

Ohio Election: The Weight of Watergate

CINCINNATI—The burden of Watergate on Republican candidates is starkly apparent in one out of every five Republican voters we interviewed here who openly admitted they would be "more inclined" to vote Republican in next Tuesday's special congressional election if Richard M. Nixon had been replaced as President by Vice President Gerald Ford.

It was precisely this weight of Nixon-Watergate that defeated the Republican nominee in the Michigan election to fill Ford's old seat. Here in Ohio's 1st congressional district, the Republican antecedents are also strong. Yet, the horrors of Watergate have reduced the 70 per cent Republican victory in November 1972 to an even race that may send Democrat Thomas A. Luken to Washington. If so, that second upset is certain to spread panic among Republicans running for office this year.

Armed with a questionnaire drafted by national pollster Otter Quayle, we interviewed 63 voters in their homes in overwhelmingly Republican precincts with the help of three Quayle interviewers: Peggy Weiss, Kathleen Wagner and Bonnie Fumarola. We found heavy support for the Republican candidate, Willis D. Gradison Jr.,

against Luken but not nearly so heavy as usual. Thus, based on our interviews, the congressional race looks nip and tuck—thanks to the Nixon drag.

Most significantly, our scouting expedition showed for the first time that Republican voters are talking about the impact of Watergate on their vote in a purely local context.

The key question: "If Gerald Ford were President, instead of Nixon, would that make you more or less inclined to vote Republican?" The replies: 14—far more than would be expected in such a district—said they would be more inclined, only 3 less inclined; the remaining 46 gave the predictable answer that it would make no difference.

But a second question dramatized even more the dilemma of Republican candidates damned by the President's hard-core backers if they desert him and damned by anti-Nixon Republicans if they don't desert him. Of our voters, 19 agreed they think more of Republican Gradison "because he would support Richard Nixon" as a Republican in Congress; but a whopping 33 voters said they would think less of him.

Hence the sharp decline in Republican fortunes. No matter how he plays

it, Gradison is going to alienate Republican voters on one side or the other. In solidly Republican precincts of Norwood (urban middle income) and Madeira (suburban upper income) where we interviewed, the just retired Republican congressman, William Keating, won over 80 per cent in 1972. Our interviews favored Gradison over Luken by only a 3 to 2 margin, suggesting a possible Democratic upset.

"Watergate means that anyone identified with the GOP has his head in a noose," the cheerful wife of a physician told us. A widow said she would always vote Republican, "but people don't trust the Republicans anymore. Even my daughter and I have trouble on this."

A 41-year-old salesman who voted three times for Mr. Nixon (1960, 1968 and 1972) gave only one reason for favoring Luken: "Because Gradison is for Nixon."

Actually, Gradison struggled to bridge the gap between fanatic Nixonites and anti-Nixon voters. He has criticized the President for being "too legalistic" and "too secretive" in dealing both with Watergate and impeachment investigators.

But the Nixon drag may be too strong. The famed Quayle trust scale,

for example, shows that 18 of our voters scored him at the very bottom of the trust scale ("I don't trust him at all"). Only door-to-door salesmen, with 27 "Don't trust at all" scores, did worse. In contrast, Sen. Robert Taft Jr. had only one "don't trust" score.

As for resignations and impeachment, our interviews in Ohio's 1st congressional district ran true to form: 2 to 1 against both impeachment and resignation. Mr. Nixon's "positive" rating as President was 27 per cent, just as it was in our last scouting expedition in Newark, Ohio, a month ago.

Mr. Nixon does enjoy certain support here nonetheless. The pro-Nixon argument, that much of his fall from grace is a result of anti-Nixon press and politicians trying to "get" him, found slightly more than half agreement. There was 4 to 1 agreement that impeachment would "seriously weaken" the country.

The President's deeper strength is foreign policy, an asset surviving all the deprecations and degradations of Watergate. On that one issue, Mr. Nixon remains impressively strong. But for a local election, it provides precious little aid and comfort for Gradison or any other Republican.