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# The GOP's Governorship Grip Slipping

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The Republican party's hold on governors' offices around the country appears likely to suffer further attrition in 35 elections this year.

From a high of 32 state capitols controlled in the early days of the Nixon administration, the GOP share has shrunk to 18.

Democrats see an opportunity not only to win a record majority of the 50 governorships but also to re-establish themselves in the giant industrial states where they were virtually shut out in the late 1960s.

Four years ago Texas was the only one of the ten largest states with a Democratic governor. Since then Democrats have won control in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, New Jersey and Florida.

This year the Democrats say they have fighting chances, or better, in the remainder of the ten states: Massachusetts, Michigan and the two great prizes, New York and California.

Watergate, the threat of presidential impeachment, economic problems and other troubles of the Nixon White House are clearly contributing to Republican difficulties in state-level politics.

In state after state, Republican professionals report a pervasive depression within the party's middle management that they expect will extend into the fall campaigns. Already, however, it is demonstrable that the Watergate atmosphere and, in turn, the general expectations of a bad year for Republicans have kept many of the GOP's most formidable candidates out of the running.

The Republican party's difficulty in recruiting the

candidates it wants this year is perhaps the strongest common theme in a survey of Republican and Democratic officials and professional observers in the 35 states where governors will be elected this fall. Watergate, in other words, seems to have taken a substantial toll already.

The retirement rate among Republican incumbents is considered symptomatic of the general problem. Of ten Republicans who were free to run for re-election in 1974 (including former Governors Nelson Rockefeller of New York and John A. Love of Colorado, who retired last year), only four decided to do so.

Among Democratic governors, 16 out of 19 who are eligible for another term are seeking it. The governors who will not seek another term are John A. Burns of Hawaii, who has cancer; Robert B. Docking of Kansas, and Dale Bumpers of Arkansas, who is running for the senate.

Another index of the Republican defensiveness this year is the fact that while Democrats are virtually uncontested in a dozen or more states where they now hold the governor's mansion, only one Republican — Robert D. Ray of Iowa — is considered an overwhelming favorite for re-election.

Of the 35 governorships open this year, 23 are now held by Democrats and 12 by Republicans. With the exception of Iowa, all of the Republican-controlled states will be hotly contested this fall, and in two of them — Connecticut and Arizona — some Republican officials concede they are already prepared for defeat.

Republican designs on statehouses in the South have been curtailed. Of eight Southern and border states with governor races this year, South Carolina, Florida and Tennessee are the only ones where Republicans are mounting serious efforts.