



Members of the Tea Party Patriots cheer at a midterm election party last November.

## Speaking in Teabonics

Tea Party rhetoric harnessed voter anger and drove Republican candidates to centre stage

BY ALICIA VON STAMWITZ

**T**wo years ago, the world watched in wonder and millions of Americans cheered as a young and brainy black president was sworn into office. Even Americans who opposed Barack Obama marvelled at the widespread euphoria.

Two months ago, during the midterm elections, Republicans overturned the Democratic tables, gaining more than 60 seats in the House of Representatives and six in the Senate. This time, the mood among voters was decidedly different. Anger. Frustration. Anxiety. Fear.

What happened? As former U.S. President Bill Clinton put it in his 1992 campaign, "It's the economy, stupid." Almost 15 million Americans are unemployed — a whopping 9.6 percent of the working population. But other forces contributed to what Obama called the midterm democratic "shellacking."

The Tea Party, once seen as an irritating fringe movement, was partially responsible. In exit polls, 41 percent of midterm voters claimed allegiance to the movement. Tea Party activists tapped into voter discontent early last

year and catapulted Republican candidates to centre stage. Even Karl Rove, the former Republican White House deputy chief of staff, underestimated the movement's clout. In a September 2010 interview on Fox News, he dared to insult Tea Party-backed candidate Christine O'Donnell, saying she was "unelectable" and has said "nutty things." (He was right, of course. O'Donnell lost the Delaware Senate race to Democrat Chris Coons.) Tea Partiers instantly flogged Rove with the whips and chains of our 24-7 media: talk radio and cable television rants, angry tweets and scathing blogs. Rove then stumbled back to Fox and genuflected before his attackers, publicly endorsing O'Donnell and stressing that he was in fact "a huge Tea Party fan."

"Teabonics," as some have dubbed the movement's rhetoric, harnessed American anger and directed it against the status quo. On election day, most voters admitted they didn't vote for someone so much as against a person or a party.

The Democratic administration clearly misstepped by focusing on health-care reform during the economic meltdown. The president was

accused of not hearing, or not caring, that most Americans were more worried about finding or keeping jobs than health care, clean energy, gays in the military and other progressive issues. Maybe Democrats would have fared better if they'd convincingly touted their successes: up to 3.3 million jobs saved thanks to the stimulus package, a historic reduction of the deficit, the ending of a painful war and so on. But until the economy improves, Americans will remain angry and afraid.

The silver lining for Democrats is that the Obama administration had been preparing for the midterm fallout for some time. No one was surprised by the Republican sweep, and the priorities ahead were clear: Create jobs. Shrink the deficit. Come up with a tax-reform plan worthy of bipartisan support.

The challenge for Republicans and Tea Party leaders is to channel their substantial energy into practical policies and productive governance. On election night, John Boehner, the new majority Speaker of the House, said, "This is a time to roll up our sleeves." Republicans were ready to work with the president "to the extent that he is willing" to change course and heed the demands of voters.

That president, our president, is a man of hope and faith: faith in the American people and faith in American government. As he said in November 2008 in Chicago's Grant Park before a roaring audience celebrating his election victory, "If there is anyone out there who doubts that America is a place where anything is possible, who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time, who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer. . . . We have never been just a collection of red states and blue states. We have been and always will be the United States of America." Despite the current discontent and rancour, his words still resonate with all Americans yearning for progress.

Let the American people of all stripes and colours say, "Amen."

Alicia von Stamwitz is a writer and retreat leader from St. Louis.