

We see ourselves stuck with two choices, and not just in presidential elections. But we have more power than we know, more choices than we realize.

ALTOONA, WI - Henry Ford famously said his customers could get one of his cars in any color they wanted as long as it was black. American consumers have come a long way since the days of the Model T.

American voters haven't. Ford's "they can have what I say they can have" philosophy is nowhere to be seen anymore in commerce but it still looms large in elections. Some 150 years ago Boss Tweed quipped "I don't care who does the electing, so long as I get to do the nominating." It's not so very different today.

As *Daily Show* host Trevor Noah recently wisecracked : "When it comes to everything except presidential candidates, Americans have the most choices for more things that anyone else in the world. Like, I can walk into a supermarket — any supermarket in America — and choose from literally 400 different kinds of yogurt…. And yet, when it comes to selecting America's leader for the next four years, you're stuck with two choices: Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. Or to put that in yogurt terms: vanilla and Sriracha baboon anus."

This is the truth, but not the whole truth. We see ourselves stuck with two choices alright, and not just in presidential elections but all partisan elections. We can vote for major party nominees who occasionally win but rarely do what we want once elected and regularly sell us out. Or we can vote for minor party candidates who seem less compromised and more likely to act in our interests but never win. An inadequate and profoundly unsatisfying choice, to say the least.

Here's what's amazing. As demanding as we are as consumers, that's just how passively accepting we are as citizens.

We don't have to be passive. We don't have to be accepting. We have more power than we know. And we have more choices than we realize.

When major party establishments offer us bleak and bleaker, our choices are not limited to either holding our noses and selecting what we consider the lesser of evils or saying the hell with it and casting a protest vote for someone with no chance of winning. There is another option.

Almost exactly a century ago, farmers in North Dakota were at wit's end about the insensitivity of elected officials to their economic plight. A couple of socialists organized tens of thousands of disgruntled North Dakotans and lined up reform candidates to run for office all across the state. But they didn't run under the Socialist Party banner. Their movement and their candidates were embedded in North Dakota's ruling Republican Party and in a few short years they took it over .

Almost exactly a century later, at the beginning of this decade, anti-government feelings smoldered in poor, recession-ravaged communities and was fanned by rich right-wing ideologues, exploding into a prairie fire that swept the country. It was dubbed the Tea Party, but it was not a party at all. Its organizers took cues from those North Dakota socialists and embedded their insurgency within the Republican Party, and in a few short years lightning struck again in the same place. The GOP was pretty much taken over.

Now go all the way back to the 19th Century. The Progressives of the late 1800s tried for a time to establish a separate party, but did not truly gain traction until their kind were embedded in both major parties. Once you had Teddy Roosevelt successfully running for president as a Progressive on the Republican ticket and some years later Woodrow Wilson winning the presidency as a Progressive on the Democratic ticket, the major parties had no choice but to embrace the Progressive agenda and enact Progressive reforms. America was radically transformed.

Consider what was done by Wisconsin's legislature in 1911 alone . Child labor laws and protections for women in the workplace were put in place. Workers' compensation was established to help injured laborers. And so much more. Railroad regulation. Insurance reform. The first state life insurance program anywhere in the country. The nation's first system of taxation based on ability to pay, namely the progressive income tax. America's first vocational, technical and adult education system. All done by a legislature made up almost entirely of Republicans and Democrats. All done by Progressives embedded in those major parties.

All done by people who refused to accept the dismal choice we assume we are stuck with today.

— *Mike McCabe*