

Consumers Gaining Political Clout

CONSUMERS have emerged as a potentially powerful political force who might carry weight in the future comparable to that of farm organizations, labor unions and business associations.

This is not to say that consumerist groups now on the scene necessarily reflect general consumer attitudes. Just as no farm organization can claim to speak for all farmers, no consumer group speaks for all or perhaps even a majority of consumers.

Nevertheless, Congress and public officials listen, and a number of consumer laws have been enacted, with others certain to be considered by the new Congress.

Everybody qualifies as a consumer, so attempts to generalize could be misleading. Many surveys are being made to find out what consumers are like, what they want and need.

A New York business research group called The Conference Board portrays "tomorrow's consumer" as predominantly younger, with more unmarrieds, smaller families and fewer women in the traditional mother-housewife role.

This survey foresees more "middle class" by 1980, with 42 per cent of families having incomes above \$15,000 a year. It expects life styles to become more sophisticated and affluent.

The Conference Board also expects consumers will exhibit distrust and skepticism toward government and industry, complaining more about faulty products and unsatis-

factory services.

In a report on "Year of the Consumer," Forbes magazine cites trends in consumer buying. The market research director for a large manufacturer says: "So a consumer who spends \$60 for a tennis racket and \$70,000 for a house might examine the price of every brand of laundry detergent in the local supermarket before choosing one." Spend big and economize small, it seems.

A survey by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service concludes that today's consumers are better informed and more demanding than at any other time in history.

The Gallup organization has set up an economic service to poll consumer attitudes. Its director contends that "the American people today expect bad times as the norm." The thing that frightens them most is inflation, the pollsters say.

Nevertheless, in December, The Conference Board concluded that, despite inflation, Americans enjoy a far higher standard of living than they did in 1960. People not only have more real spendable income after allowance for price increases, but they are allocating smaller portions of these incomes for food, clothing and other necessities.

Dr. Peter Drucker, noted professor of social sciences at Claremont Graduate School, recently observed that "the American consumer market is undergoing a new regimentation. . . that will cause marketing men to rewrite their rules."

Since Washington spokesmen and lobbyists are advocating legislation in the name of consumers to create bureaus to regulate something or somebody, the buying public is justifiably concerned. What happens will happen to the consumers.