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## HONK WHEN THE ELECTION IS OVER

## Why the Voters Are Turned Off

By William Greider and Myra MacPherson

THE POLITICAL GRAFFITI of 1976 told the story of this presidential election, those non-official messages scattered across America this autumn, anonymous warnings to the politicians.

A bumper sticker spotted in Illinois: "The Lesser of Two Evils Is Evil."

A small wall poster in the Philadelphia train station: "Vote for Nobody — Nobody Keeps His Campaign Promises."

A newspaper slogan: "Honk When the Election Is Over."

A longshoreman from Baltimore offered a droll critique of the presidential debates. They put the debates on the air at the wrong time, Orson Welles said. "At prime time," he explained, "people are used to watching things that hold their interest."

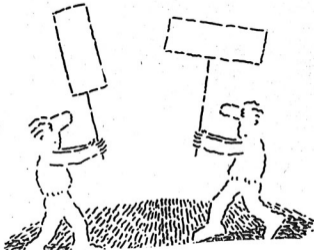
Even the partisan humor, that native wit which at year's flourishings at election time, seemed so often this way. An anti-Ford poster reached for a wretched pun:

"Ford Is So Dole We Can't Even Make Him the Butz of Any Jokes."

On certain campuses, the Democratic candidate is known as "Jiffy" Carter. He reminds students of smooth-spreading peanut butter.

The messages go on, but everyone already senses the meaning: a kind of fervent cynicism lay upon American politics this season, a bleak passage in which the normal turmoil did not produce the old excitement, the old words did not connect with deep feelings. Politics was not as much fun, not the way political people remember it. The presidential candidates seemed to people like "smaller men" than the Presidents who preceded them.

"Apathy Is a Problem," another bumper sticker conceded. "But Nobody Cares."



ocrats are running against Congress. It's survival time in the districts and the classic rhetoric doesn't sell this year.

Sen. Harrison Williams of New Jersey, having served 22 years in Congress, discovered this fall that only 13 per cent of his constituents know who Harrison Williams is. He is, nonetheless, regarded as a sure bet for reelection.

In Nevada last month, "None of the Above" won the Republican congressional primary. "None" got 47 per cent of the vote, finishing ahead of two other candidates. The little joke from the Nevada legislature, putting "none" on the ballot in statewide races, does not amuse some politicians.

"Not voting" is suddenly chic. "Nobody for President" held a rally in the capital last week, reminiscent of anti-rails theater from the 1930s. The expectation, according

*A voters' guide to the presidential, congressional and gubernatorial races in all 50 states: Pages C4-5*

to various estimates, is that a smaller percentage of adults will vote this year — perhaps even less than half of the electorate.

Ford and Carter are widely blamed for this mood of disaffection, but the turn-off is not new to 1976. Similar things were said about George McGovern and Richard Nixon four years ago; the decline in voter participation has been under way since 1954 and the anti-politics attitudes recorded by public opinion polls have been steadily rising for a decade. This election season suggests that the decay is still spreading — a dislocation between voters and leaders which ultimately could pose scary questions about the legitimacy of government.