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WASHINGTON—One of the most polarizing U.S. elections in living memory ended in a hard lurch to the right, as voters beset by hard times took vengeance on Washington, steering the balance of power back to the Republicans.

Tuesday saw a wave of Republican red, with the Grand Old Party and its more volatile conservative bedfellow, the Tea Party movement, handed control of the House of Representatives, stripping the Democrats of their treasured majority.

All 435 House seats were in play and as of early Wednesday morning, the Republicans had captured 239 seats — a surge of at 60 — many of which will be occupied by budget hawks determined to stall, if not repeal, many of the Obama administration's signature projects, including health care and financial regulatory reform.

Republican gains were less evident in the 100-seat Senate, where Democrats retained their majority, albeit a much narrower one with a loss of six seats as of early Wednesday morning. (Not all results were yet final as of 8:30 a.m. Wednesday.)

Several districts remained too close to call early Wednesday. And a clutch of races hinged on minuscule margins of victory, raising the possibility of recounts and court challenges to come.

However the final numbers break, they constitute a withering blow to the Obama Democrats, with Americans appearing to change their minds on change.

Many watching from beyond America's borders, meanwhile, are likely to interpret the outcome as a great leap inward.

The Obama era so welcomed by the world two years ago now is shackled by the famed U.S. system of checks and balances, leaving Washington a house divided. The turnaround bodes ill for American leadership on global problems, from climate and energy issues to the stumbling White House drive for Mideast peace.

"When the economy's this bad, Americans don't concern themselves with their place in the world. It's all about the pocketbook — period," said Scotty Greenwood, Executive Director of the Canadian-American Business Council. "Until economic fears die down, the big global issues will probably remain on the back burner."

The next Congress, which is due to assume power in January, will include clusters of Tea Party insurgents in both legislative chambers — a triumph within a triumph for the American right, but a potential friction point as moderate Republicans and Tea Party hawks struggle to locate the party's centre of gravity. Among the prominent hardliners bound for the Senate are Rand Paul of Kentucky and Marco Rubio of Florida.

"Tonight there's a Tea Party tidal wave," a triumphant Paul told cheering supporters in Bowling Green, Ky.

"I have a message — a message from the people of Kentucky. That message is loud and clear and does not mince words. Tonight we've come to take our government back."

Rubio, speaking to supporters in Florida, said he was humbled by his margin of victory. Thanking God first and his supporters second, Rubio said he would go to Washington mindful that "we make a great mistake if we believe that tonight these results are an embrace of the Republican Party."

"Tonight is a second chance—a chance for Republicans to be what they said they were going to be not so long ago." But the night also saw the



"Tonight there's a Tea Party tidal wave," a triumphant Paul told cheering supporters in Bowling Green, Ky. Paul defeated Democratic candidate Jack Conway to win a U.S. Senate seat. (Photo by Tom Pennington/Getty Images)

Tom Pennington/Getty Images

Tea Party steal defeat from the jaws of victory, most notably in Delaware, where Christine O'Donnell, the controversial Sarah Palin protégé, flopped in her Senate run after snatching the Republican nomination from the party's establishment choice, effectively handing the crucial seat to the Democrats.

And in Nevada, the biggest single battle of the night broke for the Democrats early Tuesday morning, as Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid prevailed over another prominent Tea Party insurgent, the mercurial Sharron Angle.

"I've been in some pretty tough fights. And I have to admit this has been one of the toughest," Reid told supporters. "But the bell that just rang isn't the end of the fight — it's the start of the next round." The bitterly fought Nevada race saw an election-day intervention from the president, who went live with a Las Vegas radio station in final appeal to mobilize voters.

But Obama's torrid campaigning had little effect elsewhere; in Ohio the president came away empty-handed despite a dozen visits since taking power; and in Illinois, Obama's old Senate seat fell into Republican hands.

Other prominent Democratic casualties included Sen. Russ Feingold of Wisconsin and Sen. Blanche Lincoln of Arkansas, both major Obama loyalists.

The Republican momentum fell short of the Pacific coast, however, with California's high-profile Senate and gubernatorial races going to Barbara Boxer and Jerry Brown, respectively, despite big-money challenges from a pair of prominent high-tech executives.

Also losing in California — marijuana. The Prop. 19 ballot initiative to legalize and tax pot for recreational adult use failed by a margin of five percentage points, despite earlier polling suggesting it might pass. The White House welcomed the defeat in a statement early Wednesday; Officials behind the Prop 19 initiative appeared unfazed, however, promising the question would return in 2012 in California and several other western jurisdictions.

The Republican wave came also at a state level, with victories in at least 21 of the 34 governorships in play — wins considered especially important in this census year because incoming governors are expected to lead the redrawing of district boundaries in ways that could influence the 2012 presidential election.

Allan Gottlieb, the former Canadian Ambassador to Washington, said he was struck by the speed with which the American electorate appears to have foreclosed on the president's agenda.

"When Obama was elected it really seemed that the pendulum had swung, that we had entered an era of 25 years of liberal domination," said Gottlieb. "To see it swing back after just two years is unthinkable."

Overall, the night's results were largely in line with the vast majority of predictions, leaving the House in Republican hands but with the Democrats holding the line in the Senate — a formula that, coupled with the president's veto, points toward political gridlock in which neither agenda is likely to prevail.

How the Tea Party engages in the coming battles remains unclear. Talk late Tuesday was of the hardliners pooling their new-found power by caucusing together within the respective chambers. At least one prominent Tea Party supporter, buoyed by the night's trend, called on fellow travellers to seek an outright takeover of the GOP.

"Some have asked how the Tea Party movement hopes to pressure Republican leaders or influence the party," said Richard Viguerie, chairman of ConservativeHQ.com. "That's the wrong way to look at it. The goal is not to influence the party but to become the party."

Rep. John Boehner, who will take on demanding role of corralling the wayward right as the next Speaker of the House, broke down in tears late Tuesday as he accepted victory at Republican Party Headquarters in Washington.

"It's clear tonight who the winners really are — and that's the American people," said Boehner. The vote was clearly a repudiation of Washington, a repudiation of big government and a repudiation of politicians who won't listen to the American people."

Boehner was the recipient of a midnight call from Obama, according to White House sources. But the White House was otherwise silent on the night's dramatic developments, with no spin expected until 1 p.m. Wednesday, when the president will face the press corps for a live news conference.

Analysts caution against over-reading Tuesday's outcome, pointing to exit-poll data suggesting that if unhappy Americans have fallen out of love with Obama's Democrats, they seem almost as indifferent to Republicans. One voters' survey indicated that fewer than 20 per cent of the electorate have confidence in their government — a bleaker outlook even than during 1970s Watergate scandal that toppled Richard Nixon.

Paradoxically, exit polls also indicated as many as 43 per cent of Americans approve of the job Obama is doing — an indication that the

president's first term is not doomed to colossal belly flop.

"He's still in mid-air. You don't know it's a belly flop until he enters the water in 2012," said Greenwood.

Democrats in search of silver linings seized upon a handful of key victories. In poverty-stricken West Virginia, Democrat Joe Manchin came through with an all-important Senate win after campaigning further to the right with each passing day.

And even in the context of the worst recession since the 1930s, Democrats took heart in an outcome better than the disastrous midterms of 1994, when Bill Clinton's lost control of both chambers of Congress.

"Looking back, 1994 was a calamity for Clinton and the Democrats, losing both the Senate and the House for the first time in 40 years — and at a time when the economy was relatively robust," said Washington-based consultant Paul Frazer, a former Canadian diplomat.

"One of the lessons is that midterm elections are all about pushing back against the government of the day. The more dissatisfied people are, the more likely they are to vote. It's very different from presidential elections, and just as Clinton made it to a second term, I don't think today says much about Obama's prospects for re-election."