

Disaster Seen in Voter Defections

By Lou Cannon

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In Minnesota the Republican Party is trying to find itself a new name. In California voter turnout has fallen so low that pollster Mervin Field foresees a disaster ahead for the GOP. In Michigan the filing for Republican precinct delegates has reached an all-time low.

These are no isolated examples. Throughout the country, after 21 state primaries and half a dozen congressional special elections, the Republican Party is reeling from a succession of upset losses, declining registration and some of the lowest voter turnouts ever.

Not since 1964, when GOP presidential nominee Barry Goldwater carried a regiment of Republican officeholders down with him to defeat, have party professionals been as apprehensive about the future of their party.

In Michigan, where Republicans were stunned by two special election defeats earlier this spring, a prominent GOP official pointed to

the reduced precinct filings and predicted: "We're going to be in absolutely serious trouble in November if something doesn't happen in Washington."

In Iowa, where Republicans traditionally outvote Democrats 3 to 1 in primary elections, Democrats turned out in record numbers June 4 and outvoted the GOP by 1,500 votes.

"It would appear that Iowa has become a Democratic state," said Melvin Synhorst, the Republican secretary of state and elections commissioner.

And in California, where Republicans have been able to win statewide elections because they usually vote in disproportionate numbers to the majority Democratic Party, participation in the June 4 primary was off by 19 percentage points when compared with contested gubernatorial primaries in 1962 and 1966.

"If the election-day turn-

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out is proportionate, it's all over for the Republicans," said pollster Field. "It's a disaster."

Field, whose pre-election findings in the California primary closely coincided with the results, believes that there is "some evidence that Republicans won't resume their normal voting behavior—they're frustrated, disheartened, shaken up. Apathy is not the right word for it. It's more active frustration."

Nationally, the Republican Party is now at its lowest statistical ebb since the grim year of 1964. The GOP is down to 187 House members, 42 senators and 18 governors, and it is facing an off-year election when the political parties even of popular Presidents usually lose congressional seats.

At the beginning of the year Republican strategists, including national GOP Chairman George Bush, were hopeful of minimizing these usual losses. Their hope was based partly on the poor GOP congressional showing in 1972, when President Nixon carried almost no marginal Republican congressmen to victory in his landslide defeat of George McGovern.

The theory at the time, and one shared by some political scientists and pollsters, was that Republicans might escape the normal mid-term losses because they lacked the marginal House seats usually carried in on presidential coattails.

But even normally safe congressional districts abruptly became marginal in the six 1974 special elections, all of them for seats vacated by Republican congressmen. Democrats won two seats in Michigan and one each in Pennsylvania, Ohio and California, where the GOP also salvaged its only victory.

"Those damn specials were bad," Bush said. "We lost races we should have won."

But if the specials were bad, the primary elections were in some respects worse. While less dramatic in their impact than the special election losses, the primaries revealed that significant numbers of Republican voters no longer were participating in the political process.

"The turnout is a bad sign," said veteran Republican pollster Robert Teeter. "It was not a problem in the special elections, where Republicans turned out and then voted against us."

Republicans had no opportunity to cast direct protest votes in the primaries, according to a theory shared by some GOP politicians, so they either crossed over to vote for Democrats, in states where that was possible, or stayed home when it wasn't.

An example of a crossover state is Ohio, where Republican participation in the May 7 primary plummeted to 655,047 from 970,096 four years ago. But participation in the Democratic primary increased by 177,000 votes, and state election officials attributed a substantial portion of this to GOP voters who cast ballots for Democratic Senate nominee John Glenn.

In the May 28 Oregon primary the percentage of Republican voters declined from 48 to 44 per cent, with

Even in states where Republican participation increased, the Democratic turnout increased more.

In last Tuesday's hotly contested primary races in Maine, for example, GOP participation was up 6 per cent, compared with the gubernatorial election four years ago. But Democratic participation increased 19 per cent.

Another striking statistic, this one from California, is a decline in Republican registration. In a state where Democrats already had a 3-to-2 majority, registration throughout 1974 has favored Democrats by a 4-to-1 majority.

It is this registration majority, as much as anything, that has given a major boost to the fortunes of Democratic gubernatorial candidate Edmund G. (Jerry) Brown Jr., who in the first post-primary Field poll leads Republican nominee Houston I. Flournoy by 8 percentage points.

Fields says that if the low GOP voter turnout in the primaries holds in November, it will mean a difference of 10 percentage points in every race, a margin that could cause the defeat of seven or eight GOP congressmen.

But no one, neither the pollster nor politician, has any clear idea of whether this pattern will hold in November.

"The guy walking down the street in work clothes can't tell you what impact Watergate or President Nixon will have on his vote in the fall because he hasn't considered that yet," Teeter said. "People can only tell you what they know."

Although Field believes there is some evidence that Republican voter disaffection may persist through November, both he and Teeter regard voter attitudes as fluid and perhaps dependent on what happens in the pending impeachment proceedings. This is an attitude shared by many Republican professionals.

"Maybe Watergate will be further behind us in November," Bush said. "If it isn't, it is not good for us."

The impeachment trial, or the threat of it, overshadows all Republican campaigns. Incumbent senators who face re-election are worried that their campaigns will be aborted by a televised public trial.

In California, supporters of Flournoy are concerned that the impeachment trial would divert public attention away from the gubernatorial campaign. Other congressmen believe that voters will retaliate against House members of both parties if they dally in voting on impeachment.

"If we fool around with this thing for a few more months, the people may just decide to throw us all out,"

the number of votes cast declining to the lowest point in the decade.

Republican voting also was down in California, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Iowa, New Mexico and Montana. In Nebraska, the GOP voting participation declined by 7 per cent from 1970 to 1974, and Democrats and independents now outnumber GOP voters for the first time.