

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

It Used to Be 'Nixon Country'

LOS ANGELES—In the middle class suburbia of southern California which has steadfastly voted for Richard M. Nixon for a generation, the President has recovered hardly at all from the Watergate depths and remains in desperate political trouble.

This unmistakable conclusion is drawn from answers to questionnaires prepared for us by pollster Oliver Quayle for interviews in Nixon Country: Two all-white precincts in the San Fernando valley. Far from confirming White House claims that President Nixon's recent spurt of visible activity had set him on the road to recovery, these interviews revealed widespread disbelief in his Watergate explanations and overwhelming disapproval of his refusal to surrender the secret White House tapes.

The President's problem is typified by a television repairman's wife in her late 30s, a registered independent who voted for Mr. Nixon last year but now regards his performance as poor. "He is setting a terrible example for the American public," she told us. "He is telling us to be law-abiding citizens and he doesn't follow the laws."

Elections analyst Richard Scammon selected two San Fernando precincts for us—one lower-middle income blue

collar, the other middle income white collar—which Mr. Nixon carried last November by over 60 per cent. The 94 voters we interviewed with California polling supervisor Beryl Winn indicated no reversal in the President's decline.

These voters, by more than 5 to 1, do not believe Mr. Nixon should either resign or be impeached. But that is the end of any comfort here for the White House (apart from some 25 hard-core Republicans who give the President blanket support).

Although a substantial majority of those interviewed in these two precincts voted for him, Mr. Nixon now gets only a 30 per cent job approval rating. They feel he is wrong not to surrender the tapes and they support Federal Judge John Shriock's order to give him the tapes, both by 2 to 1. Only 22 voters believe Mr. Nixon learned the details of Watergate just last March; rather, by a scarcely believable 5 to 1 margin, they feel he is not telling the whole truth.

The White House campaign against Sen. Sam Ervin's Senate investigating committee has failed here. By better than 3 to 1, these voters want Ervin's hearings continued. The contention that the committee is more interested in smearing Mr. Nixon than in discov-

ering the truth is rejected by better than 2 to 1.

The most stunning result is found in Quayle's trust index. Of seven political figures tested, Ervin is highest at 66 (surpassing even the popular Republican Gov. Ronald Reagan, who had 58.) At the bottom is Mr. Nixon with 40, running below Vice President Spiro T. Agnew (44) and Sen. George McGovern (47).

The sincere perception by many politicians that the voters have soured on the Ervin committee may stem from the vociferousness of dedicated Nixonites, as shown in these two precincts. Contending that the President "is being used as a scapegoat in Watergate," a machinist told us he supported Mr. Nixon in every respect. So does a retired bus driver, who said: "He's had a lot to buck—Congress and that damn Ervin committee."

But these faithful are too few to keep this truly Nixon country. The President's decline is measured by the attitude of Democrats and independents who voted for him and now condemn his presidency—often citing economic factors. High prices is the main complaint, but a surprising number mention the Soviet wheat deal. The Democratic wife of a veterinarian regrets

her vote for Mr. Nixon because of his "selling wheat to Russia while we get stale bread at home."

Such disaffected Nixonites promise to return to their old Democratic allegiance in 1976. A divorcee who supports her family on a nurse's aide's pay, complaining about the "price of food and housing," told us she would vote for any Democrat next time.

Thus, the polyglot suburban precincts of California's San Fernando Valley closely mirror the ethnic urban wards of Jersey City, N.J., site of our last scouting trip six weeks ago. The fact that Mr. Nixon has since broken out of confinement with two press conferences and repeated other public appearances has made no difference.

In fact, the interviews here dispute the impact of those press conferences. By better than 2 to 1, these voters deemed that the press conferences made them think more highly of the President. By nearly 3 to 1, they disagreed that the reporters were disrespectful to the President. Based on these soundings from Nixon country, it will take more than cosmetics and anti-media, anti-Congress counterattacks to rehabilitate the President in the public mind.