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Democrat Appears Victor In Key Ohio House Race

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CINCINNATI, March 5—The Democratic candidate, Thomas A. Luken, apparently won a narrow victory tonight in a special election in Ohio's First Congressional District that was fraught with national significance.

Politicians and analysts had watched the contest between Mr. Luken and Willis D. Gradison Jr., the Republican nominee, for clues as to the probable political impact of the Watergate scandals. A Democratic victory in this staunchly Republican area, they believed, might signal disaster for the Republicans in November.

With more three-quarters of the district's precincts reporting—416 of 478—the unofficial totals were as follows:

Luken 47,931
Gradison 44,779

A precinct that has usually gone with the winner in past elections in this Ohio River city voted 113 to 101 for Mr. Luken, leading Democratic officials to claim victory. But Republicans suggested that returns would propel Mr. Gradison into the lead.

Both Mr. Gradison, who is 45 years old, and Mr. Luken, 48, are former Cincinnati Mayors.

Democrats have taken over Republican seats in two earlier special elections this year, winning in Johnstown, Pa., on Feb.

5, and in Grand Rapids, Mich., on Feb. 18, in a contest for the seat formerly held by Vice President Ford.

Even before the indictment last Friday of seven of President Nixon's close associates, Watergate had exerted a subtle pressure on the campaign for the seat that Mr. Keating won in the Nixon landslide of 1972

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Buckley and Richardson

Mr. Gradison brought in a series of outside speakers, including Senator James L. Buckley of New York to help on the abortion issue, and former Attorney General Elliot L. Richardson to help on Watergate. Mr. Richardson resigned last year rather than obey the President's order to dismiss Archibald Cox, the special Watergate prosecutor.

Mr. Luken had help as well. Senator Edmund S. Muskie of Maine was here this weekend, and the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations sent him three experts. That prompted Mr. Gradison to run a television commercial charging that "big labor political bosses from around the country are spending a lot of money here to get workers to vote the way they want them to."

The Democrat resisted suggestions that he turn the election into a referendum on Watergate, in emulation of the strategy of Richard F. Vander Veen, the victor in the Grand Rapids contest.

But the arrival of Mark Shields, a Washington political consultant who ran the successful 1970 campaign of Gov. John J. Gilligan, persuaded Mr. Luken to go a bit further than before.

In a television commercial that started running only last week, Mr. Luken said that his opponent supported the Administration and "all that it has come to stand for — record profits for oil companies and record prices for the rest of us; almost criminal inflation and actual criminal indictments."

But Mr. Luken insisted to the end that he did not want the Republican voters in the district to feel as if the survival of their party was at stake.

Both sides made massive get-out-the-vote efforts, the Republicans running a 48-telephone operation and the Luken forces

69 telephones. The Democrats had 1,200 workers in the field on Election Day.



Associated Press

Willis D. Gradison Jr., a Republican, and his wife, Helen, also voted in Cincinnati. He opposed Mr. Luken for the seat left vacant by resignation of William J. Keating.



United Press International

Thomas A. Luken and his wife, Shirley, leaving separate polling booths in Cincinnati yesterday. A Democrat, he ran for Congress from Ohio's First District.

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with 70.3 per cent of the vote.

Mr. Gradison, a Harvard-educated moderate with close ties to Cincinnati's prestigious Taft family, described himself as "my own man" and attacked Mr. Nixon for excessive secrecy on Watergate.

His campaign slumped when he refused to support an anti-abortion constitutional amendment, thereby prompting the Right to Life organization to mail out 57,000 anti-Gradison brochures. But he moved to the counter-offensive in the closing hours of the campaign, stressing busing and so-called social issues.

A team of political operatives from Washington, headed by Edward Maye, chief of the political department of the Republican National Committee, stiffened the Gradison effort in the final week. In addition, close associates of Senator Robert Taft Jr. took over key advisory roles.