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Ohio's Vote: Clue for November

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By R. W. APPLE Jr.

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CINCINNATI, March 6—The Republicans and Democrats split two special elections yesterday, and today, to no one's surprise, the politicians were full of phrases like "Mexican standoff" and "inconclusive outcome."

An Appraisal is not that simple, for several reasons. In truth, it

was a better day for the Democrats than the Watergate-battered Republicans, if less than the Republican disaster it might have been.

Both of the seats at stake were in districts that have turned in huge Republican majorities year in and year out. In 1972, the Republican nominees got 74 per cent of the vote in the California district; 70 per cent in the Ohio district. In ordinary circumstances the Republicans would have expected to sweep both of yesterday's elections.

Message for Washington

In addition, national leaders of both parties acknowledged before the balloting that the Ohio race was the more important—evidenced by the amounts of money and personnel that they sent to Cincinnati.

The victory of Thomas A. Luken over Willis D. Gradison Jr. in the election here is likely, therefore, to "send Washington a message," just as Mr. Luken had hoped it would. At the least, many Republicans who will run for re-election this fall are more fearful; at the most, some of them may be marginally more willing to vote for the impeachment of President Nixon.

Officially, Republican spokesmen put the best possible face on the results. George Bush, the Republican national chairman, said he still felt "reasonably optimistic" about his party's chances in November, although he said he felt "disappointed over Ohio."

Senator Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania, the Senate minority floor leader, remarked, "The Cincinnati election was another setback for the Republican

party, just as the California election is sunlight through the smog."

At his news conference in Washington tonight, President Nixon said that Watergate "might have influenced the Ohio results. But he asserted that the trend in by-election usually ran counter to the outcome of general elections. Therefore, he contended, the Republicans need not fear a disaster in November.

The election in California, in which a Republican State Senator, Robert Lagomarsino, won 53 per cent of the vote, offered no head-on clash. The seven Democratic candidates, none of whom has ever held public office, were unable to put national issues into clear focus, and the national parties had put no significant amount of resources into the campaigns.

"We have not said this should be considered a victory for the party or the President," Mr. Lagomarsino commented. "It should be considered a victory for me."

It would be an overstatement, terminated the Ohio result.

In the view of most analysts, to suggest that Watergate de-

Neither candidate argued that it had. Mr. Luken, who won by only 4,000 votes out of 105,000 cast, contented himself with remarking that "the voters have expressed themselves about the nature of this Administration." Mr. Gradison described Watergate as "one of many factors" in the race.

But there was hard evidence, in a poll conducted by The Cincinnati Enquirer, that Watergate might have provided the margin of difference. A similar poll taken for the Republican National Committee had produced similar conclusions about the Democrats' upset victory in Grand Rapids, Mich., on Feb. 18.

'The Nixon Issue'

According to The Enquirer survey, in which 819 voters were interviewed as they left the polls, more than a third said they considered Mr. Nixon's performance poor. Of those, almost 90 per cent voted for Mr. Luken. The "Nixon

issue," said The Enquirer, overshadowed all other issues, including economic questions, in determining the outcome.

The poll showed that Republicans remained faithful to their candidate, as did Democrats. But the big bloc of voters who describe themselves as "independents" — usually heavily Republican in this district—voted for Mr. Luken this time, 54 per cent to 46 per cent.

For Republican candidates in dozens of districts this fall, those numbers spell trouble; many Republican incumbents, members of a minority party, depend upon independents to win.

Mark Shields, the Washington political consultant who managed the Luken campaign, also mentioned the independent factor, but said that his pre-cinct analysis suggested another development: an intense anti-Nixon reaction among blue-collar Democrats who had broken away to vote for Mr. Nixon in 1972.

"If I were a Republican," he said, "I'd be looking at my hole card instead of discussing 'the new majority.'"

The swing in the Ohio vote was extraordinarily large. In the last three Congressional elections in this district, the Republican nominees averaged 68.5 per cent of the vote. Mr. Garrison got only 48.2 per cent—a change of 20 per cent.

Not in Wartime

Only in 1912, when the Republican party was split at the top, and in 1936 and 1964, when Presidential landslides occurred, had the Democrats been able to win this seat in this century. The Democrats could not win in wartime, in years of Republican-caused Depression (1932 and 1934) or in years when they had a strong candidate (John J. Gilligan, now Governor of Ohio, in 1966), unless some national political cataclysm intervened to disturb the solid Republicanism of Cincinnati.

This year, though other factors are certainly at work as well, the cataclysm is called Watergate.