

# Need a stronger tea to get a party going

BY MARCO RESPINTI

The Republicans have been invigorated by the conservative movement known as the Tea Party. They were hugely successful in the midterm elections and are now hoping to generate the critical mass necessary to win the White House.

Today more than ever the Republican Party's preparations for the November 6, 2012 presidential elections are long and laborious. Due to the system that selects candidates through the primary elections, all presidential campaigns in the United States are long and laborious. And with the renewal of Congress every two years, there is almost never a respite in the campaign.

The race for the Republican Party began during the election campaign for the 112th Congress, which took place between 2009 and 2010. But it can also find traces that go back to the presidential election of November 4, 2008, in which Barack Obama led the Democrats to the White House, and even back to the two terms Republican George W. Bush.

Not even his political opponents and detractors can deny that the Bush presidency was a strong and incisive one. For better or worse, the eight years changed how the United States acted in the world and how it was perceived internationally. They also significantly changed the Republican Party. The political-cultural axis during the Bush years – backed by the neo-conservatives (who did not automatically constitute the electoral base of the Republican Party) – moved the country's center of gravity to the right. It is symptomatically evidenced by the fact that to win the 110th Congress, the Democratic Party was obliged in the midterm elections of November 7, 2006 to run an un-

usual number of moderates and centrists, and even several war veterans who had credentials that would appeal to more conservative voters.

For the Republicans, Bush was an important, though at times cumbersome precedent, especially during the most critical and difficult episodes of his dual mandate. In preparing for the 2008 presidential elections, it was difficult for Republicans to find a replacement who did not invalidate the important aspects of his presidency while still being able to elegantly distance himself from its most unappealing elements. And this is mainly due to lack of suitable personnel. The choice fell to Senator John McCain, who of all the Republicans was the most openly critical of Bush. Thus McCain was unable to offer an especially credible alternative for the conservative electorate, which was needed to defeat the Democrats.

But the 2008 elections were not merely a scorching Republican defeat. They were also an opportunity for a significant change within the party – a healthy change.

In retrospect, the 2007-2008 primaries opened the way for new faces and ideas that would significantly "test the waters." People like Mitt Romney and Mike Huckabee initiated a dialogue with the electorate that in three years has begun to bear unimaginable fruits with most conservative members of the American electorate. But above all, the Republican defeat in 2008 brought to center stage two events that are now very

Linda Dupere holds a sign at the Tax Payer Tea Party Rally in Concord, New Hampshire on April 15, 2011.





JONATHAN ERNST / REUTERS

Pins and jewelry, including some that reference former Alaska Governor Sarah Palin, are on display at an exhibition booth at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Washington on February 12, 2011.

compelling: First of all, the former governor of Alaska Sarah Palin, chosen by McCain in 2008 as a running-mate for the White House. Secondly, there was the Tea Party movement.

For the Republican cause, the choice of Palin was really crucial (if one goes by media accounts, the importance seems to have been ignored). It was probably the most politically astute move made by the party leadership (and McCain) at a time when the hope of triumphing over Obama were fading. Deploying the former governor of Alaska, who is closely connected to the conservative constituency, made it possible to significantly stop the haemorrhaging of conservative votes fleeing from the “tepid” (by conservatives standards) and even “hostile” McCain, thus consolidating an electoral base that an eventually renewed Republican Party could benefit from. The two subsequent years of American political life confirmed this. The Obama presidential victory in 2008 was in fact primarily determined by the personal success of the previously unknown senator from Illinois (rather than the Democratic Party), who was able to manage his image and rhetoric with great skill and reach out to people who normally would not vote. While Obama’s landslide was largely the result of bringing more people to vote, while the McCain-Palin ticket succeeded in limiting the loss of consensus among the Republican electorate.

And yet, it was during that election campaign – for example, especially with the policy proposals of the Texas Republican Senator Ron Paul – that we saw the first steps of the Tea Party’s massive anti-high taxes

and anti-big government movement.

Now the Tea Party has become the real novelty of the current US political scene while simultaneously being a thorn in the side of the Republicans.

Remotely born in 2008, but launched as a direct challenge to the Obama Administration in February 2009, the movement appeared as a huge and informal popular reaction against high taxes, runaway government spending and astronomical national debt, particularly severe in a global context of exceptional economic crisis. Not only, but the Tea Party was also an open challenge to the traditional leaders of both major US parties. But the movement’s conservative orientation does not in any case prevent it from also criticizing the Repub-

lican Party itself if its policies are perceived as being “pro-big government.” In fact, the Tea Partiers can be understood properly only within the context of the history of American conservatism.

The Tea Party provides the most current and robust expression of conservatism. But it is also the product of policy options that had already begun to take shape for the ruling classes of the party by the 1950s. So today the Tea Party engages in a very peculiar dialogue with the Republican Party.

If Republicans are currently perceived as a right wing party, or at least more right wing than the Democrats, it is because of the conservatives. Within the party, the movement began in the mid-20th century to conditionally support Republicans, voting to the extent that the party would be willing to assume certain convictions. It happened the first time with the presidential nomination in 1964 of Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater, strongly supported by the conservative base (it was the first time that the movement so openly sided with a man of the party, of any party, then the Republicans) as well as being held in contempt by the party establishment. It happened again with the New Right that brought Ronald Regan to the White House, this time with less hostility by the party establishment.

Since then, the links between the conservative movement and the Republican Party have remained strong, but not at all taken for granted. And increasingly, from the 1960s onwards, the weakness or strength of Republican candidates was determined by the support of conservatives structured within a constellation

of organizations, think tanks, lobbies, advocacy groups, cultural institutions and influential media outlets.

The same is happening in the era of the Tea Party. The massive electoral success achieved by the Republicans in the elections for the 112th Congress on November 2, 2010 (the House was regained with a near record majority for the Republicans, the Senate gap was reduced, and it also won a great number of state governors) was undoubtedly the work of the Tea Partiers. On several occasions they replaced the candidates of the Republican establishment with one from their own ranks. And they always set the tone and themes of the election campaign, consistently shifting the average spectrum of Republican electorate to the right.

As a result, the House of Representatives is now dominated by “two rights”: the right wing of “professional” Republicans (the thrust of the Tea Party has progressively knocked out the more progressive elements of the party) and the “off-siders” elected from within the movement, who are nominally Republican, but in reality quite “independent.”

This is the strength of Republicans in 2012, and also their weakness. It is their strength because its opposition to the Obama administration has given them a vast majority in the House, and the momentum has not stopped. That success was made possible by a veritable new force in the party. But it is also a weakness because the Tea Party remains a hard-to-tame a force, more inclined to try to control the party than to be controlled by it.

Within the same House of Representatives, the two “two rights” inevitably show differences in sensitivity and strategy against the Democrats, which could be useful only if they both learn how to manage them. Moreover, the Tea Party it is not even a homogenous phenomenon itself. For example, on issues of foreign policy differences can be considerable. In addition, the new movement that powers this new season of the Republican Party, on the one hand, is always, at least in theory, willing to withdraw its support for the party if it disagrees with its general guidelines, so it can end up weakening the challenge to Obama. On the other hand, it still lacks sophistication and the strategic ruthlessness necessary to triumph in important elections, which in comparison the “professionals” of the Re-



KEVIN LAMARQUE / REUTERS

publican Party certainly have.

Moreover, the range of election proposals that the Republican Party has so far fielded tend to overlap. All in all, the policy proposals put out since the election campaign of 2008 have gained much in terms of visibility, but they all tend to fish in the same pond – conservatives who tend to speak the same language. While this is certainly what Tea Party wants, it may result in a weakening of all the Republican candidates equally. This has certainly been true for Huckabee, and it is now the case for Newt Gingrich and Mitch Daniels – even for Ron Paul, despite the difference of his being an isolationist in foreign policy.

The conservative electorate and the Tea Party certainly does not regret the lack of more liberal candidates on the Republican side, but all this could eventually lead to candidates not very different from each other, thus encouraging the Democrats. In the game of the “two rights” that dominates the House, what the Republicans should do is to put some order into the new movement, offer a candidate who can unify the new forces, and get totally behind him or her. But in order to accomplish this the establishment of the party must of course first of all want it (and this is still not a given); it has to decide to give in to the movement or outsiders (even less of a given) and must have the credibility (lost through years of trade-offs?) that would allow for draconian but necessary choices in the name of a greater good. In short, Republicans need a leader. Otherwise, there is likely to be a debacle due to over-exuberance.

Chairman of the House Budget Committee Paul Ryan holds up a copy of *The Wall Street Journal* with a front page story on inflation worries as Chairman of the Federal Reserve Ben Bernanke testifies on the state of the US economy before the committee on Capitol Hill, February 9, 2011.





Former US Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich reacts during the 38<sup>th</sup> annual Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) meeting in Washington on February 10, 2011.

In many ways, the Republican Party can only lose the presidential elections of 2012 by handing the victory and the second term over to Barack Obama because of its inability to manage its current advantage. Obama is, in fact, weaker today than when he was elected. The American electorate has now seen him operate, govern, contradict himself and limp. The reasoning is valid for anyone in power. Obviously it is easier to criticize from the standpoint of the opposition. Equally clear is the fact that the person and party in charge always pay the price for national problems, whether they are accountable for them or not. But in Obama's case, the magnitude of hope generated by an unknown politician – albeit skillful at fund-raising and spinning the media, and of course by harshly criticizing the previous administration – is incongruent to the results actually obtained. With each passing day the gap between dream and reality grows wider. In a general context such as that of American politics, in short, where the personalization of political debate is very strong, Obama is risking a lot.

His main weaknesses are still the ones that allowed the Republican opposition to gain a majority in the House of Representatives. And this “shellacking” has been detrimental to his image. Obama's well known

economic recipe – often spoken of as “neo-Keynesianism” – is opposed by a significant percentage of the American electorate, and this has gradually been joined by ranks of former Obama supporters disappointed by the persistence of the economic crisis still affecting millions of American citizens. Opponents of the Obama Administration's policy prescriptions consider them a continuation of the typical Democratic big-government runaway spending approach, and therefore the exact opposite of what is really needed for a healthy recovery. Everything is attributed directly to the ideological motivations that sustain it, thus transforming the criticism into a clash of economic schools. Beyond this scenario – which in many ways remains the prerogative of the “insiders” – the average US voter has been unable to perceive the much touted change that was promised, and which would help the country. So, even assuming that the economic and financial crisis still weighing on Americans was due (also) to the previous President, George W. Bush, assuming that the solutions proposed by Obama have not yet had the chance to reverse the situation and really fix it, assuming that the economic woes suffered by American citizens are to be blamed on a generic “capitalism” rightly or wrongly identified with Republican policy

choices and not on specific individual responsibilities of this or that would-be capitalist, the American taxpayer gets the feeling that the “Obama recipe” has not worked – either because of the administration's incapacity to really implement it, or because it is intrinsically wrong. In either case, the electorate's disappointment with Obama has long been palpable. And whether this is indeed the fault of the White House or the result of general situations well beyond Obama's control, the President will nevertheless pay dearly for the promises he was unable to keep for whatever reasons.

Notwithstanding the initial enthusiasm and apart from a few moments of intense sporadic success, the measure of Obama's public approval since his election has been in constant decline – both in national and international policy.

Obama's radical lunges in domestic politics since his inauguration have certainly strengthened his more progressive constituency, but it can hardly provide the Democrats the difference needed to beat the Republicans. And the theme of “non-negotiable core principles” which conservatives in general and the Tea Party in particular espouse continues to have a strong hold on the American electorate.

The sum of the two cold showers produced by three years of the Obama Administration – the disappointment because of promises not maintained and the fear of unpopular socio-cultural changes – is accompanied, moreover, by confusion demonstrated in foreign policy. This confusion pushed former US Ambassador to the UN, John Bolton – a man who has not yet decided, but is seriously considering a run for the White House – to call Obama “the first post-American president” in US history. For Bolton, the “Obama Doctrine” is in fact in opposition to US national interests. And Bolton calls him “post-American” because of the fact that he believes Obama is conscious of this opposition. While such serious allegations obviously need to be supported with fact, they manage to summon ghosts among an electorate already ideologically averse to the current policy of the White House.

In the months that separate him from the November 6, 2012 elections, Obama will have to find a way to explain to those who voted for him in 2008, many enthusiastically, why their taxes have not been reduced – indeed, why they have increased for many. He must also explain why public spending is steadily increasing and why, however painful cutting it may be, the only concrete alternative now on the table is that offered by the Republicans, led by Representative Paul Ryan of Wisconsin, the combative Chairman of the House Budget Committee. Obama will also have to explain how he will finally be able to reconcile and administer the Army's announced withdrawal from Afghanistan in the fight against terrorism by engaging in another war,



in Libya, which for the overwhelming majority of citizens is far away, obscure, unpopular and irrelevant to the national interest.

For his part, Obama can count on two successes. The elimination of Osama bin Laden is the first. Certainly it was a huge accomplishment of which the President should be proud. And he will undoubtedly use it to expedite the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan (which is not the end of the conflict, but the White House will certainly try to present it as such). It will also afford him rhetorical fodder on the tenth anniversary of September 11, just weeks before the elections. Yet it should be remembered that no candidate for the White House has ever been able to win by running on foreign policy successes, not even winning a war on the ground. So Obama can only effectively exploit Osama's death by “selling” it as a solution to the *domestic* problems that affect Americans every day. And this is precisely his Achilles' heel.

His second undoubted strength is the disarray of the Republicans. With less than 18 months before the presidential election, Obama's best hope is that the Republicans continue to do exactly what they are doing – neutralizing one another.

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