

WATERGATE ISSUE FOUND STILL ALIVE

Survey of Michigan District Indicates Scandal Remains a Factor in Election

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One of the crucial political questions today is whether the Watergate scandals will leave a permanent legacy for American politics. Will Republican candidates continue to suffer its after effects or has President Nixon's resignation cleansed the party in the minds of voters?

A limited but scientific survey taken last week suggests that pronouncements that Watergate is behind us may be a bit premature.

Even though most people polled said they held the Republican party blameless and that inflation was their chief worry, the survey found evidence that Watergate remained an important underlying factor in how people may vote this fall. It hinted too that the scandals might have helped to cement the Democratic majority coalition in many areas.

Key Election Last April

These patterns emerge from a sampling of voting-age persons in Michigan's Eighth Congressional District, the so-called "Thumb" section of the state. Last April, the district attracted national attention and a vain visit from President Nixon for a special election in which the Democratic candidate for Congress, J. Bob Traxler, scored an upset over James M. Sparling Jr., the Republican.

This victory, in a staunchly Republican, mostly rural area, was widely interpreted as an echo of Watergate outrage in mid-America. If the survey is right, Mr. Traxler has substantially solidified his position since April and would probably win hands down if the November election, in which he faces Mr. Sparling again, were held today.

The survey was conducted by two dozen professional journalists attending a seminar on statistical techniques for reporting here at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism. The seminar was sponsored by the Council for the Advancement of Science Writing under a grant from the National Science Foundation.

The sample was drawn by random dialing of telephone numbers in the district. Since the poll was limited to just one district, its implications for the national political scene can only be surmised. However, the

political characteristics of the district make it a somewhat typical one.

411 Persons Interviewed

A total of 411 persons were interviewed, enough to say with 95 per cent certainty that the results erred by no more than 5 per cent in either direction. The survey suffered from certain methodological imperfections that may have somewhat further diminished its reliability.

Another inadequacy of the poll was that it had no way of gauging the extent to which Mr. Traxler's new strength stems from his assiduous personal and mail campaigning.

Although Republicans have won consistently in the Eighth District since 1934, their margins of victory have been provided by moderate-to-conservative Democrats and independents. A survey by the Knight newspapers after the April vote found that Watergate had caused major defections to the Democratic candidate from these independent-minded voters.

Since April, the new survey suggests, this new realignment of political loyalties has solidified. Among independents, who constituted the largest portion of the sample (42 per cent), nearly 7 of every 10 said they would now vote for Mr. Traxler, the Democrat.

Even though only 3 per cent said Watergate was the most important issue today, it was clearly Watergate that separated the Traxler and Sparling voters. On most other major issues, including the rise in cost of living, which 73 per cent called the most important, the respondents seemed to perceive little difference between the Democratic and Republican candidates.

But those in the Traxler column were much more likely to be "outraged" or "very disturbed" about the Watergate abuses. They were also readier to place the Watergate blame on President Nixon and his personal aides, as opposed to politicians in general. Only 22, or 5 per cent, of the 411 respondents said Watergate was mainly a reflection on the Republican party.

Opinion on the Watergate question tended to coalesce along party lines, suggesting further that there has been a return to old-fashioned partisan politics, which generally benefits the Democrats.

One startling finding was that this rather conservative area, was taking a relatively lenient attitude toward war resisters.

More than half (52 per cent) of those responding to the question said they favored a conditional amnesty whereby deserters and draft evaders would be allowed to return if they performed some other service. The survey was taken in the two days after President Ford's speech urging such a course.