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Eric Cantor's Shocking, Richly Deserved Primary Defeat

By [Jonathan Chait](#)

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Since Republicans won control of the House in the 2010 elections, the political future of Eric Cantor has been the subject of ceaseless speculation. The speculation always centered around whether — or, really, when — Cantor would depose Speaker John Boehner. The notion that Cantor himself would be knifed before he could knife Boehner occurred to absolutely nobody. Shockingly, it happened, as an obscure right-wing challenger named David Brat not only defeated Cantor in a primary but defeated him by double-digits.

The shock contained by Cantor's defeat is almost impossible to fully convey. Brat teaches economics at Randolph-Macon college, and won a \$500,000 [fellowship](#) funded by libertarian banking millionaire John Allison to spread the word of Ayn Rand to impressionable college students. But there are so many millions of dollars sloshing around the conservative world that such an achievement hardly indicates fame or influence. Brat's [c.v.](#) conveys his standing as an anonymous cog within the movement, containing such highlights as “Attend U.S. Senator Ayotte talk at American Enterprise Institute, met President of AEI, Arthur Brook.” (The President of the American Enterprise Institute is actually named Arthur *Brooks*.)

Brat was [outraised](#) by Cantor 25 to 1. Cantor's [internal polling](#) had him leading the race by 34 points. Brat scheduled a meet-and-greet session with Beltway conservative leaders like Grover Norquist and Paul Weyrich — the kinds of movement hands an insurgent absolutely needs to woo to gain any oxygen for his quixotic campaign — but [stood them up](#) because it turned out to fall on finals week. The Washington *Post* story previewing the race this morning began:

A conservative challenger is expected to fall far short of defeating House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-Va.) in Tuesday's congressional primary. Disorganization and poor funding have stymied the campaign of tea party activist David Brat, even as he tapped into conservative resentment toward a party leader who has been courting the Republican right for years.

Cantor is not merely the second-highest-ranking member of the Republican House. He [helped engineer](#) its strategy of mass opposition, grasping even before President Obama's inauguration that the party's fastest road to regaining its majority lay in withholding support for any and all parts of Obama's agenda. When John Boehner nearly succumbed to the temptation of locking in a conservative policy victory by trading revenue-raising tax reform for cuts to retirement programs, Cantor, along with Paul Ryan, slapped the Speaker back to reality and [killed the deal](#).

What, then, could possibly have transmuted Cantor from the enforcer of ideological discipline to its victim? Like many establishment Republicans, Cantor understood the 2012 elections as a rebuke to the party's hoary Reaganite core. He personally spearheaded a "[making life work](#)" agenda that, while almost totally devoid of substance, at least implied the need for the party to revise its canon. Brat also benefited from the constant undercurrent of discontent emanating from the base that House Republicans had accommodated President Obama by failing to force him to accept their agenda — the still-extant pangs of anger that drove the party to shut down the government last fall.

But the biggest issue by far was immigration reform. Cantor was no reformer, really. He rejected the bipartisan immigration reform deal that Marco Rubio and other Republicans had negotiated in the Senate. But he did hope to salvage some partial compromise, perhaps allowing some illegal immigrants who had been brought over the border as children, and thus could not be deemed personally guilty, to stay unmolested. Brat rejected even that. Any token of conciliation was too much. He [still uses](#) the old lingo, calling undocumented immigrants "illegals." The immediate, and probably correct, reaction in Washington is that Cantor's defeat wipes out whatever tiny shred of a hope that remained for immigration reform.

Cantor went out the way he carried himself throughout his career: making comically disingenuous attacks. His television commercials assailed Brat as a tax-loving Democrat — he served on a non-partisan state revenue-estimating commission — and actually ran ads calling him a "liberal college professor":

It is conceivable that, by preposterously describing a Rand-loving right-wing crank as a liberal, Cantor actually managed to underestimate the intellectual discernment of his voters. In any case, he had ceded all the premises of the argument to his opponent even in the course of smearing him. Cantor was, finally, Cantor'd. He will not be missed.