

The recent election for Vice President Ford's congressional seat in Michigan does not show what some are claiming (i.e., that Watergate demolished a Republican through guilt by association), but does point the way to an effective election strategy for this year's Democratic office seekers.

The race between Messrs. VanderVeen (the newly-elected Democratic) and VanderLaan (the Republican) got interesting in this solidly Republican district only after VanderVeen changed tactics in mid-January. At that time he supplemented his attacks on the President by touting Vice President Ford as a far superior alternative. In a congressional district that had elected Ford for 25 years, this was a slick tactic. Loyal Republican VanderLaan was trapped—he could not support the popular Ford to the extent his Democratic opponent did without betraying the President and the party. The ironic upshot of all this was the fact that VanderVeen benefitted more from his "association" with Ford than did his Republican opponent. In Michigan's Fifth District, that was the key to realizing the opportunity that Watergate helped create.

Obviously, no other congressional district in the country will offer quite this kind of opportunity to a Democrat.

However, VanderLaan's predicament as a trapped Republican is not at all unique.

The Republicans are hoping that the Democrats choose a "guilt by association" strategy with regard to Watergate because of the likely backlash, i.e., a campaign which argues "the President and his administration are corrupt, therefore, the party and its candidates are also corrupt" would inevitably backfire on the Democrats. But the lesson for the Democrats of this election is to paint Ford as the better alternative which the Republicans should have demanded in late 1973. Democrats will ask their opponents why they were quiet throughout the Watergate disclosures. Is there not, the questioning will go, a higher morality than party loyalty? Did not the Republican Party have an obligation to the American people to purge the destructive, "sinister" forces which had shaken public confidence in government—especially when the constitutional successor to the presidency was a loyal Republican of unimpeachable integrity, broad experience, and proven ability? If I were a Republican office seeker, I would be hard put to answer such questions.

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