

Esquire

A Stunning Victory for the Tea Party, and What It Means

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Today is a day on which you should thank your personal Deity that you do not live in the Seventh Congressional District of the Commonwealth of Virginia. This is because, in the Seventh Congressional District of the Commonwealth of Virginia, the worst thing that an elected representative can do is even to pretend that he is going to Washington to help govern the country.

There's going to be a lot of entrails being read this morning over the meaning of the stunning defeat handed to Republican House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, who lost a primary to an economics professor named Dave Brat despite outspending Brat something like 20-1. There is the undeniable fact that Cantor ignored Brat for too long and then embarrassed himself by scrambling ideologically in the final weeks. (At National Review Online, Joel Gehrke is correct in pointing out what a terrible bungle it was for Cantor's people to [release an internal poll](#) in which they claimed he was leading by 34 points.) There is the undeniable fact that Brat got to the right of Cantor on immigration reform, and did so just as the crisis of the border children was hitting the news. There is the undeniable fact that Brat got a huge lift on this issue by a flock of talk-show and Intertoobz harpies including Laura Ingraham, Michelle Malkin, and Mark Levin. (Note to my man Chuck Todd -- it is not a completely "grassroots" effort if most of your media is coming for free from radio millionnaires.) But those are all secondary to the fact that Dave Brat beat Eric Cantor because the latter could be framed effectively to the Republican primary electorate as at least trying to act like an actual member of Congress. Thus did Eric Cantor become the latest victim of the prion disease that has been eating away at the brain of the party since the Goldwater campaign.

(I can think of only two upsets in my lifetime of watching politics that come remotely close to this one. The first is the primary defeat of former Speaker of the House Joe Martin of Massachusetts by rookie Margaret Heckler in 1966, but Martin was 82 at the time and he died not long after losing to Heckler. The other was the Elizabeth Holtzman's upset of 50-year incumbent Emanuel Celler in 1972. Celler also was the chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, and Holtzman's win not only ensured that she eventually sit in judgment on the crimes of Richard Nixon two years later, but that Celler would be succeeded by Peter Rodino of New Jersey, which Jimmy Breslin, in his fine Watergate book, correctly pointed out was critical

to the development of a bipartisan consensus on the committee in favor of Nixon's impeachment.)

It wasn't just the fact that Cantor flirted with immigration reform. [Brat also hit him](#) for voting to raise the debt ceiling -- Brat has promised to vote against raising the debt ceiling for the first five years he's in Congress -- and for voting for the Ryan-Murray budget plan, and for voting to end the government shutdown. In other words, Dave Brat was elected because he ran against the very few things that Eric Cantor did that remotely helped the government simply to function.

Apparently, Brat would have the country default on its debts, go without a budget, and have the government still shut down until the president is willing to torpedo his signature policy success. If you lived in the Seventh Congressional District of the Commonwealth of Virginia, those are the policy choices your fellow citizens would have endorsed last night. Any pundits who ever again criticize the president for not "compromising" with a party that thinks this way -- and is proud that it does -- deserve to have their keys to the Green Room icebox confiscated.

As for the winner, Brat [seems a very bad combination](#) of serious religious quester and devout Randian economist, a combination that would have had Ms. Rand herself reaching for the opium pipe. He got his undergraduate degree at Hope College in Michigan, which is run by the Reformed Church in the United States, a conservative evangelical wing of the United Church Of Christ. He then got a Masters in Divinity at Princeton, which is a very conservative seminary and now, according to his website, *Dave attends St. Mary's Catholic Church with his wife Laura and their two children: Jonathan, 15 and Sophia, 11*. So either he's a Douthatian convert, god help us, or his faith is all over the lot, which may account for his rather startling announcement last night that he won because God was speaking through the voters of the Seventh Congressional District of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Even his background in economics is shot through [with conspicuous religiosity](#).

Brat's background should make him especially appealing to conservative organizations. He chairs the department of economics and business at Randolph-Macon College and heads its BB&T Moral Foundations of Capitalism program. The funding for the program came from John Allison, the former CEO of BB&T (a financial-services company) who now heads the Cato Institute. The two share an affinity for Ayn Rand: Allison is a major supporter of the Ayn Rand Institute, and Brat co-authored a paper titled "An Analysis of the Moral Foundations in Ayn Rand."

Well, that must have been good for a few laughs.

His academic background isn't all economics, though. Brat got a business degree from Hope College in Holland, Mich., then went to Princeton seminary. Before deciding to focus on economics, he wanted to be a professor of systematic theology and cites John Calvin, Karl Barth, and Reinhold Niebuhr as influences. And he says his religious background informs his views on economics. "I've always found it amazing how we have the grand swath of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and we lost moral arguments on the major issue of our day," he says, referring to fiscal-policy issues.

What's that mean? Who in hell knows, although any attempt to marry Niebuhr's theology with Rand's economics and general view of the world -- to say nothing of her atheism -- is going to be more appropriate to the *Cirque du Soleil* than to a political philosophy. Nevertheless, Professor Dave Brat has taught his first lesson. The worst possible thing any Republican politician can do - - even a powerful politician, even a member of the congressional leadership -- is to demonstrate, however faintly, that the national government should work at all.