



Eric Cantor's Challenger from the Right

Professor Dave Brat courts big-name conservative backers.

By Betsy Woodruff

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Add another to the lengthy list of contests between powerful Republican incumbents and Washington far-outsiders: An economics professor from Henrico, Va., Dave Brat, will announce his entry into the race for Eric Cantor's House seat on January 9. He has already hired John Pudner of Concentric Direct as his consultant.

"I want to be Eric Cantor's term limit," he tells National Review Online.

That's not an easy prospect by any stretch of the imagination, and Cantor is certainly not throwing in the towel. Rory Cooper, a spokesman for Cantor, tells NRO: "Congressman Cantor is proud to serve the people of the Seventh District and hopes to earn their trust again so he can continue creating jobs and opportunity for hard-working Virginia families and defending conservative values."

But Brat looks to have a better shot than anyone who has tried to unseat the majority leader thus far. "This is probably the first time that Eric has had a credible opponent with a comparable education and background," says Amanda Chase, Cantor's former political director.

She adds that defeating Cantor is difficult for a variety of reasons. For one, though some of the majority leader's moves have rankled grassroots activists in his district, he's highly regarded among establishment Republicans. He also has a preternatural gift for fundraising, Chase adds, and, naturally, there's his name recognition.

That said, Brat has a few interesting factors working in his favor. First, he's expecting support from some of the deep-pocketed outside groups that have long been frustrated with the current Republican leadership. Brat couldn't speak on the record about which groups he has met with, but he tells NRO that the political figures and organizations that have indicated interest in his candidacy are "as big as they get."

"I think it's safe to say it will definitely rattle some cages when it comes out," he says.

He tells me he intends to target Cantor for his support of the Ryan–Murray budget deal, as well as his stances on immigration reform. He'll also go after the majority leader on the Affordable Care Act. "He hasn't moved the ball down the field at all," Brat says.

"He had two CRs at the end, one in favor of the shutdown and one opposed to the shutdown at the same time," Brat continues. "And that's fairly symbolic of unprincipled leadership. I mean, that's not a leadership position, where you're on Side A and Side B at the same time and you've got your finger up in the air, checking which way the wind is blowing."

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." Brat says that while he isn't a Randian, he has been influenced by [Atlas Shrugged](#) and appreciates Rand's case for human freedom and free markets.

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.

Brat also has experience in Virginia politics. He worked as a volunteer in the office of state senator Walter Stosch from 2005 to 2012, advising him on education policy, and he has served on the Governor's Board of Economists since he was appointed to the position in 2006 by then-governor Tim Kaine. He has campaigned for a number of Republican candidates in Virginia, including Ken Cuccinelli and Stosch, and he himself ran for the Virginia House of Delegates in a 2011 special election.

Brat can expect backing from much of the Virginia grassroots, especially the libertarian and tea-party activists who have long been frustrated with the state party's leaders. "It's a big decision to fire your congressman and replace him with somebody else," says Larry Nordvig, head of the Richmond Tea Party, "but I think people are tired of hearing the rhetoric and seeing the opposite of what they're looking for in a conservative leader."

He adds that there's also frustration in grassroots circles with Cantor's lack of responsiveness. "He is the king of form letters," Nordvig says. "If you write to him, if you call, you get a form letter back that is obviously not addressing your issue."

While Nordvig's group doesn't endorse candidates, he tells me he plans to support Brat and expects many of his members — the bulk of whom live in Cantor's district — to coalesce behind him as well. He adds that Brat received a warm welcome at the last Richmond Tea Party meeting.

“There was almost a collective sigh of relief,” Nordvig says. “People were like, ‘Finally! Finally we have a solid candidate to challenge Cantor.’”