

[Loyal black base craves a fighter in the Oval Office](#) (Charlotte Observer – October 9, 2011)

By Tim Funk and Celeste Smith

It's the lunch hour, and President Barack Obama is live, talking jobs, on a big TV screen at No Grease Exclusive Barber Shop in uptown Charlotte. Along with the NBA labor troubles and the sour economy, the country's first African-American president is a hot topic in this shop, which cuts the hair of about 400 customers every week. So Jermaine Johnson, who co-owns No Grease with twin brother Damian, has heard it all in what's become a raging debate over whether Obama is doing enough to help a hurting African-American community whose enthusiasm and high turnout were crucial to him winning North Carolina and the White House in 2008. "They talk about the (difficulty) he's having in passing any new ideas that will help stimulate the economy," Jermaine Johnson, 38, says of the chatter from his customers. "The word on the street is that the Republicans are turning down anything he puts forth." But barber-chair pollster Johnson also is hearing something else: If Obama expects the black community to be there for him in equal numbers in 2012, he needs to become more of a fighter. "We would like to see a little more bravado from this president - the cowboy going in there to make it happen," says Johnson, whose shop is a few doors down from Time Warner Cable Arena, where Democrats will nominate Obama for a second term next year. "He's been doing what's expected in politics - crossing lines and trying to get the parties together ... But I think he's over-exhausted it. He's done it too long. It's time to stand up for what you believe." Apparently, the president has been getting the same advice from political advisers who are concerned about his declining poll numbers, including among his base in the black community. A Washington Post-ABC News Poll last month found that 58 percent of African-Americans had "strongly favorable" views of Obama - down from 83 percent in the spring. In recent weeks, Obama has been barnstorming the country, promoting his \$450 billion American Jobs Act and leading town hall chants for Congress to "pass this bill now." He plans to bring his case to North Carolina the week of Oct. 17 as a part of a bus caravan that also will take him to Virginia, another 2012 swing state. With this new tone, says Urban League of Central Carolinas President Patrick Graham, Obama is going back to his roots: "You're seeing more of the community organizer." U.S. Rep. **Mel Watt**, D-N.C., a former head of the Congressional Black Caucus, says it's about time. "A lot of people have been frustrated that he's bent over backwards (to work with Republicans)," says **Watt**, whose district includes much of Charlotte. "Now he's starting to draw lines and differentiate himself. It's what people have been looking for."

**'Our people are hurting'**

The president's new populism comes after weeks of criticism from some high-profile black leaders, who have said that Obama was not addressing the needs of the African-American community, where unemployment is much higher than the national rate. Among blacks in Charlotte, the jobless rate is more than 19 percent. In August, Charlotte's overall unemployment rate was 9.8 percent. U.S. Rep. Maxine Waters, D-Calif., wondered aloud why a previous Obama bus tour over the summer made stops in the rural Midwest, but not in, say, urban Detroit. "We're supportive of the president but we're getting tired, y'all," she said at an August jobs fair in Detroit that was sponsored by the Congressional Black Caucus. "We want to give the president every opportunity to show what he can do and what he's prepared to lead on. But our people are hurting." PBS and radio talk show host Tavis Smiley and Princeton University professor Cornel West also have taken shots at Obama. In their "Poverty Tour" bus trip in August, they charged that Obama has failed to stand up for the poor. (The show airs on PBS this week.) Former Charlotte Bobcats owner Bob Johnson last week blasted the president from the other side of the ideological spectrum, saying he should "recalibrate" his targeting of the wealthy in his tax proposals and rhetoric. "You don't get people to like you by attacking them or demeaning their success," said Johnson, one of the country's wealthier Democrats. But this heated debate over the first black president's record and tactics as election year nears also has drawn plenty of Obama backers. Other prominent radio and TV personalities - including Tom Joyner, Steve Harvey and the Rev. Al Sharpton - have defended Obama and attacked West and Smiley. The president got an enthusiastic reception at a recent Black Caucus dinner even as he invited members in a fiery speech to stop their complaining and "put on your marching shoes. ...We are going to press on." And most African-Americans who've been heard from - the famous and the rank-and-file - couldn't disagree more with Johnson's plea to go easier on the rich and try yet again to compromise with the GOP on Capitol Hill. Former Charlotte Mayor Harvey Gantt says he would advise the president to stay in the bully pulpit "instead of pulling back and allowing the Congress to make certain decisions and then stepping into the fray. He's really got to tell the American people what he wants." Claude Mayse, 57, a Charlottean who's unemployed and has been unable to find a sales job, likes the tougher Obama. On everything from the shape of the health reform plan to the size of the economic stimulus package, Mayse says, "I felt like (Obama) compromised too much." Now, Mayse adds approvingly, "he's circumventing (the Republicans) and going straight to the people."

### **Enthusiasm is the key**

No one is predicting that the frustration out there will cause black voters to cross over en masse and back Obama's GOP challenger. Not even Herman Cain, an African-American businessman who's a hit with a surging number of mostly white Republicans, generated much interest among local black voters interviewed last week by the Observer. The latest breakdown

from Public Policy Polling found that 87 percent of North Carolina blacks approve of Obama - down from the 90-plus percent support he received at the polls in 2008, but still very high. (Among all Americans, Obama's favorability rate now averages 46 percent; among all North Carolinians, 44 percent.) But polls don't always measure enthusiasm. Turnout numbers do, and in 2008, black turnout increased by almost 5 percent nationally, while white turnout slightly declined. If the excitement level for the president is only so-so come

Election Day 2012, many black voters may not bother to go to the polls, worries Joel Ford, who was Mecklenburg County Democratic Party chairman when Obama was elected in 2008. That year, Obama carried one westside precinct, 639 votes to 8 - 98.6 percent. "There is a possibility that some will

stay home, and a possibility that some won't stand in lines," Ford says. "The president's got work to do." Barber shop co-owner Jermaine Johnson says he and his brother have a lot of "newly unemployed" people among their clientele. And though these customers don't look to Obama to single-handedly solve their problem, Johnson says, "when you have a president who looks like you and he still can't push the envelope for you, you get some frustration." On the other hand, Johnson says, frustration in the black community also has given rise to, perhaps, a more realistic view about the limits to what one person - even the president of the United States - can do. "I think it's still going

to be a big (African-American) turnout (in 2012)," he says. "But I don't think it's going to be a lot of 'rah rah' ... because, during his first term, a lot more people have gotten educated on what he can and

cannot do." There's also a growing sense that Obama inherited maybe the toughest plate of problems, national and international, since Franklin Roosevelt, who took office during the Great Depression. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were draining money and troops. And the financial meltdown that rocked Wall Street and threatened banks just weeks before Election Day 2008 were causing mass job losses. "A lot of people are having a reality check," says veteran Charlotte radio personality Beatrice Thompson, news and public affairs director and talk show host for WBAV and WPEG. "I don't think anyone truly understood what condition the country was in. ... I have to admire (Obama) for not losing his cool given what he had to work with." Charlotte Mayor Anthony Foxx says Obama's seriousness in trying to deal with those big challenges will eventually win over many voters - black and white - who may now feel ambivalent about the president. "He's had a tough hand dealt to him, and he's had to make some tough calls," says Foxx, who spearheaded the campaign to bring Obama's 2012 convention to Charlotte. "When the story is told, I think many, many, many people will come back and support him." Still, Foxx and others acknowledge that there's been some complaining that Obama has not paid

enough attention to the needs of an African-American community that was there for him in 2008. Gantt says that same tension was there in the 1980s, when he became the first African-American to be elected Charlotte's mayor. "That's a touchy thing for an African-American president," he says. "You still have to convince a lot of your electorate - because of your skin color - that you're there to support the cause of all Americans." Johnson C. Smith University senior Kirsten Anderson Hall, an aspiring city manager who's 20 and will be casting her first presidential vote next year, says she agrees - and disagrees. "It's the United States of America, not the United States of America and black people," she says. "But that doesn't mean he needs to displace us and forget about us."

## The debate goes on

Back at No Grease, the challenge for Obama is evident from this conversation between customer Jason Vicks, 37, who owns a restaurant and real estate agency, and his barber. Vicks: "Obama is not doing the hiring. Obama is our president. He can only do what he is able to do.... Obama does not own the restaurant up the street or any business (where) he could employ African-Americans." Damian Johnson: "He can create the opportunities for us to hire (black people). If we're ever going to have an opportunity as a people - black people here in America - this is our prime time to do it, with an African-American president. ... He needs to stand up to the powers that be."