 <sup>a</sup> (.454) <sup>a</sup> (.654) <sup>a</sup>	-.26 <sup>b</sup> (.081) (.008)	-.05 (.008)	.04 (.004)	.06 (.007)	.03 (.007)	
Political Position	-.11 (.045) (.030)	-.10 (.239) <sup>a</sup> (.434) <sup>a</sup>	.35 <sup>a</sup> (.071) (.025)	.07 (.025)	.23 <sup>b</sup> (.046) <sup>c</sup>	.02 (.027)	-.08 (.027)	
Number of Variables =	(2)		(3)				(2)	

a.  $p \leq .01$ ; b.  $p \leq .05$ ; c.  $p \leq .10$ ; n = 73 (young);  $\geq 18$ ,  $\leq 24$ ; n = 86 (older);  $\geq 25$   
 NOTE: Bracketed entries indicate the variance accounted for (R<sup>2</sup>) by the given block as an increment above that accounted for by all previous blocks. Tests are incremental F tests for that block. The R<sup>2</sup> for the 1972 Block 1 includes the variance accounted for by the T1 measure of the dependent variable as well as Party Affiliation; 1972 Block 2 includes measures of television and newspaper public affairs use and political discussion.  
 Unbracketed entries are standardized regression coefficients for each variable controlling for the influence of every other variable. Tests are for the significance of the individual variable.

We would expect that attention to the broadcast Ervin hearings would be most strongly related to the set of Watergate orientations shown in Table 3. Apparently, this is not the case. Watergate exposure from television and radio operates only in raising the salience of honesty in government as a retrospective campaign issue, and this is only among the older voters. In several cases, moderate zero-order correlations of Watergate broadcast exposure with the dependent variable are substantially reduced by controlling for the other two Watergate communication variables.

Reading about the scandals in newspapers and magazines shows a strong relationship to Watergate orientations, however (Table 2).<sup>8</sup> The heavier readers among the young are more apt to blame Nixon and his entourage and less likely to think of the Watergate crimes as being typical of American political life. If we relax traditional levels of statistical significance, they also are less likely to support Nixon in a vote "replay" and less likely to attribute blame to the system, morality, and the mass media. Interpersonal discussion is also associated with blaming Nixon and not blaming media among the young, after controlling for all other variables.

The older voters show little relationship to Watergate orientations for either print use or interpersonal communication (Table 2). For them, Watergate orientations seem more a function of the gratifications they seek than their level of exposure. Those naming a greater number of reasons for using political media content were less likely to change their "votes" away from Nixon but were more likely to blame Nixon and his entourage, the system, and the mass media. A closer inspection of the beta coefficients for individual gratifications (not in tables) reveals that those older voters using political media for anticipated communication with others tend to attribute blame to all sources. Those using the media for vote guidance also tend to blame Nixon and morality, but they are significantly below other older respondents in blaming the media.

The 1973 Watergate communication measures tend to show little connection to changes in general political orientations

TABLE 4  
**Election Campaign Behavior (1974): Standardized Regression Coefficients for 1973 Watergate  
 Media Exposure and Interpersonal Discussion, Gratifications and Avoidances**

Dependent Variable	R <sup>2</sup> for 1972 Variables:		1973 Watergate Hearings				Total Gratif. Avoid.	Ingrm. R <sup>2</sup>
	Political	Communication	Broadcast Exposure	Print Exposure	Interper. Discussion	Ingrm. R <sup>2</sup>		
Political Participation	Young (.122) <sup>b</sup> Older (.419) <sup>a</sup>	(.052) (.046) <sup>c</sup>	-.23 <sup>c</sup> .03	-.09 .17 <sup>c</sup>	.30 <sup>b</sup> .00	(.096) <sup>b</sup> (.025)	-.18 -.13	(.031) (.016)
Campaign Participation	Young (.253) <sup>a</sup> Older (.310) <sup>a</sup>	(.047) (.014)	.07 -.20 <sup>c</sup>	.20 .00	.16 -.04	(.106) <sup>b</sup> (.029)	-.05 .06	(.009) (.022)
Campaign Discussion	Young (.040) <sup>a</sup> Older (.183)	(.020) (.144) <sup>a</sup>	-.07 .03	.01 .06	.24 <sup>b</sup> .10	(.070) (.032)	.04 <sup>b</sup> .22	(.003) (.031)
Campaign Information Seeking	Young (.088) <sup>b</sup> Older (.059) <sup>c</sup>	(.018) (.038)	-.04 .15	-.12 .11	.16 .15	(.011) (.073) <sup>c</sup>	.42 <sup>a</sup> .03	(.149) <sup>a</sup> (.058) <sup>c</sup>
Political Knowledge	Young (.482) <sup>a</sup> Older (.427) <sup>a</sup>	(.039) (.039)	-.19 <sup>c</sup> -.10	.32 <sup>a</sup> -.06	.00 .10	(.060) (.017)	-.05 -.10	(.003) (.011)
Vote Direction (Democratic)	Young (.398) <sup>a</sup> Older (.622) <sup>a</sup>	(.002) (.039) <sup>b</sup>	-.10 .05	.35 <sup>a</sup> .06	-.13 -.04	(.071) <sup>b</sup> (.013)	.19 <sup>b</sup> .16 <sup>b</sup>	(.060) <sup>b</sup> (.022) <sup>c</sup>
Vote Turnout	Young (.006) Older (.019)	(.020) (.011)	.02 -.11	.02 .14	-.08 -.16	(.008) (.039)	.26 <sup>b</sup> .27 <sup>b</sup>	(.069) <sup>c</sup> (.082) <sup>b</sup>
Number of Variables =	(2)	(3)				(3)		(2)

a.  $p \leq .01$ ; b.  $p \geq .05$ ; c.  $p \leq .10$ ; n = 73 (young);  $\geq 18$ ,  $\leq 24$ ; n = 86 (older);  $\geq 25$   
 Note to Table 3 applies here, as well.

(Table 3). Again, viewing of the televised Ervin Committee hearings or listening to them on the radio drops out as an explanatory variable. Print attention to Watergate, however, is related to a shift toward the Democratic Party and to an increased sense of duty to vote among the young. On the other hand, discussion of the Watergate scandals among the young is associated with a lessened duty to vote, a weakened allegiance to the Democratic Party, and a seemingly contradictory leftward movement in political position. The zero-order correlation of political position and party affiliation is .50 for the young and .46 for the older in 1972. It is interesting to note that this relationship dropped sharply ( $r = .22$ ) for the young in 1974, but it increased slightly for the older voters ( $r = .52$ ). These trends seem less contradictory when we look at the changes more closely and find that what is happening among the young is a change in the nondiscussing group toward a less participatory political stance, toward Independent status among former Republicans, and toward Independent Democratic status among the former Independents. The frequent discussers have become less dutiful and tend to move from stronger to weaker Democratic positions. The reasons given for seeking and avoiding political communication show expected patterns of relationships with the political orientation measures. The more reasons given for avoiding political material, the more the person is apt to become less efficacious and trusting and less interested in politics in general. Seeking political media content is associated with greater political interest and a leaning toward the left end of the political spectrum.<sup>9</sup>

Looking at the effects on the 1974 election campaign in Table 4, most of the significant relationships to Watergate communication come among younger voters and for the print exposure and interpersonal discussion variables. Attention to the 1973 hearings on television and radio shows only nonsignificant associations with lessened participation and knowledge among the young and weakened campaign activity among the older voters. Exposure to print media during the early scandal period, however, is associated with increased knowledge and

voting for Democratic candidates in the more recent campaign among the young. Watergate discussion among this group is tied to higher levels of participation and discussion in 1974. Gratifications and avoidances are related to 1974 campaign behavior in expected ways. Those with stronger gratifications and weaker avoidances tended to discuss the campaign more often (older only), to seek more information, to vote Democratic, and to have higher turnout levels.

### CONCLUSIONS

Our findings may be discouraging to those who would think of Watergate as a series of events which had astonishing impact on American society. Although the responses of our 159 panel members in 1972 and 1974 showed marked increases in anti-Nixon attitudes and perceptions that honesty in government should have been the key issue in the presidential race, there is little evidence of net change in more general orientations such as political efficacy and trust.

The relative infrequency of significant findings for our three Watergate communication measures (only 12% of the 132 comparisons of individual betas in Tables 2-4 significant at the .05 level; 20% of the 44 incremental  $R^2$ s) may add to a conclusion of very limited impact of Watergate as a media event. However, a very strong and conservative test of Watergate communication impact was used. Using a panel with three points in time to specify the order of potential causality and controlling for 1972 levels of dependent variables provides a sensitive measure of change. The use of party affiliation and other control variables also removes sources of spuriousness often found in cross-sectional research designs. The control for 1972 levels of public affairs media use and interpersonal discussion means that we are dealing with Watergate communication per se rather than with communication behavior that confounds usual and specific patterns.<sup>10</sup> While we find little evidence for a massive impact of either media coverage or

interpersonal communication about Watergate, it would be unwise to regard our data as presenting null findings. The findings, in fact, produce two rather interesting types of conclusions. The first involves the differences between media in subsequent effects, and the second includes some very distinct contrasts between age groups.

The reading of the early hearings in newspapers and magazines and the extent of discussion of them produced a considerable number of significant relationships. In contrast, the results show little effect of the amount of attention paid to the Ervin hearings on radio and television. The same pattern of a stronger influence of print media and little impact of the broadcast media also held for the levels of usual communication behavior and their relationships with the dependent variables. These differences between media are consistent with the analysis of the 1972 presidential campaign by Patterson and McClure (1976).

The inference that broadcast media exposure made little difference is subject to a number of alternative explanations. One is that a ceiling effect in television viewing might have restricted variance that would reduce the effect correlations. This turns out not to be the case, since broadcast exposure shows slightly higher variance than does print exposure.<sup>11</sup> Multicollinearity poses a greater threat in that both Watergate print exposure and interpersonal discussion are strongly associated with Watergate broadcast exposure. These correlations range from .28 to .58. The zero-order correlations, however, show fairly consistent higher *effect* correlations for print exposure, with differences rather marked in most cases. The threat stands, but the inference remains that reading about and discussing the Ervin hearings seem to have consequences in subsequent political behavior while television and radio exposure, for the most part, does not.

Until the present study, our research program investigating the differences of young and older voters had found unequal levels in some political (e.g., older/higher in duty to vote) and communication (e.g., older/higher in public affairs media use)



variables coupled with stronger effects for older voters. Here for the first time we find younger voters reacting more strongly than older voters. Media exposure and discussion of the Ervin hearings had more effect on the young, while the usual patterns of public affairs media use and motivational gratifications and avoidances exhibit the previous patterns of greater consequences for older voters.

More specifically, for the young, attention to Watergate in the print media is linked to strengthening anti-Nixon attitudes, to seeing the scandal as atypical, and to absolving the media and the political system of guilt. It also is related to an increased sense of vote duty, Democratic Party allegiance, and possibly to an increase in knowledge and use of newspapers for public affairs. With the possible exception of stimulating public affairs interest, it does none of these things for older voters. Avid Watergate readers among the older group are less likely than those who paid less attention to Watergate print media content to change their earlier assessments of honesty as an issue and are more prone to blame morality.

Interpersonal discussion of the Ervin hearings also seemed to have different consequences for the two age categories. Among young voters, discussion was associated with blaming Nixon rather than the media, with lower vote duty, and weakened Democratic Party affiliation and yet, at the same time, a weakened leftward political position. High discussion among the young was also related to subsequent increases in political participation and discussion in the 1974 campaign. Discussion among older voters again had fewer consequences, and a less clear pattern emerges. Those discussing the scandal more frequently tended to accept Nixon's guilt, but to retain their earlier saliences of "honest in government" as an issue. They decreased their political trust, but also tended to increase their sense of duty to vote. Differential age patterns also surfaced in the analysis of gratification and avoidances, but the major difference was in the stronger effects for the older voters.<sup>1 2</sup>

We have found little evidence of massive effects of Watergate as a communication event. Instead, we have found interesting

and diverse patterns of effects depending on the age of the person, which medium is used, and the motivational focus of media use. Such factors make the study of communication effects perplexing but fascinating.

#### NOTES

1. Gallup poll results indicate that only 12% of Americans had not watched any of the Senate committee hearings when they ended in August of 1973. Robinson (1974) advances the argument that the high level of media exposure may render Watergate effects analysis impossible. This is probably true if the researchers confine themselves to simple dichotomous media exposure questions traditionally used by political scientists. More differentiated questions of frequency of exposure to specific content types and gratifications sought from the content can produce sufficient variance for analytic purposes.

2. These polls are reviewed more fully in McLeod, Brown, and Becker (1975).

3. Rather than using Party Affiliation as a five-point scale, continuous control variable as we have done here, it is also possible to use it as a contingent condition in the analysis of communication effects. We have done this elsewhere, and the inferences of the present research were upheld. Because of the small sample size, however, it is impossible to use both Age and Party Affiliation as contingent conditions.

4. Comparison of the June 1973 results with the pre-election findings is reported in Chaffee and Becker (1975).

5. Further discussion of the gratifications and avoidance measures along with a validity analysis using the 1972 (T1) data can be found in McLeod and Becker (1974). For this paper, gratification and avoidance measures were summed by factor-determined dimensions across media (television and newspapers) and over both time points (1972 and 1974).

6. Wherever possible, individual items were combined to form an overall index within the criterion groups. Later analyses provided justification for keeping separate the Watergate attitudes, general political orientations, and 1974 campaign behavior measures in that the correlations among the three areas were moderate at best.

7. The incremental test is whether the Watergate media exposure and gratification-avoidance dimensions add anything to the prediction of the effect variables beyond the variance accounted for by the T1 variables of party affiliation, newspaper and television public affairs use, and prior level of the particular criterion variable. In the linear regression analysis model used, party affiliation and T1 level of the dependent variable were introduced as a first block of variables. The second block of variables included usual levels of television public affairs viewing, newspaper public affairs use, and frequency of discussion of politics. Then Watergate electronic media exposure, Watergate print media exposure, and Watergate interpersonal discussion were added as a block and F tests were conducted to see if the additional variance accounted for by the Watergate block was statistically significant relative to the

variance level unaccounted for by the three blocks. Several checks to determine the adequacy of the data in meeting the underlying assumptions of regression analysis were conducted. All measures showed adequate variability and their distributions were sufficiently normal, with the possible exception of Vote Turnout, which might have been treated more appropriately as a categorical variable within Discriminant Analysis. Second, an examination of the residuals in the regression models indicated normality and largely acceptable limits of T1 – T2 error term correlations according to the Durbin-Watson statistic.

8. Factor analysis indicates five blame factors, listed in order of attribution of blame: Nixon and entourage (Nixon, staff, CREEP, and friends); System (party politics, political system, economic system); Regime (Republican Party, American voter, Congress, Democratic Party); enemies-morality (our enemies abroad, morals); and the media (newspaper reporters, television reporters).

9. In these analyses, all reasons for seeking or avoiding content are treated as equal, and only one index for each is computed.

10. It could be argued that the control for 1972 public affairs media use may be too stringent. For this reason the effects of the control were determined by examining the intercorrelations among usual communication behavior, Watergate communication behavior, and the dependent variables. For the broadcast media, controls for usual behavior have little effect, since the usual and Watergate broadcast media behavior measures are not strongly related. For the print media, however, the control for usual levels of public affairs reading does reduce the relationship to some degree. Controls do not alter the Watergate interpersonal discussion relationships with the dependent variables because of the modest relationships between the two measures of discussion.

11. It is likely that the predictive power of newspaper reading about Watergate relative to radio and television exposure to those hearings would be even greater had we used an intercommunity, rather than an intracommunity, design. That is, network radio and television news content tends to be relatively standard across communities, while newspaper coverage varies to a greater extent. Therefore, intercommunity designs with greater newspaper content variance might product even stronger findings for the press relative to the broadcast media.

12. Our inferences here were limited by using the two motivational variables as totals without putting the individual gratifications and avoidance factors in the regression model. This was necessitated by the small number of panel respondents.

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