



# Opinion

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## Let Us See Congress' Votes

Information would build and maintain confidence and accountability in government

BY RALPH NADER

Members of Congress are continuing to play hide-and-seek with their legislative records. Only two congressmen - Republican Reps. Christopher Shays of Connecticut and Frank Wolf of Virginia - have placed their voting records on the Internet in a searchable format easily accessible to citizens. Not a single U.S. senator has been willing to use the Internet in a manner that would give voters an open, accurate and quick way to track their votes.

Thanks to taxpayers, computers equipped with Internet access are available in the offices of every one of the 535 members of the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives. Posting voting records on their websites in a searchable citizen-friendly format would be a simple task.

So, why the reluctance to implement something that would make it easy for voters to understand how their elected representatives were performing their official duties?

Flowery speeches about the public's right to know notwithstanding, most members of Congress are guided by the age-old political rule: "What the voters don't know can't hurt you on Election Day." If voters could pull up easy-to-read details on their computer screens about every vote a senator or a representative makes during a term, there might be some

surprised voters and a lot of red-faced members of Congress in need of quick explanations.

This past summer, two members of my staff - Noel Dingboom and Mark Wittink - worked with congressional interns in a survey of Senate and House offices to determine attitudes about the posting of voting records in a searchable format on the Internet. The answers were disappointing with most members falling back

their own policy positions. Others are selective about the issues and votes they list. And members of Congress have a long history of attempting to discredit as biased any group that publishes a voting record that makes their record look bad.

It is true, as many offices cited, that the Library of Congress, through a service dubbed "Thomas," carries votes in conjunction with its Internet tracking of

go into effect earlier this month without a vote.

It is little wonder that frequently fewer than 40 percent of the eligible voters turn out in biennial elections to select their senators and representatives. And millions of those who do arrive at the polls have only the most surface information about what their sitting senator or representative has been doing in Washington. Incumbents like to keep it that way.

Information is the oxygen of democracy. It is also the basic ingredient that builds and maintains confidence and accountability in government. At a minimum, citizens have a right to know in detail the positions their representatives take on legislation. Congress should adopt a rule that would require that all members list their voting records on the Internet in an easily accessed, searchable format by member name, bill subject and title.

This would be a giant step forward in efforts to ensure an informed electorate - and a more accountable Congress. Citizens should contact their senators and representatives and ask why this isn't being done. They can be reached through the Capitol switchboard - 202-224-3121 for senators; 202-225-3121 for representatives.

Ralph Nader is a consumer advocate and former presidential candidate based in Washington.

*Some of the explanations for the failure of members to post their own records seemed to translate into something akin to "the constituents are too dumb to understand" an unvarnished straightforward rendition of a congressional voting record.*

on claims that votes were available on other Internet sites including those managed by various private organizations.

Some of the explanations for the failure of members to post their own records seemed to translate into something akin to "the constituents are too dumb to understand" an unvarnished straightforward rendition of a congressional voting record.

Reliance on private groups is tricky, at best. Most compile voting records in a manner to support

activity on the floor of the House and Senate. The process of extracting votes of individual members from "Thomas" is too cumbersome and time-consuming to be practical for most citizens. The same is true for the Congressional Record printed by the Government Printing Office.

Unfortunately, sometimes Congress is able to rig the parliamentary procedures so that some items can slip through without a vote. One of these was a \$4,900 raise for all members that was allowed to

## Act Now on Election Reform

on the Taliban should not blind people to America's unfinished election reform business.

On Sept. 10, "The New York Times" and the "Washington Post" were primed to release evidence that candidate George W. Bush received fewer votes in the presidential election of 2000 than candidate Al Gore. In addition, on Sept. 10, in the corridors of Congress, meaningful election reform was under active consideration.

After Sept. 11, the nation's attention was diverted away from the people's choice, to a selected voice.

It has been a year since the

dastardly disenfranchisement on Dec. 12, but we have not forgotten.

We shall never forget that the winner was wiped away, and the loser was lofted.

The margin of "victory" was uncounted votes. The issue in Florida was not so much about a "butterfly ballot" as it was the perversion of the process.

The Equal Protection of Voting Rights Act of 2001, sponsored by Senators Dodd (Conn.), and Daschle (S.D.); and Representatives Conyers (Mich.), and Morella (M.D.) hits the root cause of last year's fraud in Florida, Illi-

nois and across the nation - a lack of federal standards to protect voting rights.

The major provisions of the law would set comprehensive minimal standards for federal elections.

Without a federal mandate, states will enact lightweight legislation. Meaningful measures require one set of rules, equally applied to all states.

If the Equal Protection of Voting Rights Act of 2001 is not enacted this congressional session, it will probably be lost forever, and the truth of the stolen election of 2000 will be further buried.



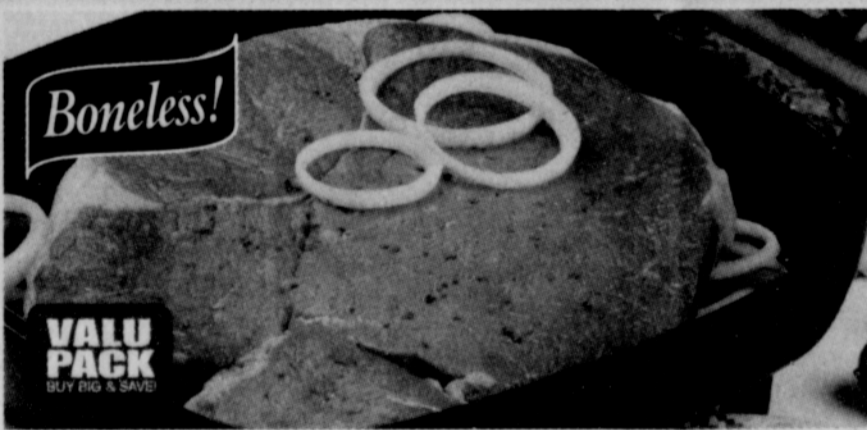
Jesse L. Jackson Sr.

The following appeal is reprinted from the Rainbow Push Coalition, led by Jesse L. Jackson Sr., founder and president:

Yes, America is engaged in military exercises in Afghanistan. However, taking target practice



# HOLIDAY SHOPPING MADE EASY!

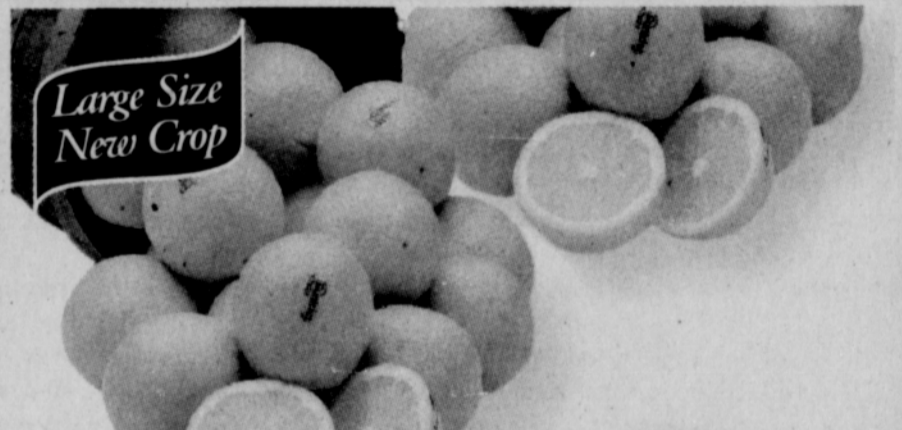


**Boneless Beef Round Steak**

Valu Pack of 4-lbs. or more.  
SAVE up to \$2.00 lb.

**1.49**  
lb

Safeway Club Price



**Seedless Navel Oranges**

SAVE up to 60¢ lb.  
Box Price...\$13.99  
Approx. 40-lbs.

**39¢**  
lb

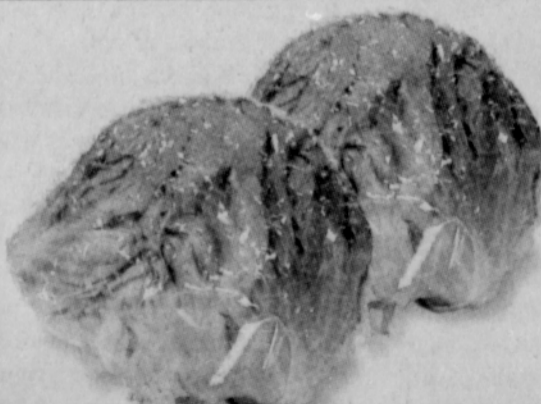
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