

Thunderclap

In the closing days of his campaign for Vice President Gerald Ford's former seat in the House, Democrat Richard VanderVeen told audiences: "If I win this election, there's going to be a thunderclap that will be heard from one end of this country to the other."

Voters in Michigan's conservative Fifth District have now sent that political thunder rolling across the country. Mr. VanderVeen defeated an experienced and respected Republican opponent by the convincing margin of 7,000 votes in a district that had not elected a Democrat since 1910.

Since the winner focused his campaign on the moral issue of Watergate, there can be little dispute about the significance of the result. Mr. VanderVeen made a shrewd appeal to home-town sentiment by stressing that Mr. Nixon's resignation would mean the elevation of Mr. Ford to the Presidency. But that circumstance does not alter the adverse judgment that this Middle Western Republican district has rendered on the President's conduct. Two weeks ago, voters in a "swing district" in Pennsylvania also chose a Democrat to fill a House seat that had long been held by another highly respected Republican.

House Republican leaders have been trying to hold their members in line for Mr. Nixon by arguing that any G.O.P. Congressman who called for his resignation or impeachment risked political defeat by antagonizing hard-core Nixon loyalists. But many elections are not determined by down-the-line partisans on either side. They are decided by voters who are willing to go outside their normal political allegiance if an issue seems important enough. They can express themselves by voting for the opposition candidate or, as many Republicans did in Michigan on Monday, by staying home.

In their political behavior, Americans tend to be slow to anger and to be tolerant toward the human failings of their public servants. But once a moral issue takes hold, voters can make their disapproval known in an unmistakable manner. Important legal issues aside, Watergate has become a clear question of right-and-wrong on which the public has made up its mind.

For House Republicans, the implications are self-evident. Those who are deaf to the thunder from out of Michigan may not be around Washington after the people speak in November.