MICHAEL SEAN WINTERS

One for all and all for one

Barack Obama has attempted to define his presidency as one that will embrace all Americans, and not only those who voted for him. There is an astute political calculation behind this move, both in terms of electoral politics as much as ideology

Candidates for the US presidency always talk about the value of bi-partisanship. Candidate George W. Bush notoriously promised to be a "uniter not a divider". But President Barack Obama seems to be serious about his call for a "post-partisan" politics. On election night, he said: "To those Americans whose support I have yet to earn – I may not have won your vote tonight, but I hear your voices, I need your help, and I will be your president, too."

In the week leading up to the Inauguration, Mr Obama met conservative pundits over dinner at the home of the columnist George Will, and, in an unprecedented act, he hosted a dinner on the eve of his Inauguration honouring his Republican rival in the presidential race, Senator John McCain.

Last week, President Obama travelled to Capitol Hill to meet not his fellow Democrats but to address the Republican caucus and solicit support for his financial stimulus package. "The atmosphere was good," said Republican Congressman John Campbell of the meeting with Mr Obama. "But no minds were changed." Indeed, precisely no Republicans in the House voted for the President's stimulus bill. Senator Jim Inhofe said the Obama honeymoon lasted "about two days". Scepticism is not limited to Republicans. Congressman Barney Frank called Mr Obama's efforts naïve and said: "The notion of trying to deal with [Republican congressional leaders] as if we could be post-partisan gives me post-partisan depression." He went on to suggest that Mr Obama's motives were psychological, telling *The Financial Times*: "Barack Obama has this desire to be widely liked way more than is helpful." But that doesn't ring true. Bill Clinton's emotional neediness was as obvious as the McDonald's burger in his hand. Mr Obama is one of the most self-contained politicians in memory. And he lacks Congressman Frank's evident delight in political battle.

Despite such warnings about the futility of reaching across the aisle, Mr Obama continues his effort to woo Republicans. It is possible that his idealism has led him to believe that he really can bring people together, perhaps not on every issue, but in the interest of making politics a less cut-throat occupation. It certainly allowed him to distinguish himself during the primaries from Hillary Rodham Clinton, whose partisan credentials were her strong suit, and the post-partisan idealism served as well in the general election as an implicit indictment of the Bush-Rove years. Mr Obama is now Mrs Clinton's boss, not her challenger, and Mr Bush is back in Texas. Mr Obama and the Democrats have substantial majorities in both houses of Congress. Yet,he is still trying to reach out to the Republicans.

Or is he? Perhaps the audience for Mr Obama's post-partisan initiatives is not congressional Republicans but an entirely different group: independent, or unaffiliated, voters. These are voters who, when they register to vote, decline to affiliate with either the Democratic or Republican parties. Independent voters are, by definition, resistant to partisan appeals and building political loyalty among them is difficult. To them, Mr Obama's constant courting of congressional Republicans reflects what these voters believe about themselves, that they put country before party

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and view issues on their merits and not through ideological lenses.

Independent voters hold tightly to other key beliefs about themselves and, when their self-image conflicts with what a party projects, they stick with their self-image. "I vote for the person not for the party" is a frequent refrain when campaign calling to independent voters. In fact, you vote for both in the American political system. Like it or not, if you vote for your local Democratic congressman, you are voting to elect Nancy Pelosi as Speaker of the House, just as a vote for your local Labour candidate is a vote to keep Gordon Brown as Prime Minister. Yet, the self-image persists. Mr Obama's public courting of the Republicans blurs his own image the way these voters blur the reality of their vote. They see Mr Obama entering the Republican caucus, smiling at a meeting with GOP leaders in the Oval Office, walking into George Will's for dinner, and they think Barack Obama is one of them.

Independent voters are also the least likely to be motivated by a single issue. If your most important public policy concern is the environment, chances are you are a Democrat. Conversely, if you really worry about your Second Amendment gun rights, the betting is you are a Republican. Independent voters may be conflicted – such as a pro-life, pro-health-care Catholic – but many more simply may not pay that much attention to the issues. Atmospherics and the personalities of the politicians will matter more to an Independent voter than to a Republican voter, who may like a politician's tone but deeply resent that politician's advocacy for gun control.

The most important thing about independent voters is that they are the ones who actually decide elections. By way of example, in 2008, Mr Obama became the first Democrat to win Virginia since 1964. Thirty-nine per cent of the electorate self-identified as Democratic in exit polls (Virginia voters do not affiliate when they register), but I would guess that those Democrats mostly voted for John Kerry in 2004, too. Mr Obama and the Democrats won the state not only by increasing Democratic turnout, but by winning a higher margin among the 27 per cent of Virginia voters who identified themselves as independents. In Florida and Colorado, two other states that flipped from red to blue, independents were 29 per cent and 39 per cent of the electorate respectively. In almost every state in the Union, you can't get to a majority without winning independent voters.

So, the next time you see President Obama with his arm around a Republican leader, don't wonder what they are saying to each other. Wonder what the independent viewer watching on television is thinking and is he thinking that Obama is his kind of guy. Barack Obama may or may not be an idealist at heart, but he is a very canny politician.

■ **Michael Sean Winters is the author of *Left at the Altar: how the Democrats lost the Catholics and how the Catholics can save the Democrat* (Basic Books, £15.99)**

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