



## **Cantor forgot that all politics is local Conservative theories on House leader's defeat differ, but the undeniable cause is his loss of district support**

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Apparently divergent explanations of what defeated Republican House Majority Leader Eric Cantor in the primary race for the Virginia Seventh District make the event resemble the proverb of the eight blind wise men and the elephant. Each of the professional partisans I spoke to immediately after Cantor's concession speech Tuesday night saw a different beast in failure.

Steve Moore, chief economist of the Heritage Foundation and a personal friend of Cantor, told me the congressman was defeated by anti-Washington rage. "My jaw is on my chest," Moore said. "I just think this is an expression of rage among conservative voters, we saw this in Texas ... we've seen this in other states, of a kind of rage against Washington of conservative voters who are angry at Republicans, at Democrats, anyone in power in Washington. They can't take out their rage at Harry Reid and others, and they're kind of lashing out at anyone who is seen as establishment."

Larry Kudlow, senior contributor to CNBC, told me that Cantor was defeated by a Republican backlash at the talk of immigration reform in Washington. In the last weeks of the campaign, David Brat, the handsome economics professor who challenged Cantor with little money and no name recognition, sought to link Cantor to the long-standing controversy over illegal immigration. At a closing appearance on a local Richmond TV station, Brat, when asked about immigration reform, pointed to the sensational and tragic news stories of tens of thousands of immigrant minors crossing into the United States without adult accompaniment. Brat didn't say what was to be done, nor did he say that Cantor was responsible for the chaos. He just stated the fact in such a way as to suggest that Cantor was part of the problem of border security.

Kudlow also told me that Cantor's defeat was the end of the Republican quest for a big tent to expand the electorate for the 2016 presidential cycle. "People were attacking Cantor for even talking about an immigration deal," Kudlow said. "Cantor didn't even talk about citizenship. He just talked about legalization of those who are already here ... It was a crushing defeat for immigration reform. This is going to be a big wedge issue inside the Republican Party ... This is a consequential defeat for Eric Cantor, but most of all a consequential defeat for immigration reform in the GOP."

Bill Whalen, research fellow at the Hoover Institution, saw the defeat as confirmation of a clumsy candidate who misplayed the tea party opposition to his established authority. Whalen acknowledged that the tea party's alarm at immigration-reform talk was a major factor in the race. However, he also pointed to the surprising contrast between Cantor's defeat and the success on the same evening of another Southern politician fervently disliked by the tea party, Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina.

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John Fund

"You have two primaries going on in the Confederacy," Whalen offered. "In Richmond, where the Confederates surrendered, and in South Carolina, where the first shot was fired in the war. Eric Cantor was defeated by the tea party. He took them head on in immigration and paid a price for it. But you go down to South Carolina, and Graham is a man who is despised by tea party activists. He breezes to re-election because he found a way to work the system. He adopted a lot of tea party themes, and he's being rewarded for it tonight."

John Fund, contributor at the National Review Online, opined that Cantor's defeat was a result of the majority leader's lackadaisical, "dozing" campaigning. Fund observed that Cantor did not take the Brat challenge seriously until too late and then went negative with ads instead of positive with policies. Cantor did not recognize that Brat was a cagey campaigner who could speak grandly of free markets and fiscal responsibility and at the same time use the immigration controversy as a weapon.

I asked Fund whether Brat was sincere about his highlighting fears of illegal immigrants. "David Brat is a free-market economist," Fund answered. "I think he understands something about migrations of people and the need for a guest worker program."

In fact, Brat has written academic papers in praise of libertarian Ayn Rand's thinking and reportedly holds a chair funded by the president of the conservative Cato Institute. "But that's not what he was talking about in the campaign," Fund said. "He was convinced that Eric Cantor was saying one thing in Washington and doing something else in the district." Fund then laughed. "David Brat is the right wing of the right wing of the tea party, and he is smart."

Cantor's defeat was not because of a light turnout with an indifferent Republican electorate. Yes, there were likely some mischievous Democratic votes for Brat; however, the 2014 primary showed 65,000 votes cast, as compared with the 2012 vote of 47,000. Clearly the tea party fever over immigration, and some savvy rhetoric by a political novice, contributed to Cantor's undoing. Nonetheless, the consistent suggestion from all my informants was that the most likely cause of Cantor's reversal of fortune was a candidate who forgot how to be a politician in his own hometown.