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OP-ED COLUMNIST

No More Sham Elections

By Nicholas D. Kristof

In Iraq shortly before the war, I had an icy conversation about Iraqi elections with one of Saddam's goons. "What do you mean by 'sham'?" he asked.

"Look, Saddam gets a lot of votes, but no one's running against him," I protested. "If you only have one candidate who can win, that's not a real election!"

Oops. I spoke too soon. The U.S. electoral system looks increasingly dysfunctional, and those of us who used to mock the old Soviet or Iraqi "elections" for lacking competition ought to be blushing.

In Arkansas, 75 percent of state legislative races this year were uncontested by either the Republicans or by the Democrats. The same was true of 73 percent of the seats in Florida, 70 percent in South Carolina, 62 percent in New Mexico.

And Congressional races were an embarrassment. Only seven incumbents in the House of Representatives lost their seats this month. Four of those were in Texas, where the Republican Legislature gerrymandered Democrats out of their seats.

Granted, gubernatorial and U.S. Senate races are often still competitive. But, increasingly, to be elected to the House once is to be elected for life. As David Broder of The Washington Post put it, the House is becoming like the British House of Lords.

So what's the cure for our electoral diseases? Here are three ideas:

Have nonpartisan experts draw up boundaries for Congressional districts after each census. Both Republicans and Democrats have shamelessly drawn boundaries to serve their own needs, and that's one reason Congressional races are so uncompetitive. Normally, state legislatures do the redistricting, but Iowa and Arizona have handed the responsibility over to independent commissions.

Eliminate the Electoral College, so that the president is chosen by popular vote. This was seriously discussed as a constitutional amendment after the 1968 election, when George Wallace's third-party candidacy could have prevented Richard Nixon from receiving a majority of the electoral vote. And in this election, if just 21,000 voters had changed their votes in Nevada, New Mexico and Iowa, the electoral vote would have been tied and the choice of the president would have gone to the House.

"We don't run elections well enough to have clear winners that we all accept if it's really close," said Rob Richie, executive director of the Center for Voting and Democracy. "I think if the winning side had been ahead by only 20,000 votes in Ohio, the losing side wouldn't have accepted it."

It's time for America to develop the kind of full-fledged popular-vote democracy that is enjoyed by, say, the good people of Afghanistan.

Funnel campaign donations through a blind trust. The funkiest idea in politics is to make donations anonymous even to the recipient. Citizens would make contributions through a blind trust, so that candidates wouldn't know to whom they were beholden.

If officials don't know who their major contributors are, they can't invite them to spend the night in the Lincoln Bedroom or write tax loopholes. A donor might boast about having made a contribution, but special interests will realize they can save money by telling politicians that they have donated when they haven't, and then politicians will doubt these boasts.

Such a system of shielding names of donors exists in 10 states, to some degree, for judicial candidates. A provocative book by Bruce Ackerman and Ian Ayres, "Voting With Dollars," makes an excellent case that the system be applied more broadly, but we need some innovative state (Oregon, do you hear that?) to take the leap.

Chile is a nice role model. While the U.S. was finishing campaigns that were another embarrassing roll in the hay for politicians and lobbyists, Chile was holding its first elections using a new law with a blind trust for campaign donations of more than \$500. Patricio Navia, a Chilean elections specialist at New York University, says the system has loopholes but is a big improvement.

"It's a clever idea," he said. "It's a promising way of separating special interests and politicians."

Our nation's founders were forthright and creative in establishing our political system. Today we need to be just as forthright in recognizing that the system is often dysfunctional - and just as creative in fixing it. If we're willing to introduce vigorous, competitive democracies in Iraq, why not do the same at home?