

Obama or Clinton: What do Americans want America to be?

IN DC people watch politics like other people watch sports. So said Ben Connors, a 24-year-old news editor, referring to the political sophistication of the capital's residents. He plays bingo with his pals, not with numbers, but with the number of times President George W Bush will use a word in a speech. They have pizza and beer in front of a debate, when the rest of America is in front of a match.

But there's none of the New York in-your-face exuberance here. There are no boisterous mobs squatting on street corners waving campaign signs at honking motorists.

Washingtonians have not only heard it all, they've seen it all first-hand during the grind of each administration's tenure. Politics is the fabric of the city and everyone seems to be involved: from policy writers, lobbyists and aides, to the deli workers that serve up soup and sandwiches, to the secret service agents at all hours.

The city is awash in snippets of policy discussions and presidential primary theory. Everyone is surpris-



Barack Obama is flying high, but Hillary Clinton is fighting back, writes Karen McCarthy

ingly informed. Even the 20-something Starbucks worker Paul Brown has a well thought out "reason to support Barack," which he'll gladly offer up with a caramel macchiato.

"He's non-establishment and young and has a vitality that out-weighs the importance of Clinton's experience," Connors effused. "We need to invigorate the masses and bring that energy back into the process."

Catchphrases like these that echo Obama campaign rhetoric are rampant. It sounds like he's either indoctrinated the masses with magic jingles or tapped into some deep need in America.

People praise his message of reconciliation and are critical of what they consider Clinton's divisive character and "fighting" slogans.

Obama's recent eight-state winning-streak has made the New York senator come out swinging even harder. As support from women, black and working class voters erodes, her campaign has responded with a flurry of negative attack ads in the all-important end-game states of Texas, Ohio and Wisconsin.

Her hard-charging rival is also blanketing the airwaves. Washington Post sources revealed he spent \$13.5 million (€9.2m) to her \$8.3m (€5.6m) on advertising since Super Tuesday. The more people get to know him, the more popular he becomes.

Her campaign portrays him as all style with no substance, a debate dodger brandishing a health care policy that would leave 15 million Americans without coverage.

In reality there are marginal policy differences between the two democrats. The battle is being fought on character, so bitterly, that former vice-president Al Gore is reportedly poised to mediate.

"We don't need more fighting," Obama countered after she held up boxing gloves during a recent speech. "We need some getting together, solving some problems."

In the nation's capital where Republican and Democratic supporters are entrenched, Obama's message of unity resounds.

"I'm sick of the fight," said Katherine Pardington, a 28-year-old

educator who has more confidence in Obama's character and charisma.

"Hillary Clinton represents old politics," Pardington added. "She expects to fight and she'll be a great voice, but I don't feel our nation needs another polarising person."

One black comedian recently joked that Bush was so bad that America is considering a black president. The joke is reflected in the sentiment on the streets, where there's a desperate need for something different after the last eight years.

This past weekend, Pardington took a three-hour trip to a Virginia when they heard an impromptu Obama rally was taking place. The organisers expected 7,000 supporters and were mobbed by 18,000. Pardington was mesmerised by the senator's rhetoric.

"I had goose bumps the whole time," she said. "He's definitely the JFK of our generation."

But the man also has staunch critics. George Lander, a young black university student, finds him egotistical and arrogant, others find him vague, indecisive and inexperienced. Many say his debating skills are feeble compared to

the rousing speeches that are littered with clever sound bites to exploit the jingle media and feed the masses who don't want to invest too much time getting better informed.

"Too much happened to get us the vote," Lander said. "It's important to become educated and use that power well."

With black Congressional Representatives coming under intensified pressure from constituents to vote for the increasingly viable Illinois senator, the super-delegates that Clinton once had in the bag are taking flight.

"You can choose speeches or solutions," is how she threw down the gauntlet this week to Texan, Wisconsin and Ohio voters. Her success in the final lap depends on her ability to persuade them that Obama is just glitz and glamour.

Connors, a registered Ohio voter, has firmly staked his flag in her rival's camp. "The world has changed," he said. "Barack Obama is proof to the rest of the world that we want to reroute our country's trajectory. He's proof of what Americans want America to be."