

CAPITOL LETTER

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## The 'Process' President

Obama's cool, cerebral style may be just what we need

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[Barack Obama](#) is a process guy. That doesn't sound like much of a compliment, but changing the way Washington works is at the heart of his message. The election will not be won on his energy policy or health-care policy. If he wins, it will be because voters want to fix the way we make decisions—and they think Obama will drive the modern-day equivalent of the biblical moneychangers from the temple and set the country back on course.

"If anybody can do it, he can," says [Richard Cherwitz](#), an expert in political communication who came away impressed with Obama after meeting him at a backyard barbecue in Austin, Texas. Cherwitz is a professor at the University of Texas, and the rhetoric course he teaches focuses on ways to bring people of difference together. He saw that Obama recognized the value of getting the process right—and he was drawn to the candidate's cool cerebral style and the absence of the partisan heat that had become so divisive.

He'd seen [George W. Bush](#) as governor and admired the way he talked about transcending differences. "I'm a uniter, not a divider," Bush repeatedly said. But Bush abandoned it as a governing strategy, and, with rare exceptions, catered to

his party's base as president. With the Democrats certain to pick up seats in the House and Senate and poised to capture the White House, Cherwitz says that even with the Bradley effect, where people tell pollsters they'll vote for a black candidate but in the privacy of the voting booth do otherwise, the deck is so stacked against the Republicans, "I don't see how this guy will not get elected."

Then why doesn't he have a bigger lead in the polls? The conventional wisdom is that Obama should be way ahead, but he's still a relative unknown. Voters want to see more before they make up their minds. He hasn't really established himself in Washington, other than to defeat the most formidable political machine in modern politics. Beating Hillary is what credentialed him, not his legislative record or his years as a community organizer or even his rhetorical gifts. To close the sale, Obama needs what's known as a Reagan moment. The country wants reassurance that he's up to the job in the same way the electorate held back in 1980 until candidate Reagan appeared on stage with President Carter in the single debate of the season, his easy manner and jovial banter carrying the evening and the election.

The two campaigns have agreed to the three debates scheduled for the fall, and while Obama doesn't have Reagan's charm and personal warmth on the stump, the physical contrast with McCain is stark. It's not even a question of age; it's the persona that is projected, one a graceful athlete, almost a ballet dancer, the other a more tightly wound wrestler in body type and body language. "I may be projecting too much on him—he is a little aloof," Cherwitz says of Obama, "but I think he is going to put smart people at the table, and it won't be about left or right, it'll be about making the right decisions." That's where process matters. As a self-described white male associate dean in his 50s at one of the top five public universities, Cherwitz has lived through the challenges of affirmative action. After Supreme Court decisions banned taking race into consideration except as one of many characteristics, minority enrollment dropped, forcing educators to look at other ways to boost the numbers of underrepresented groups. In Texas, where Anglos are no longer the majority in the state, the number of Hispanics and African-Americans in graduate school at the University of Texas is at best 10 percent nationally, only 7 percent of Ph.D.s are awarded to minorities.

Cherwitz developed an internship for undergraduates in what he calls intellectual entrepreneurship. It is available to all students wrestling with what they will do once they graduate, and its mission is to help students discover their intellectual passion and encourage "citizen-scholars" to pursue advanced degrees in a variety of academic fields. Diversity was not Cherwitz's chief motivation, but when he looked up after 10 years (the course was first offered in 1997), he realized that more than 50 percent of the students enrolling are first-generation college students and minorities. "Affirmative action is a wonderful thing, a necessary thing, but it's not sufficient," he says. "And it's not just a political issue;

it's an academic issue. We can't fulfill our mission without a diverse classroom. How can I teach search and seizure when there's no one who understands what it means to have the police come after you?" Explaining to students in his course on rhetoric how to adapt to an audience and how to talk to people "not like me," is harder when the classroom is homogenous, he says. "While I can't prove it," Cherwitz e-mailed me, "I think Obama would very much appreciate such a thoughtful approach to increasing diversity—one not mired in the same old political fights ... That, after all, is the hallmark of his campaign."