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—Allen H. Neuharth, Founder, Sept. 15, 1982

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## Spoiler-free elections

Life isn't very happy these days for the "spoilers" from November's elections.

As reported by USA TODAY last week, Democrats in Congress are shunning their old consumer-advocate comrade in arms, Ralph Nader, because he siphoned off enough voters to cost Al Gore the election. If just a fraction of Nader backers in Florida and New Hampshire had gone for Gore, he would have won both states, and a majority of the Electoral College.

While not widely reported, GOP renegade Patrick Buchanan played a similar role. Bush lost New Mexico, Iowa, Wisconsin and Oregon by margins so small that Buchanan's votes could have given him victory. If Bush hadn't eked out a court-ordered edge in Florida, Republicans would be denouncing Buchanan just as Democrats do Nader.

Clearly, both parties have a stake in changing the system — ideally without making it harder for third-party and independent candidates to get on the ballot.

Some states, notably in the South, already require runoffs between the top two candidates if no one gets 50% of the vote in a primary or election for state office. Many other countries elect presidents that way. Thus whoever wins can legitimately claim to have majority support. But second campaigns are

expensive and would result in even more special-interest money tainting the process.

Two California cities, Oakland and San Leandro, just adopted a better way for local elections, called "instant runoff voting." Under it, voters rank the candidates 1, 2, 3 in order of preference. Voters thus could support both a Nader and a Gore, both a Buchanan and a Bush, or any other combination.

If a candidate wins a majority of first-preference votes, the count is over and that candidate wins. If not, the last-place finisher is eliminated. Ballots cast for that candidate are counted for voters' next choice, until someone has a clear majority. Australia and Ireland have used the system for decades.

In Alaska, instant runoff is to be on the ballot for voter approval in 2002. Similar efforts are underway in New Mexico, Vermont, Washington and elsewhere in California.

Changing presidential elections on a nationwide basis would require a constitutional amendment, though states could adopt such changes on their own.

Third-party candidates ought to be able to run without being labeled spoilers, and officeholders ought to be able to say they have the support of a clear majority of the public. Getting there, though, will require both major parties' support for change.



*"The Way Democracy Will Be"*

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