

Our Political Future: Behind Door Number Four

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MADISON - Americans clearly are sour on politics. According the latest Gallup public opinion polling, the number one problem in the U.S. is “dissatisfaction with government, Congress and politicians” along with “poor leadership, corruption and abuse of power.”

New Associated Press polling shows slightly more than a quarter of Americans say they trust Republicans to manage the government, while just under a quarter trust the Democrats. The biggest bloc of citizens say they don't trust either major party. And the AP survey showed that public confidence in the government's ability to make progress on the important problems and issues facing the country continues to slip, with 74% now saying they have little or no confidence, down from 70% who said the same last December.

Both parties are failing our country, leaving most Americans feeling betrayed and politically homeless. But the citizenry's response to these circumstances leaves the most to be desired.

We've all been conditioned to believe we have only three options. Behind door number one is whatever the two major parties offer up. A few partisans on either side are more or less satisfied with what's behind this door, but most Americans aren't. Most feel they are forced to hold their noses and choose between the lesser of evils. Most look for another door.

Behind door number two is an occasional third-party or independent candidate. But whether it's

Ross Perot one time or Ralph Nader another, this door leads to a dead end. The U.S. is not a parliamentary democracy. Ours is a two-party system. Supporting a third party invariably ends in disappointment.

That leaves door number three. Behind it is resignation. Sadly, a great many of us are choosing this route, throwing up our hands in disgust and hightailing it for the sidelines. This withdrawal from civic life is now endemic to American politics.

Three doors. No happy ending to be found behind any of them.

That's the bad news. The good news is that there is a fourth door. We've been trained not to recognize it or even acknowledge its existence, much less open it. But it is there all the same. It hasn't been opened in our lifetimes, but when it was found and opened by past generations, what it led to was transformational and landscape altering.

Door number four is what I call a first-party movement. Third-party movements operate on the political fringes, to the left of the Democrats and to the right of the Republicans. Put another way, they seek to clip the wings of the major parties. First-party insurgencies go for the heart. They compete for the affections of the entire electorate.

The goal of third-party movements is to have three or more parties. The goal of first-party organizing is to have at least one that is worth a damn. At least one that truly owes its allegiance to the people.

Conditions are growing ripe for an extensive renovation of the nation's political landscape. The telltale signs of an impending political implosion are visible. The percentage of Americans who refuse to identify with either major parties is at its highest level in three-quarters of a century. The biggest swath of the electorate – by far – is not the Republican loyalists or the Democratic faithful. Nor is it centrist or moderate. It is politically homeless.

If door number four is opened, the two parties will either adapt or perish. The odds that at least one of the parties will cease to exist in its current form are getting shorter by the day.

We have it in our power to put citizens back in the driver's seat of our government. The two major parties are repellent. We have it in our power to build a political household that people actually want to live in. It can be done. Our great-grandparents and great-great-grandparents did it. On more than one occasion they opened door number four and freed themselves from the same kinds of traps that ensnare us again today.

We don't have to make history. We only have to repeat it.

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