I have a message for my liberal friends, relatives, and colleagues: If you think Republicans play dirty and Democrats don't, open your other eye.

I've been hearing this complaint everywhere I go. It seems to be the emerging centerpiece of the Democratic campaign message in 2004. Exhibit A is George W. Bush's victory in the court fight over the 2000 Florida recount. Exhibit B is the ongoing attempt by the Republican governor and Republican legislature of Texas to redraw that state's congressional districts. Exhibit C is the recall of Gov. Gray Davis, D-Calif.

The complaints are spreading and becoming more shrill. At last Tuesday's debate among the Democratic presidential candidates, Carol Moseley Braun said Bush "was not elected by the American people." Al Sharpton added, "We are witnessing a nonmilitary civil war. It started with the recount in Florida, it went to the redistricting in Texas, now it's the [recall] in California. … It's a rejection of the American people."

On Saturday, at a Democratic steak fry in Iowa, several presidential candidates stood behind Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, as he charged, "Bush stole the election. … We know what the Republican strategy is: suppress the vote. … Look what they did in Florida. Look what they're trying to do in Texas. Look what they're trying to do in California." Former President Bill Clinton told the crowd that in 2000, five justices of the Supreme Court "thought it was time for the minority to have the White House, they stopped counting votes in Florida, and they just gave it to them." Clinton said Republicans "believe in government by ideology, enemies, and attack. We believe in government by experiment, evidence, and argument."

Really? Let's look at the record.

In Florida, Al Gore originally asked for a recount only in counties in which he thought Democrats would gain votes. Moreover, to be precise, he wasn't for "counting" more ballots; he was for reinterpreting already-counted ballots until he came out ahead. Gore's lawyer, David Boies, argued that ballots should be interpreted as votes for Bush or Gore based on "the intent of the voter, not how the voter manifests his or her intent"—in other words, without rules. Rep. Ed Markey, D-Mass., a Gore surrogate, actually claimed, "The punch cards were wrong." Gore eventually moderated his position, but not until he had to.

In Texas, Republicans seeking to redraw congressional districts in the third year of the decade are violating custom but not law. On Friday, a panel of federal judges dismissed a lawsuit by Democrats claiming that the GOP's redistricting tactics violated the Voting Rights Act. As for the 11 Democratic state senators who fled to Oklahoma and then New Mexico to prevent the majority from gathering a quorum, I can only imagine the cries of outrage I'd be hearing from my liberal friends if those were Republicans thwarting a Democratic legislature.

Many Democrats have questioned Bush's legitimacy because he lost the nationwide popular vote. It doesn't seem to bother them that this principle—the right of the majority to get like-minded representation, regardless of which party wins jurisdiction by jurisdiction—is exactly the principle they deny in Texas. Gore lost the Electoral College while winning a 48 percent plurality of the vote nationwide. Texas Republicans lost a majority of the state's congressional seats in 2002 while winning 56 percent of the vote statewide.

In California, the recall process is authorized by the state constitution. More than 1.3 million California voters signed petitions calling for this recall. Maybe that's because Davis got a lower percentage of the vote statewide in 2002 than Bush got nationwide in 2000. Or maybe it's because 63 percent of likely California voters disapprove of Davis' performance in office (down from 72 percent in August). And before you complain about
Republicans using sneaky tactics to oust an honestly elected governor, let's hear your defense of the $7 million Davis spent in last year's Republican gubernatorial primary to deprive general-election voters of a moderate Republican alternative.

Are Republicans nasty? Do they refuse to accept election defeats? Do they subvert respect for democracy? If so, they have no monopoly on these vices. They aren't the ones claiming that our current president "was not elected by the American people." They aren't the ones declaring "a nonmilitary civil war." And it was Clinton, not a Republican former president, who asserted at the Iowa steak fry that the other party "tried to put more arsenic in the water."

A day after Clinton leveled that charge, ABC's This Week aired a delicious exchange between George Stephanopoulos and Howard Dean aboard a Dean campaign van. Stephanopoulos asked Dean whether it was true, as rival candidate Dick Gephardt alleged, that Dean had supported $270 billion in Medicare cuts advocated by Newt Gingrich in 1995. Dean said it was "very unlikely." Then Stephanopoulos showed Dean newspaper clips backing up the allegation. "It's pretty clear that you said you would accept a 7 to 10 percent cut in the rate of growth of Medicare," said Stephanopoulos. "Oh!" Dean interjected, raising his eyebrows. "Cutting the rate of growth! That's much different."

Excuse me, but wasn't that difference exactly what Clinton deliberately blurred in his 1996 campaign? Didn't he beat Bob Dole by accusing Dole and Gingrich of cutting Medicare?

I'm not excusing the games Republicans play. But by projecting all evil onto Republicans, Democrats spread the same political disease: the notion that you don't have to be wary of lying or cheating unless the other side is doing it. Lying and cheating don't belong to Republicans or Democrats. We're all susceptible, and we're all guilty.

Sure, some people are more guilty than others. But if that's your obsession, I commend to you the words of my colleague, Jack Shafer: If you're interested in which wing lies more, you're probably not very interested in the truth.