

Up to the Democrats

The Democratic party has drawn handsome gains out of the difficulties of the incumbent Republicans. The brutal realities of inflation and recession, the fear of depression, and the memory of Watergate worked together to wreak heavy damage on the G.O.P. from New York to California.

If the Democrats are to capitalize on Tuesday's victory to win the Presidency in two years' time, they urgently need leaders of national stature. None seems to have emerged from this week's election. The Democrats are left with the circle of more or less familiar faces in the Senate, none of whom as yet has stirred much enthusiasm.

The mid-term election had its biggest impact in the House of Representatives, where the Democrats increased their margin of control by more than 40 seats, providing them with a genuine working majority. Some Republican stalwarts in the House were defeated while several capable Democratic ex-Congressmen, such as Richard Ottinger and James Scheuer of New York were returned.

Economic dissatisfaction was clearly the primary source of the increase in Democratic majorities and the loss of Republican House seats almost uniformly across the nation. Moral issues also conditioned popular thinking. The appalling deceit practiced by Mr. Nixon, the unmasking of Spiro Agnew as a bribe-taker and a tax-evader, the selling of Government decisions for cash from corrupt corporations, and the blatant favoritism and injustice of President Ford's pardon of Mr. Nixon—these and other scandals have rocked the American people during the last two years.

Americans are still a people with a moral sense in public affairs, despite recurrent episodes of political corruption and despite the materialism and hedonistic self-indulgence that characterizes too much of the nation's style of life. Americans retain their capacity for indignation about wrong-doers in high places. That indignation was expressed Tuesday in many parts of the country. The ouster of several Republicans who had supported Mr. Nixon on the House Judiciary Committee, notably Representative Charles W. Sandman Jr. of New Jersey, exemplified this protest vote.

In the Senate, those Republican incumbents who have progressive records on economic issues and who had kept their distance from the Nixon White House fared the most successfully on Tuesday. In this group were Senators Jacob K. Javits of New York, Richard Schweiker of Pennsylvania, Charles Mathias of Maryland, and Robert Packwood of Oregon.

But in the more conservative farm and desert states, right-wing Republican candidates proved in a few instances that personal style and skillful campaigning could offset economic issues and the association with Mr. Nixon. Thus, Senator Henry Bellmon in Oklahoma, who preceded John N. Mitchell as the manager of Mr. Nixon's Presidential bid in 1968, and Senator Robert Dole in Kansas, who used to be Mr. Nixon's most aggressive defender in the Senate, both squeezed back into office.

In Colorado, however, Democrats picked up a Senate seat profiting from both the anti-Republican trend and a superior campaign by their own nominee, Gary Hart. The loser was Senator Peter Dominick, a two-term Goldwater conservative whose reactionary views are now out of step with the environment-minded majority.

The Democrats increased the number of statehouses under their control but, as usual, personalities and local issues were more important than any national trend. It is hard to believe, for example, that Ohio voters had much concern for post-Watergate morality when they defeated Governor John Gilligan, one of the abler Democratic state executives, and replaced him with ex-Governor James Rhodes, a routine partisan with a questionable record.

If the Democrats have not yet found national leaders, have they the capacity to formulate a national program? Now that they have increased their strength in the House and the Senate, it is up to them to achieve the coherence and inner discipline that will enable them to offer viable alternatives to the program of the Ford Administration. The public also wants to avoid any worsening of unemployment and poverty. The Democrats can justify Tuesday's vote of confidence only if they develop a balanced program to meet these divergent economic pressures.