

## Why Howard Schultz should run for president

by ABRAHAM UNGER

The 2020 race for the White House has begun. While President Trump is the only Republican in the field right now, as is traditional for the incumbent's party, eight Democrats have announced exploratory committees or filed to run for president with the Federal Election Commission.

That's a good thing. The American political frame of reference certainly needs some rejuvenation, especially after the recent federal shutdown and the national malaise it encapsulated. A breath of fresh air, and new political lenses through which to see the world, are always healthy.

Independents are vital to that exercise. One never knows in advance, but sometimes, we reach a tipping point when just that singular voice is the right medicine to remind us of our civic core as a democracy that speaks plainly to the twinned American ideals of social equity and the free pursuit of individual aspiration.

In my lifetime, I've seen this corrective action occur three times, with no detriment to the polis, but rather, an enriching and meaningful contribution to the larger American conversation on public policy. John Anderson did it in the 1970s, Ross Perot in the 1990s, and Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) in 2016. That last one is still an open question on the electoral books. Could Sanders have become president if not for the actions of the Democratic National Committee? We'll never know, but his independent voice has spawned an emergent crop of progressives, such as Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.), who are enlivening policy debates.

Yet, for all the civic good that a serious third-party candidate such as an Anderson, Perot or Sanders might do, former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz's announcement that he's thinking of running created the kind of outlandishly negative response that made one think the whole 2020 electoral process might falter because of him. The basic argument is from those who oppose Trump. Underneath some ad hominem attacks, such as New York Times columnist Michelle Goldberg's crude claim that Schultz is "narcissistic," the reasoning, at least on its face, is that Democrats can't afford any viable contender from outside their party to defeat Trump.

However, the Democratic National Committee seemed to have actively worked against Sanders as a presidential contender three years ago, when he became truly competitive with party favorite Hillary Clinton, so I'm hypothesizing that this really is just Democratic establishment bias.

Former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg — like Schultz, a billionaire and historically an independent who continuously thinks of running for president — has entered the fray. He claims he is relying on research from 2016 that he conducted to prove he shouldn't run as an independent. But that was 2016. After that election, pollsters are a little more suspect when it comes to forecasting the twists and turns of presidential races.

Taking Schultz on nothing more than his body of work as a self-made, former CEO and thoughtful social voice who created jobs with admirable benefits for thousands of Americans, he may have something meaningful to contribute toward the one big issue that looms over all discussion of domestic policy, and remains the same since 2016: the rebooting of the middle class.

The Starbucks jobs with benefits that Schultz created largely were for Americans without college degrees. My research indicates that cohort is having the hardest time keeping up in our deindustrialized workforce. While the middle class once was the largest group of Americans, it now is the smallest. That means most of America is not making it in the current economy in the way that our parents and grandparents did. This inescapable truth does not bode well for the promise of American democracy.

I am not yet a supporter of any candidate for president. It's too early to make that kind of decision. Yet I am intrigued, as many reasonable citizens likely are, by a Howard Schultz candidacy. In place of an unwelcoming response to Schultz, how about just the opposite? How about a generous broadening of the American conversation, with an expansive feeling of security in the common good that comes with a wider discussion of policy ideas from all corners? Let democracy have its day.

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