

Eric Cantor's defeat: a great day for status quo on immigration reform

Christian Schneider

June 11, 2014

"You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means."

-Inigo Montoya, The Princess Bride

Before Republican House Majority Leader Eric Cantor strode to the microphone to concede defeat on Tuesday night, the 24-second media cycle already had explained his crushing primary loss.

As results still trickled in, Vox.com advertised "11 political lessons from Eric Cantor's loss" (because 12 would be way too many). Other national outlets rushed to explain how a long-time member of the Republican leadership could lose a shocking primary to an unseasoned economics professor such as David Brat ("Why Cantor Lost," "The Real Reason Cantor Lost," etc.).

The reasons for Cantor's stunning defeat ranged from the plausible (he ignored his constituents for years in his quest to become House speaker) to the ridiculous (Republicans has a distaste for Jewish GOP politicians). But the most prevalent explanation has settled around one word: "amnesty."

Cantor was an advocate for comprehensive illegal immigration reform; this included negotiating with the Democrat-led Senate over a "pathway to citizenship" plan that strengthened the border but also provided a number of requirements for non-citizens to be granted legal status.

Despite a recent poll demonstrating that 64% of self-identifying Republicans support immigration reform, the words "pathway to citizenship" are alum in the mouths of the more strident members of the party. They deride any attempt to legalize those here illegally as "amnesty," as if government would wave a magic wand and grant citizenship to everyone *carte blanche*. (Interestingly, this is one major area where the tea party splits from traditional libertarianism, which is much more open to immigration: See "Immigration is good for Wisconsin's economy" from the libertarian CATO Institute last October.)

But immigration reform proponents on the right contend that the word "amnesty" doesn't mean what the hard-liners think it means.

"You pay a fine, you're on probation, you secure the border, you get the employer verification system up and running, you're at the back of the line, you can't receive any government benefits during this time, be it Obamacare, food stamps or welfare, and your status changes after everyone else has been dealt with in front of you," Rep. Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) told me last year when describing the House version of the immigration bill.

"That's what we're talking about. That's not amnesty. You earn your way toward a legal status just like a judge puts someone on probation who has to earn their way toward a legal status by fulfilling the requirements of their probation," Ryan said.

What Cantor's defeat has done, however, is almost certainly slam the door on any kind of immigration deal any time soon. So for those who criticize the current "open borders" policy, congratulations — you will be rewarded with more of the status quo.

Strengthening the borders, which can't be done unilaterally from the House, will have to wait until a deal also can be reached on a pathway to citizenship — or at least until Republicans take over the Senate and the White House. (In fairness, Republicans argue that even if they struck a deal, there's no guarantee President Barack Obama would enforce it — and given Obama's proclivity for hiding laws he doesn't like in the Oval Office couch cushions, this is a valid complaint.)

Imagine you're holding a dinner party, and the most hellish scenario occurs. People begin talking about how much their kids love the movie "Frozen." The front entrance to your house has no door on it, and in come more and more parents, showing off iPhone videos of their kids singing "Let it Go." According to the rules of the party, the only way you can put a door on your front porch is to stop these parents from talking about their kids; but the other guests demand these parents be removed from the party, otherwise they won't agree to any deal. Soon, you have to hide in the bathroom, rather than see another picture of little Abby in her Queen Elsa costume.

Of course, Democrats have been equally as disingenuous on the issue. Tuesday night, liberals cheered the Cantor coup, as he has been an avatar for right-wingery for years. But those on the left who are happy to see a GOP party officer taken down are essentially admitting that they don't really care about issues, only politics. There are certainly Democrats who are sincere about wanting immigration reform, and they should be aware that their goal became much more difficult on Tuesday.

The hard-core opposition to a "pathway to citizenship" plan can be best summed up by conservative radio talk show host Mark Levin, who on Tuesday night derided "amnesty" by saying Republicans should stop "chasing ethnic groups" and "stop chasing genitalia." (Note to self: Go to more parties with Mark Levin.)

As for Brat, he seems like a solid candidate with a wealth of smarts. And Cantor's loss should be a warning shot for politicians who take their districts for granted.

But if "open borders" are so bad, a lack of a comprehensive plan will make things even worse in the future. That's as long as the GOP sticks to its current position: that illegal immigration is so corrosive, we have to stop anything from ever being done about it.