

# Michigan Postmortem Poor for Nixon

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A few hours after the election results were known, the Republican lieutenant governor of Michigan, James H. Brickley, sadly observed:

"We have a crippled President."

Variations on that theme came from many politicians yesterday in the aftermath of still another Democratic victory (the party's fourth this year) in a heavily Republican congressional district. The new setback for the Republicans—and for the embattled President—came in a special election Tuesday in Michigan's Eighth District, a "middle American" bastion that had been in Republican hands for 42 years. The winner, J. Robert Traxler, had 59,918 votes; the loser, James Sparling, had 56,575. Just two years ago, the Republican majority in the district was better than 33,000 votes.

Traxler had a blunt explanation:

"We're going to Washington with a message—throw the rascals out. . . . If I was a Republican I would not want the Nixon albatross around my neck in November."

As he spoke to his campaign workers, they chanted, "Impeachment, impeachment!"

His victory was a very pointed and very personal setback for the President. He had gone into the district last week to campaign for Sparling, who put the kindest construction on the result. "I don't blame the President," he said. "I don't think he helped or harmed me. But it absolutely was not a referendum on the President."

People in his own party disagreed. "People don't feel they have a President," said Brickley, the lieutenant governor. "And this is caused by the effects of Watergate."

Michigan's Republican governor, William G. Milliken, said it appeared that

Democrats are "riding President Nixon's coattails to Washington. The whole issue of the presidency was not a plus [for Sparling]. It was a minus."

In the neighboring state of Illinois yesterday, Republican Sen. Charles Percy was of similar mind. "Nixon," he said, "is a dubious asset for a candidate now." Reporters asked him if, in view of the Michigan results, Mr. Nixon should now resign.

"Probably so," Percy replied. ". . . It probably would be somewhat advantageous to the Republican Party and the country."

The White House issued its own statement. The President, one of his press secretaries said, is "not dismayed or disheartened." Indeed, he remains willing—if invited—to campaign for other candidates.

There was an element of dismay,

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however, in the observations of Vice President Gerald R. Ford.

"The trend as I see it," he said, "is for the Democrats to end up potentially (in November) with an overwhelming majority (in Congress) which leads to further legislative dictatorship and I don't think that is good for the country."

Democratic Party national chairman Robert Strauss retorted: "That strikes me as an interesting posture for him because three weeks ago he was talking about a do-nothing Congress that was unable to come to grips with anything."

On the election itself, Strauss said the Watergate scandal that has tainted the President and produced an impeachment inquiry was not the overriding issue in Michigan. It was, rather, "the Nixon leadership." He indicated that this would be the theme of the Democratic campaign this fall.

His counterpart in the Republican Party, George Bush, said he was disappointed at the results and acknowledged candidly that Watergate was a factor.

"The economy hurt," he said, "the energy crisis hurt, and, of course, Watergate hurt."

But he added, "the Democratic incumbents will be up this fall and the results of the fall elections will be different."

Traxler's victory increases Democratic House strength to 247. There are 187 Republicans. One California seat is vacant and won't be filled until November.

In St. Louis yesterday, Sen. Edmund S. Muskie (D-Maine) said he hoped the Traxler victory would impress on the President the need to cooperate with the impeachment inquiry being conducted by the House Judiciary Committee. "Clearly," he said, "it indicates that the President is in political trouble."

The polls have shown that for months, of course. The immediate question for the politicians is what effect—if any—Mr. Nixon's appearance in Michigan had on the outcome. Polls taken in the Eighth District before Mr. Nixon arrived indicated that Sparling would lose by about 7 or 8 percentage points. The outcome was much closer. Sparling got 48.6 per cent of the vote and both Bush and the White House made something of that. They said the President's appearance had helped to "close the gap."

The fact remains, however, that after 42 years a safe Republican district was lost.

"While we didn't swell on Watergate," Democrat Traxler said in explanation, ". . . there are a lot of people who felt it very important that a message and communication be sent that decency, honesty and integrity are absolutely essential in the White House."

Michigan's Republican Party chairman, William McLaughlin, wasn't sure.

"It's easy to blame the President," he said, "but I don't know if that's the right thing."