St to the NEWS

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BALLOT LAWS

Our Founding Fathers, whose great vision gave us the Ameri can Constitution, not only did not plan our two-party system, they did not want political parties at all. As these unanticipated appendages grafted themselves onto our body politic, they also became institutionalized by a network of federal and state laws that give the two major parties an official role in the conduct of elections.

One of the many ways that the dominance of the two-party system is maintained and competition from upstart new parties is frozen out, is by the format of the ballot itself. Candidates are listed in columns by their political party, thus making it easy and often compelling for the voter to vote a straight-party ticket by plac ing a single X on the paper ballot or by pulling one lever on the voting machine.

It is thus unnecessary for the voter to make individual judgments about individual candidates, or even to know'their names. In many la ge cities, the control of the straight-party ballot voting is the key to winning elections.

The argument in favor of this system is party responsibility, that is, the voter can hold the party resp nsible if it nominates bad candidates. This argument has merit, however, only if the candidates of one party, in general, represent a different philoso phy from the other, and if the voter can identify significant

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differences between the two parties. Recent officeholders, however, have so blurred the lines between the two parties that the present ballot system has become obsolete.

For example, the Republican Party has long been reputed to stand for fiscal integrity, yet the Nixon and Ford Administrations have given us by far the largest budget deficits in peacetime history. Nixon abandoned practically every conservative plank he ran on and adopted policies that were more like Humphrey's.

Our two largest states, California and New York, last Novem ber elected Governors thought to be liberal Democrats in the Kennedy tradition, but their hard line on state spending projects has dismayed their supporters. Another liberal Democrat, Senator Adlai Stevenson of Illinois (whose father was the self-styled ori ginal liberal egghead), has been making surprisingly forthright statements about the folly and cost of taxpayer-financed easy credit to the Soviet Union.

The Vermont Legislature recently passed a ballot reform bill which is one of the most sensible ideas to surface in a long time. It would establish a ballot on which the candidates are grouped by the office they are running for, rather than by party. This would require the voter to make a judgment about the candidates for each office, instead of abdicating his esponsibility by making a single mark.

Although this bill was vetoed by the Vermont Governor, his veto message did not come to grips with the real issues involved. More state legislatures should examine this idea. It would breathe new life into the election process and enable us to discard the party stereotypes that are no longer relevant.