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## President Schultz? Not while the Electoral College is around

by JOSHUA SPIVAK

Former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz has immediately grabbed attention — much of it negative — with his high profile flirtation with an independent bid for the White House. Donald Trump's successful run for the White House may have led anyone with a spare billion or two to think that they can jump into the presidential arena, but Schultz, and voters, shouldn't be fooled. As always, the road to the White House will run through one of the two major parties. By the time Election Day comes along, Schultz's possible independent run is likely to be a barely remembered memory.

This not to say third-party races are unimportant or that voters don't theoretically want them. Polls continuously show that a majority of voters desire a third party. As we've seen repeatedly, third-party candidates can play an important, and at times decisive, role in who wins the election. Ralph Nader made three runs on the Green Party slate, one of which, in 2000, likely cost Al Gore Florida's electoral votes and the presidency. In 2016, Green Party candidate Jill Stein siphoned off votes, presumably from Hillary Clinton, and that may have damaged her race. Before that, Ross Perot's 1992 campaign, which took 19 percent of the vote, proved a fatal blow to George H.W. Bush's reelection chances.

But all of these candidates shared another feature in common — not only didn't they win the White House; they didn't get a single Electoral College vote.

You would have to go back to 1968, with the Southern protest candidate George Wallace's campaign, to find someone who managed to receive a third-party Electoral College vote. And to find the only serious third-party candidate to manage to come in second, you have to travel back over a century to 1912, when former President Teddy Roosevelt lost the GOP nomination fight to his successor William Howard Taft, broke with the party, and ran under the newly formed Progressive Party banner. Roosevelt garnered 88 electoral votes and 27 percent of the popular vote, easily outpacing Taft. Of course, he was nowhere near actually winning — Democrat Woodrow Wilson got 435 Electoral College votes in winning the election.

There is a good reason third-party candidates are either running spoiler races or just fooling themselves. America's political system appears to have an ingrained bias against third parties. There are very few on the state and local level. Right now, there are two independents in Congress — Senators Bernie Sanders (Vermont) and Angus King (Maine). Both of them owe their office to the acquiescence of the Democratic Party, which essentially treated these two independents as their own candidates. Rarely does a third-party candidate come in and win when both parties are fully behind a different candidate for the office. These shooting-star events almost always occur on the state or local level, and the victories are based on a particular quirk specific to that state. The independent candidates may try to form a third party and elect a successor, but they never succeed.

On the presidential level, the problem is magnified. In many practical ways, the candidates are running 51 separate races (some of which they have given up immediately). Thanks to the Electoral College, they must win a plurality in enough of these states to have a chance of success. Just getting on the ballot is a challenge. Not being listed in all the states is a sign of terminal weakness, so they must spend time and money just to get a ballot line. This costs independent candidates significant cash and time to get that far. Third parties, like the Green Party, may have a spot, but running on those lines comes with its own baggage, which third-party candidates don't want. On the other side, the two parties effectively have a guaranteed slot in each state. Those ballot positions are frequently the top ones.

Just as important is that independent candidates are running under a mistaken assumption that the parties are not important and it is just the candidates that matter. But voters actually view the two parties as signifiers for a host of complicated political issues. By seeing which party a candidate is from, the voters are able to discern their position on many issues that are otherwise under the radar in an election. The positions are so set in stone that the primary races are frequently about very marginal differences over the same policies.

By their very nature, third-party candidates hope to overturn the existing structure and grab voters that are interested in an amalgamation of the policies of the two parties. But in reality, voters quickly discover that the exciting new candidate likely has unpopular positions on some hot-button issues. The result is that, by the time the election comes around, voters start drifting back to one of the two major parties. The increased polarization in the country has probably solidified views and makes it even unlikely that voters are willing to cast a ballot for a third-party candidate with uncertain positions on hot button topics.

There is also the reality that the swing voters in the center may be a very small group. About 10 percent of voters acknowledge that they don't lean to one party.

Schultz is not the first billionaire to think that he can overcome the political system. Former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who is now considering a Democratic Party race, flirted with independent runs before and he has warned Schultz of the likelihood of failure. Former Utah Governor Jon Huntsman, the son of a billionaire, also considered a run in 2012. But there is a reason that neither of them jumped into the race. Independent-party races sound fun a year before, but once the election really comes into focus, the independent or third-party candidates will once again discover that American politics has a strong bend to the two-party system for a reason. And they may quickly discover that the billions that they are spending — which may likely be matched by the other candidates — is money better spent anywhere else.

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