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The integrity of voting

Clean and effective voting is one of the things of which we can be proud of in contemporary Puerto Rico. People here have exercised their electoral franchise with great gusto, toppling periodically leaders and parties. The attachment to voting is a psychological reality; the integrity of voting is a social fact. And this has been the story for nearly half a century.

But this proud heritage is now in grave danger. Ironically, the presidential primaries, slated to be held in February and March, are the reason. One would assume that closer contacts with the American political process would enrich our democratic heritage. It is having, however, the opposite effect. The political scenario which has been designed by the ruling party provides for crossing over in the primaries. Double voting is not only allowed by a legal technicality; it is actually highlighted and even promoted by prominent leaders as a citizen's right.

This means that voters could pick, for instance, a Dole or a Baker or a Ben Fernandez in February and then experience a convenient change of heart, and vote for Carter in March. The integrity of candidacies and voting is beyond the point. The integrity of political ideals has no place in this system. What was a proud heritage is reduced to a mockery. And democracy — our democracy is the loser.

Speaker Angel Viera Martinez, the new Carter man, after Franklin Delano Lopez's official and much heralded decapitation, has called double voting a "farce" after the Republican mayor had highlighted the possibility.

As a Kennedy supporter and as a person with lifelong affinities with the Democratic Party, for which I have voted and campaigned in the United States, I challenged Viera Martinez a few days ago to prove his good inten-



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tions by sponsoring ironclad guarantees against double voting in the coming primaries.

The pressure has to be relentless and should not be based on sheer partisan considerations. In the eyes of many Puerto Ricans, the Carter candidacy is already tainted with the imminence of an electoral travesty if not a fraud. We may like or dislike Carter, but we strongly feel that a candidate for the U.S. presidency, who for the first time asks for primary votes in Puerto Rico, should not be saddled with the grave charge that he is corrupting the democratic process here. The integrity of voting has been one of our most cherished traditions. No president of the United States should disregard it, and those who support Carter have now a grave responsibility to behave as Caesar's wife: they must not only be pure; they must be above suspicion.

Otherwise, the primary process will not be an experiment on crossing over; it will be an experiment in double crossing. It will double cross the integrity of voting in Puerto Rico, and integrity of voting in a democracy is the name of the game.