

Making Mr. Nixon the Issue

The Democrats, acting more from a statistical perception than from a grand design, have devised a strategy that they believe can win elections for them in even stronghold Republican districts. Put in its simplest form, this strategy is to run against Richard Nixon the way that Democrats of

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another era ran against Herbert Hoover and make his leadership of the nation the issue of every campaign.

"It's Watergate but it's more than Watergate," says Terry Straub, field director for the Democratic National Committee. "You have Watergate but you also have the economy and the energy shortage. It's an oppressive national situation."

The Democrats did not come easily to this conclusion, contrary to the various White House assertions about "lynch parties" forming up on Capitol Hill. During most of the previous year of Watergate, Democratic congressmen resisted excessive partisanship less out of any spirit of generosity than out of the political conviction that it was better to allow Republicans to stew in the juice of their own national leadership. In the Feb. 5 special election in Pennsylvania, the Democratic candidate rejected advice to discuss the Watergate issue and won narrowly after a campaign largely confined to local issues. In Michigan the Democratic candidate was losing by a 2-1 margin when his polls showed Mr. Nixon with a heavily negative rating on a variety of issues, including Watergate. He decided to make the President the issue and won the election, even carrying a county which had never before voted Republican.

"The key word in the Michigan elec-

tion was not Watergate but Nixon," says John Marttila, architect of the Michigan upset. "Had we just relied on Watergate we would have lost. But the polls show a genuine dissatisfaction with the way things are going. The people want to know who's in charge. We talked about the substantive issues of the economy and the energy shortage and we portrayed the Republican as a company man."

Marttila, a Boston-based political consultant whose successes include Massachusetts Rep. Robert Drinan and Delaware Sen. Joseph Biden, believes that this formula is applicable throughout the country, since the negative percentages for Mr. Nixon in Grand Rapids are slightly lower than in the nation as a whole. Or as Straub puts it, in a phrase made famous by George Wallace: "What the voters were really doing in Michigan was sending the national administration a message."

It was some message, particularly when added to the messages of two earlier post-Watergate elections. A Democratic Study Group staff report shows that in these three elections the Republicans have suffered a whopping decline in turnout compared to much more moderate Democratic declines. In the 1973 election in the Maryland 12th district, which was won by a Republican, the GOP showed a 49 per cent vote fall off compared to the 20-year average while the Democrats had a 19 per cent fall off. In the Pennsylvania election the Democratic fall off was only 1 per cent compared to a Republican fall off of 32 per cent. The figures in the Michigan election were a 7 per cent fall off for the Democrats, a 55 per cent fall off for the Republicans.

Where these messages mean the most are on Capitol Hill, particularly on the House side. Publicly, the Republican incumbents in the House admitted to deep concern over the Michigan result; privately, some of them were shattered. "We've got an impossible situation," said one veteran congressman, "because most of the hard-

core loyalists are in our party and they're the people who do the precinct work and pay the bills. We're going to lose them if we desert the President and lose everyone else if we don't." A Democrat puts it even more bluntly: "Nixon is an albatross around the necks of the Republicans. They'd love for him to resign; they'll impeach him if he doesn't."

The situation will become particularly tense for Republican congressmen on the House Judiciary Committee if the vote is delayed because of White House refusal to provide requested evidence.

In this circumstance, says one member of the committee, the White House practically will be inviting Republicans to demonstrate their independence from Mr. Nixon by voting for impeachment. The President's position will become even worse if the energy crisis deepens and unemployment rises.

In the meantime, Republicans who are competing in special elections are pretty much on their own, and they are running scared both in Ohio and in another special election campaign in Michigan.

"We're going to try to run independently without turning off the Nixon loyalists," says one Michigan Republican. "It won't be easy."
