

For Some, SOTU Is Party Time

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Roll Call Staff

As President Barack Obama prepares to take the stage to deliver his first State of the Union address tonight, supporters on the left — and the far left — are organizing public watch parties in Washington, D.C., to try to whip up support for policy issues, publicize their organization or even just meet their neighbors.

Curiously absent, however, is the presence of any publicized conservative watch parties in the area.

The popular support on the left has been encouraged by Obama's ex-campaign manager, David Plouffe, as one of his first initiatives in his stepped-up role on the president's team.

"We must regroup, refocus, and re-engage on the vital work ahead," Plouffe wrote in an e-mail to supporters. "You can share ideas and experiences — and I'll be joining on the phone for a special strategy huddle before the speech."

Jim McBride, president of the D.C. chapter of grass-roots organization Generation Obama, said he's looking forward to the call. His and a slew of other District Democratic groups will meet at Local 16, a bar on U Street, he said.

"We have a lot of work to do to keep people motivated," McBride said. "Aside from the setbacks in Massachusetts, the glacial pace of health care at times, we come together and we get a chance to appreciate [that] we have a president who is really eloquent and I'm sure will make a great speech and lift people's spirits."

Hosting the party at a bar, he said, is a great way to get young people to come and mingle and maybe even join his cause. Haile Eyob Nessibu, who lives in Petworth, is taking a different approach: He's hosting the party at his house with snacks, beer and a pool table.

Nessibu said he volunteered during Obama's campaign and now he wants to help focus his community's attention on passing health care reform.

"I used to go to the election parties during the election and I thought it was pretty energizing to the base," he said. This party "is for the people of the community, to enrich them and to understand what is going on."

Curtis Felton, a 61-year-old residential building manager in Adams Morgan, said he just wants to meet his neighbors, who he said seem too busy with their daily grind to worry about politics. He'll have some snacks and tea, but no alcohol, at his apartment, he said.

"I think by doing this, I'm opening up to some of the people that aren't active politically to open up and try to talk about what they want to talk about," he said. "I haven't knocked on doors or done anything else that other people have done, so I thought this is something I could do as my contribution."

In Silver Spring, Md., D.C. Latino Caucus President Franklin Garcia is gathering people at the Greek Place Restaurant (owned by a Salvadoran, of course) to excite people about prospects for immigration reform.

"It's a big deal for us, especially because we have very little representation in D.C.," he said. "If we don't do it, I don't think anyone else will pay attention."

Back in the District, noted gathering place Busboys and Poets is hosting a discussion about the war in Afghanistan and then an open mike before the speech.

"Anyone can get up and say whatever is on their mind about what they think is the state of the union," owner Andy Shallal said. "I think sometimes people want to hear things that are unfiltered and it makes for interesting conversations."

Even Start Loving, the protester who mans the anti-nuclear-arms vigil that has been in front of the White House for 29 years, wants to host a group there to network, organize and watch the speech on his laptop with Wi-Fi — but it's no party, he said.

"We need to stand beside Obama and take this country back," Loving said. "I don't have time for people that want to party. We've got a war. So this is for serious people."

He said he wants to center any discussion on the recent Supreme Court ruling that struck down existing campaign finance laws.