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My Declaration of Independents



By Marty Kaplan

I think I've figured out how to get the White House to pay attention.

Clearly, being a Democrat doesn't do the trick. I can clamor all I want about bankers' bonuses, carbon emissions, Net Neutrality — you know, the kind of promises that candidate Obama ran on. But if I'm a Democrat, I'm just part of the base, the third of the country he'll pretty much take for granted when he tries to assemble a majority in 2012. Blowing me off as a liberal (22 percent of voters) who doesn't understand electoral math especially lacks a political downside. Where else am I going to go — Mike Bloomberg? One Ralph Nader enabling one George W. Bush is enough third-party fallout for a lifetime, thank you very much.

But if I'm an Independent — another third or so of the country — suddenly I'm Mr. Popular. I'm the voter who quit him in 2010. The White House political operation will poll me up the wazoo. My positions on issues will instantly become interesting. A Democrat who doesn't want to balance the budget on the backs of middle-income Americans is just an unrealistic whiner. But an Independent who thinks that the top Clinton tax bracket is no punishment for millionaires is a voter worth listening to. A Democrat who sees Afghanistan as a tragic dead end is naïve about terrorism. But an Independent who agrees with Joe Biden's private assessment is a sign that the country is turning away from that war.

"Independent" is, of course, an oddly capacious label. How can Joe Lieberman and Bernie Sanders have the same (I) after their names? Plus, the media are awfully sloppy about the synonymy of "independent," "moderate," "centrist," "swing voter" and "undecided." Independent can even be a face-saving euphemism for "I don't vote."

But the elasticity of the term hasn't prevented Democratic strategists from believing that a single-minded focus on winning Independents is the only way to add up to a 2012 majority. (The G.O.P. doesn't court Independents in the same way, but the media still say that Republicans are "moving to the center," despite all evidence that the raw meat they feed their base before their primaries is the same diet they serve up in general elections.) That's why I'm thinking that the way to get some love from the White House is not to be

a disappointed (and therefore ungrateful) Democrat, but instead to be a nonpartisan (and therefore desirable) Independent.

Now that I'm an Independent, Mr. President, surely you want to know what rings my bell.

Well, for starters, I want to fix the broken campaign finance system. I want multinational corporations and hedge-fund managers to pay their fair share of taxes. I want banks and insurance companies to suffer the consequences of their greed and bad bets. I want an energy policy gutsy enough to reduce global warming. I want —

Sure, fella, and I want a pony, too: That would be the White House reaction to a wish list like that coming from a Democrat. But coming from an Independent, those positions might be received by the Obama camp as a bridge to 21st-century triangulation.

I used to imagine that the president was playing 11-dimensional political chess with the Republicans, a deep strategy on behalf of the people who elected him that I was too dim to grasp. Instead, I've begun to wonder whether his negotiating with himself and his common-ground rhetoric — despite frontal Republican intransigence and contempt — are his way of dog-whistling to Independents that he's their guy.

The fight over extending the Bush tax cuts for people earning more than \$250,000 has been a case study of the pathology of chasing independents. Last week, MoveOn unveiled an ad made of clips of 2008 Obama voters speaking to camera — kids, grannies and everyone in between. The faces are earnest, their words supportive. “What up, B!” says one. “I want to say thank you for all the hard work you do,” says another. “We voted for you because for the first time in our lifetime,” a young man explains, “a politician was actually laying out a plan that reinforced the values that we've come to believe in as Americans.”

But people in the ad are also troubled. They respectfully ask him not to compromise on the tax cut. Quietly, thoughtfully, a woman at the end sums it up: “You said in your campaign speech that enough is enough and it's time to fight. Please fight. I'm willing to fight with you.”

I don't know what they were saying in the White House when they saw the ad, but on MSNBC, Chuck Todd used it as a foil during an interview with Christy Whitman. He called it an ideological attack on Obama, which prompted her to bemoan its extremism. Obama's problem, she said, wasn't that “he didn't go far enough to the left, that he wasn't strong enough on the left agenda”; his problem was that “he went further than we wanted him to go.” What we Americans want instead of hyperpartisanship, Whitman contended, is pragmatism, the no-labels, no-ideology of the sensible solution-loving center.

So inside the Beltway, wanting to cut \$600 billion from the deficit — the cost of the upper-income Bush tax cuts over 10 years — bizarrely becomes a symptom of lefty partisanship. A polite “please fight” becomes the fringe drowning out the majority. Maybe characterizing this ad as an attack on Obama from the left actually helps him with Independents; in this thinking, if MoveOn is against him, he must be doing something right. The irony is that the White House's courtship of the center has the effect of doing the

bidding of the right. If Democrats really want to be wooed, maybe it's time to play hard-to-get from the middle.

This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you'd like.

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