

The Washington Post

Howard Schultz hasn't thought any of this through

David Byler

March 14, 2019

Howard Schultz, the former Starbucks chief executive and possible independent presidential candidate, has made himself a piñata for the wonkier parts of political journalism. Schultz's basic idea seems to be that President Trump is bad, socialism is bad, the system is broken, and an independent Business Man will be able to bring unity, restore trust in America and generally solve problems. Schultz's political instincts aren't all bad here. Trump's approval rating is low. Socialism isn't a popular term, though the debate gets more complicated when you try to nail down which policies are and aren't socialist. Most Americans say they want a third party. And trust in many major institutions is down. But Schultz's pitch starts to fall apart when you get into even the most basic details of how politics and governing actually works.

Schultz, like any other third-party independent, would have trouble winning the White House. As many others have pointed out, the electoral college makes life difficult for non-regionally based third-party candidates. The top vote-getter in each state typically gets all of the state's electoral votes, and a strong third (or even second) place showing gets you basically nothing. Ross Perot famously got almost a fifth of the popular vote in 1992, while getting exactly zero of the 270 electoral votes he needed to win the White House. Political analyst Charles E. Cook Jr. has estimated that Republicans and Democrats have between 105 and 208 electoral votes locked up in completely safe states. If he's right (and I think he is), then it's very difficult for any independent candidate to get to 270 electoral votes. For better or worse, the electoral college seems to be here to stay, and it's a big impediment to Schultz.

And for all that Americans tell pollsters they want a third party, the voters who want one disagree wildly about what that party should look like. Some want a third party that's further left than the Democrats, others want it to be to the right of the GOP, and still others dream up entirely different political alignment.

Schultz seems to want socially liberal, fiscally conservative subsegment of that vote. New America senior fellow Lee Drutman found that very few of those voters actually exist. Emily Ekins, director of polling at the libertarian Cato Institute, used a variety of studies to show that libertarians make up about 10 to 20 percent of the population. And many of those voters seem to be strongly attached to an existing party anyway, which is part of why libertarian third-party candidate and former New Mexico governor Gary Johnson got only 3 percent of the vote against Trump and Hillary Clinton, the two least-popular major party candidates in the history of polling.

And if Schultz were to win, he would probably have trouble governing. He's said he would only nominate a Supreme Court justice who has the support of two-thirds of the Senate. There's nothing wrong with wanting compromise and bipartisanship, but that sounds like a number he just pulled out of thin air. Most recent justices haven't had that sort of support. And it's possible that the majority party in the Senate would pass on whoever Schultz nominates and wait for the

next president to nominate someone they like more, just as Republicans did with Merrick Garland in 2016.

More broadly, governing is a team sport, and it's not clear that Schultz would be able to win as a one-man team. Political scientists Hans Noel and Seth Masket put it well a few years ago: They pointed out that when a major-party president wants something to pass, he or she can often count on many (if not all) of the necessary votes from his or her own party. A president who isn't tethered to a party would have to either convince one of the two existing parties to sign on to every action or try to constantly build new bi- or tri-partisan coalitions from the ground up. Schultz could easily end up in a situation in which neither party trusts him and his White House is even more dysfunctional than what we're used to.

If a president could constantly create wonderful bipartisan consensus just by Grabbing Starbucks With Both Sides, then President Barack Obama, who actually held his own beer summit, probably could have done so. If a president just needs to be a little less ideological to generate compromise, then Trump — who has some political instincts but lacks a well-formed ideology — would be doing that more. But compromise is hard, and so far it's unclear whether Schultz has the policy knowledge or political acumen to make it happen.

In his desire to upend political conventional wisdom, Schultz is like a (very slightly) more personable but (much less) strategically savvy version of Trump. Trump at least had the good sense to run for a major-party nomination. So far, Schultz lacks even that.