

'74 Elections: G. O. P. Dilemma

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 20—The premise of Democratic strategy in the upset victory Monday in the Congressional election in Grand Rapids, Mich.—and the shattering implication for Republicans everywhere—is that disapproval of the Nixon Administration is now the most powerful current in American politics, even in “local” contests.

As resolute a Pollyanna as George Bush, chairman of the Republican National Committee, now sees a possibility for the first time that the Watergate scandals may damage Republican candidates in three or four special Congressional elections yet to come and in the November elections.

But from the managers of the campaign that elected Richard F. VanderVeen, an oft-defeated Democrat, to Vice President Ford's old House seat, the message sweeps far beyond Watergate.

“It wasn't Watergate,” said John Marttila, a Boston-based consultant whom Mr. VanderVeen credited with the victory. “It was Richard Nixon, the person, and what Richard Nixon is doing to the country, whether it's Watergate, or the economy, or the energy crisis, or inflation, people are saying: Under this Administration, nothing gets done right.”

For Mr. Marttila, the most important statistic in politics today—and the engine of Mr. VanderVeen's triumph—is the nearly 60 per cent “negative” figure on Mr. Nixon's job performance, a figure that turned up in Republican Grand Rapids and persistently in national opinion surveys.

For Republicans, however, the anti-Nixon bloc is only one side of a political vise. The other side is the hard core of Nixon supporters, roughly 25 per cent of the electorate nationwide, which also represents the financial and activist base for most Republican candidates.

Even after studying the results from Grand Rapids, Republicans in Congress were holding to the orthodox doctrine that while it is precarious to be associated with President Nixon, it is suicidal to speak against him. To many Republicans, the dilemma of 1974 begins to look like a problem without a solution.

On to Cincinnati

Republican campaign professionals, who are packing up in Grand Rapids and moving now into Cincinnati for the next special Congressional election two weeks away, were speaking tentatively today of reviving an old cluster of campaign issues: busing, abortion and welfare.

Much as Spiro T. Agnew as Vice President tried to distract voters from the economic problems of 1970 with his national campaign against Congressional “radic-lib,” some Republicans would reach again for a “social issue” against Democrats.

“It certainly beats talking about people sitting in lines to buy gasoline,” a senior Republican tactician remarked. But the same man admitted a degree of desperation about the move. He was not confident that a social issue, or anything else, will work even in the Cincinnati district, historically almost as strong a Republican bastion as Gerald R. Ford's old bailiwick in Grand Rapids.

“Right now we're behind,” he said of the March 5 Cincinnati race, which will coincide with a possibly decisive primary for the seat of the late Representative Charles M. Teague, Republican of California. In the combined field of six Democrats an done Republican in the California campaign, if anyone wins more than half of the primary vote, under state laws, he will be elected to the House.

Beyond searching for new issues, anxious Republicans were putting fresh stress today on the importance of organizational mechanics. Particularly in special elections where voter turnout is customarily low — it was under 40 per cent in the Michigan voting Monday — the efficiency of party cadres in identifying and getting out their votes can be crucial.

Bewailing Republican overconfidence in Grand Rapids, Representative Robert H. Michel of Illinois, chairman of the House Republican Campaign Committee, admonished Cincinnati Republicans as if sheer organizational energy were the key to victory. “Look, we can't spell it out for you any more clearly,” Mr. Michael said, “You've got to produce on Election Day with votes.”

Symptom of Problem

Yet the matter of organization despondency and low Republican turnouts — a devastating burden on Republican candidates in New Jersey, Philadelphia and elsewhere last year — seems to most party officials a symptom of their larger problem in the White House, not something that pep talks can cure.

The puzzle for Republicans remains how to get around the disenchantment with Mr. Nixon without publicly turning their backs on their President.

Ironically, the “Nixon problem” does not seem to exercise Mr. Nixon. According to Gerald L. Warren, the deputy White House press secretary, when the President met with Republican leaders this morning he mentioned neither Watergate, nor the Grand Rapids election,

nor the fall campaigns for Congress. However, Representative John J. Rhodes of Arizona, the House Republican leader, said that the President had talked aceetingly of the “political climate” that caused the loss of the Michigan House seat. Mr. Rhodes said that the President had spoken in passing of his “disappointment at the outcome” of the special election, layoffs in the automobile industry and the energy crisis.

Significantly, the party's distress about Grand Rapids does not seem to build Republican support for Presidential impeachment. Republican defeats in other special elections may prompt a few more calls for Mr. Nixon's resignation, but for most Republicans they would simply tighten the vise in which they already feel helplessly caught.

“A Republican can't be flatly anti-Nixon and survive,” Representative William A. Steiger, a Wisconsin Republican, re-

marked today. Mr. Steiger has a special understanding of the point, having been first elected in 1966 in an upset against a Democrat who was trying to disassociate himself from President Johnson. Johnson loyalists stayed home and Mr. Steiger, in winning, learned the lesson that no candidate can alienate his party militants and hope to get elected.

“Republicans are in a bind, no doubt at all,” commented Senator Bill Brock of Tennessee, chairman of the Republican Campaign Committee in the Senate. “The potential benefit in speaking out against the President is better treatment in the press and possible gains among Democrats and independents. But there's a sizable risk of alienating the people who work the precincts, the bedrock of the party, who feel the President's been ill-used and who figure you don't walk away from a fight.”