

# Watergate Effect In Election Called Possible by Nixon

By Jules Witcover  
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President Nixon conceded last night that the Watergate revelations "might have" contributed to three Republican special House election defeats this year, but said "dire predictions" of a GOP debacle in the fall elections are ill-founded.

In his press conference, Mr. Nixon argued that special off-year elections are not accurate yardsticks of national political trends in general elections. Between the 1964 and 1966 regular elections, he said, Democrats won seven seats and Republicans only five, yet in the fall of 1966, the Republicans gained 47 seats.

(According to Congressional Quarterly, there were 10 special House elections in that period, and the Democrats won six, the Republicans four, with no net pickup in seats for either party).

Also, the President said, in six special elections since 1972, each party has won three. Actually, there have been seven special House races, with the Democrats winning four, the Republicans three, and the Democrats taking two seats away from the GOP.

After President Eisenhower's landslide victory in 1956, Mr. Nixon said, "we lost 47 seats in the House just two years later in 1958 because of the recession. And after President Johnson's landslide victory in 1964 his party lost 47 seats in the House just two years later because of the war.

"This year we are not going to have a war. We're going to be making further progress toward peace—at least that's our goal and I think we will achieve it, and we're not going to have a recession.

"And so I believe that the dire predictions that are made as to what is going to happen in November because of what has been happening this spring will be proved to be wrong."

Tuesday's split results in two special congressional elections—a third straight 1974 victory for a Democrat in Ohio and then the year's first Republican victory in California—generated optimistic talk from leaders of both parties.

Predictably, each side sought to accentuate the positive in the wake of an election day that first plunged the Republicans into deeper gloom with the loss of the GOP-stronghold seat in Cincinnati, then brought them solace with success in the California district.

But even in that first GOP victory of 1974, post-election analyses indicated, there was considerable slippage in the normal Republican vote, especially in light of the special circumstances in California's 13th Congressional District race.

In the district that encompasses most of Ventura and Santa Barbara counties northwest of Los Angeles, Republican state Sen. Robert J. Lagomarsino drew 53 per cent of the vote, enough to win a House seat for the remainder of the term of the late Rep. Charles M. Teague, also a Republican.

The special race, in which seven Democrats sought unsuccessfully to force Lagomarsino into a runoff, was subjected to intense scrutiny as mostly outside state and national media sought to gauge the impact of the so-called Watergate factor on local elections.

The Democrats played the Watergate scene with heavy flourish, emphasizing Lagomarsino's support for Gov. Ronald Reagan in the legislature and implying he would be a knee-jerk Nixon loyalist in Washington.

In the light of this, Lagomarsino's narrow victory was being read widely as a reversal of the national trend toward rejection of Republican candidates. But it was not as simple as that.

Analysis of key precinct and city results in Tuesday's election revealed that the Watergate factor—and the rippling effects of inflation, gasoline shortage and general disenchantment with politicians—may have been responsible for what was a dramatic decline in the Republican vote margin in the generally conservative district.

In Thousand Oaks, for example, a conservative bedroom community 30 miles from Los Angeles, Lagomarsino received 53 per cent of the vote. But when he ran for a third term in the state senate in 1970, he won there by more than 3 to 1. Similarly, in 1972, Teague defeated his congressional opponent in that city by 3 to 1, while Mr. Nixon was defeating George McGovern by more than 2 to 1.

The pattern held consistently in other areas of the district, where Lagomarsino's family has lived for generations, where he has been a proven vote-getter in

the past, and where Republicans generally have dominated for decades.

Lagomarsino was the first to acknowledge the problem. "Watergate was obviously a factor," he said. "If we didn't have all the problems we did at the national level, the victory would have been much more."

The Democrats took solace in the fact that they had shaved Lagomarsino's victory from the 60 per cent originally expected.

Republican National Committee Chairman George Bush expressed disappointment in the loss of Republican Willis D. Gradison Jr. to Democrat Thomas A. Luken in Ohio's First Congressional District, but said he took heart from Lagomarsino's victory.

"I'm confused but not discouraged," Bush said. He had hoped for two GOP victories as a psychological boost, he said, especially in elections coming just four days after the latest Watergate indictments were handed down. He conceded the impact was a factor in the Ohio loss, but not the only one.

Bush said he believes that in the fall elections, when Watergate presumably will not have such immediacy and when Democratic incumbents are running, Republicans will be in position to run against their record in Congress.

Among those who so attributed the Ohio result was Democratic National Committee Chairman Robert S. Strauss, who said he was "surprised and pleased that we could win three elections in a row in Republican strongholds. As a result of the Republican failure to come to grips with the serious problems in this nation, the country turns more and more to the Democratic Party."

Democratic Gov. John J. Gilligan of Ohio, attending the winter meeting of the National Governors Conference here, was even more emphatic. He said the Ohio result should encourage Democrats to believe that "if they pour it on the Nixon administration, they can win," even in normally difficult Republican districts.

In his own state, Gilligan said, the Democrats now have a chance to pick up four more Republican seats in the fall. In two of them, the GOP incumbents are retiring. Tuesday's vote in Cincinnati "has to send a very clear signal to Capitol Hill and the White House on the mood of the voters," Gilligan said. "If some dramatic change doesn't take place in the White House by fall, there have to be 20 to 25 Republicans who must be worrying about how they can survive."

President Nixon, Gilligan said, "has to go—or the Republican Party is in real trouble, and so is the nation."

Gilligan's implication, that the GOP loss of three House seats in four special elections will encourage Republican incumbents to vote for impeachment of the President to salvage their own seats in the fall, was challenged by Vice President Ford speaking to the governors.

"The situation in Washington has brought about some disillusionment on the part of the voters," he said of the Ohio result, "but the Democratic Congress has a lower rating than the Republican President . . . ."

"I would hope the House would vote (on impeachment) on the basis of the facts. On the basis of the facts I'm familiar with there is no basis for impeachment . . . I don't think that the attitude toward impeachment will be affected by the elections."

*This article was prepared with the assistance of Washington Post Staff Writers Leroy F. Aarons and David S. Broder.*