

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

Mr. Nixon's Michigan Campaign Trip

SANDUSKY, Mich.—President Nixon's sweep through dense Republican thickets here may indeed keep the 8th Congressional District safely Republican next Tuesday, but it was clouded by the same elements of freakish politics that have shrouded other frantic efforts to escape the impeachment noose.

Mr. Nixon was received enthusiastically by thousands of voters, country people steeped in Republican faith and imbued with pride over the first presidential visit since Grover Cleveland's second term.

In short, the President had a captive audience. As such, it was not dissimilar to pro-Nixon celebrants at the Grand Ole Opry festival at Nashville and the convention of National Broadcasters at Houston—and the 35 heads of state with whom, he repeatedly reminded his partisans here, he negotiated high issues of foreign policy in Paris last week.

The critical impact of these one-shot excursions has been less than momentous. Indeed, the shrewdest Republican leaders here were saying privately that the best that could happen to the President even if he does get credit for electing Republican candidate James M. Sparling would be "buying a little bit of time."

More important, these Republicans would far rather have Sparling win

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without such conspicuous help from the President. A post-election consensus that Mr. Nixon's visit, instead of endangering Sparling as Republicans here first feared, elected him over Democrat J. Bob Traxler, might actually compound the party's insoluble Nixon problem.

Behind the fear is this thesis: Nothing that happens here will affect the impeachment vote in the House, which depends not on the President's marginal popularity in a single congressional district but on the quality of Watergate-coverup evidence presented to the House. Hence, a Sparling win credited to Mr. Nixon would be a political freak, not a harbinger that Mr. Nixon was recovering his political health.

Supporting that thesis was the stark contradiction between pro-Nixon enthusiasm of Republican voters in Michigan's now-famous Thumb and the

impression of Republican workers worried about the future of their party.

An active worker in the Oakland County (suburban Detroit) Young Republican organization told us during a dinner for Vice President Ford Tuesday night that "It's not that Nixon can't help himself but that he is hurting our party more every day."

Here in Sandusky, on the other hand, defenders of the President spoke sharply. A mother with two children who had waited three hours along the house said: "This will let them know in Washington to think twice about impeachment."

For the President—or Sparling—that woman was no comfort. Indeed, Mr. Nixon deliberately passed up any possibility of making converts here. The Thumb contains about one-third of the district's total vote. Its Republican majority exceeds 70 per cent. There is little unemployment here and

the price of navy pea beans, the biggest money producer here, is up to a fantastic \$59 a hundredweight.

In the cities of Bay City and Saginaw, to the contrary, unemployment is 10 per cent and independent voters control elections. These are the crucial voters. An unpublished poll in Ford's old Michigan district just after it went Democratic early this year showed that independents voted 2-1 Democratic—an identifiable anti-Nixon vote based on Watergate. The President's politicking here made not the slightest effort to convert this crucial bloc to Sparling.

Accordingly, few real political risks were taken here by the President or by Sparling. Running behind, Sparling may have lit a small spark with the glamorous presidential visit. As for Mr. Nixon, he would have been blamed anyway for a Sparling defeat.

Now, if Sparling squeaks through in this district which went Republican by 59 per cent two years ago, he will naturally claim credit.

That would mean one additional Republican seat in the House. But on the far larger question of Mr. Nixon's fate, it would mean virtually nothing. It would simply be another example of the freakish politics being practiced by a President in the throes of impeachment, an example without symbolic portent.