

Nixon Visit to Michigan Left Little Impact on Race

By R. W. APPLE Jr.

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SAGINAW, Mich., April 13—President Nixon's first campaign venture of 1974—a motorcade through the sparsely populated, monotonous farmlands of Michigan's Eighth Congressional District—had ended only a few hours before.

Now the politicians and the political reporters were trying to figure out just what he had accomplished, either for himself or for the man he came here to stump for, James H. Sparling Jr., the Republican candidate in Tuesday's special election for the House. It was not easy.

For Mr. Nixon, struggling to demonstrate that Watergate has not cost him all his political clout, it appeared to be the "real plus" that the state Republican chairman, William McLaughlin, called it. If Mr. Sparling wins, Mr. Nixon will be able to claim a share of the credit; if Mr. Sparling loses, Mr. Nixon will be blamed, but he would have been blamed whether he had come to Michigan or not.

But there was not much evidence available to suggest that the President's visit had had any real impact on the race between Mr. Sparling and his Democratic opponent, J. Bob Traxler. Nor did it appear that the outcome in this race, so full of cross currents, would work any profound change on the impeachment proceedings in Washington.

Called Visit Blunder

Mr. Traxler, a State Representative, held a news conference on Thursday, the day after Mr. Nixon's trip. At first he characterized the President's visit as "an immense blunder" that would help Mr. Traxler, then softened that to "a

mistake."

The visit proved, he said, that Mr. Sparling, if elected, "will be in Nixon's hip pocket on every issue." So that none of the district's roughly 100,000 voters would doubt what he meant, he added, "The President has come and gone, and the price of milk is the same."

It was no accident that Mr. Traxler did not say that "Watergate is the same." Unlike Richard F. VanderVeen, a Democrat who won a special election in Vice President Ford's old district in Grand Rapids earlier this year, but like Thomas A. Luken, a Democrat who won one in Cincinnati; Mr. Traxler has emphasized Mr. Nixon's handling of economic issues—taxes, prices, energy—rather than Watergate.

The explanation lies in a poll conducted by Peter D. Hart of Washington for the Traxler campaign. It shows Mr. Traxler ahead, 39 per cent to 33, with a whopping 28 per cent of the sample still undecided—not much different from the Republicans' poll.

Most Deny Referendum

More important, the survey of 354 voters, completed shortly before Mr. Nixon's arrival but after his trip had been announced, showed that only 17 per cent of the respondents agreed with the national pundits who have pronounced the contest here a referendum on Richard M. Nixon and Watergate.

"This isn't a Washington election," said one of Mr. Traxler's aides "It's all right here, people trying to live."

Thus, the Traxler themes: Mr. Sparling (who worked for 10 weeks in the White House last year) is "a Nixon stand-in"; therefore he cannot be relied upon to vote the interests of

the workers in Saginaw and Bay City, where unemployment is running above 10 per cent, and Watergate remains as an unstressed element that, the Traxler people hope, will add to the impression of ineptitude.

In this context, said the Traxler aide, the Nixon visit does not count for much. Maybe it was marginally helpful to the Republicans, he said, in that it will probably produce a somewhat larger vote in the heavy Republican rural area Mr. Nixon visited, but hardly decisive.

It might count in another way, too. For the three days before and the two days after the Presidential visit, Mr. Trax-

ler, who has less money for advertising anyway, was almost wiped off the front pages and the evening television news in the district.

Mr. Sparling made no effort to suggest that he had benefited greatly from the President's journey to the "thumb" district, as it is locally known because of its shape on the map.

"I don't think it cut much one way or another, as far as we're concerned here," said the stocky Republican candidate.

He had hoped not to be too completely identified with Mr. Nixon. But he had given an interview in June of last year to

for House

tured in a Traxler television commercial) in which he said he was "fully, totally, 100 per cent committed to the President," whom he described as "a truly great President." And Mr. Nixon underlined that with his ringing endorsements at every stop on his motorcade.

Nonetheless, if interviews in a swing precinct in downtown Saginaw are any indication, the race will be very close, and Mr. Sparling and Mr. Traxler will be the crucial issues.

A Sure Sign of Inflation

JOHANNESBURG, South Africa (AP)—Sign of the inflationary times in a music shop window: "Penny whistles — \$2.98."