



Cantor's Defeat Is No Big Deal - Unless Republicans Choose To Make It So

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A reporter emailed me a question shortly after upstart David Brat defeated House Majority Leader Eric Cantor in the recent Republican primary election for Virginia's seventh district: When, he asked, was the last time someone like Cantor had lost a primary? Possible answers to this question indicate three very different ways of thinking about the significance of the Cantor defeat for the Republican Party and its likely future.

One answer presumes that the Cantor loss was completely unprecedented, a sign that the Republican Party as we know it is collapsing. This is certainly the most dramatic answer. For much of the 2014 primary season, observers have pointed to an ongoing "Republican Civil War" pitting the party establishment against its more populist, Tea Party-inspired right flank. The establishment looked to be triumphing in this war until Brat's surprise victory. Tea Party supported primary challengers to incumbents or officially supported GOP candidates had fizzled in Texas, Kentucky, and Idaho, and failed to emerge at all in several other states. In the wake of Brat's ouster of Cantor, the big story shifted – at least until the Mississippi primary saw incumbent Senator Thad Cochran beat back a Tea Party challenger. In any event, obscure challengers in a variety of late-primary states are still vying to repeat Brat's upset; and Cantor himself was such a big fish, that many continue to want to see his surprise defeat by an obscure Tea Partier as the end of the GOP establishment as usual.

Another approach to answering the reporter's query was taken by the *Weekly Standard*, which compared Cantor's loss to liberal New Jersey Republican Clifford Case's loss to conservative activist Jeff Bell in 1978. Many conservatives of that era saw Bell's victory as a blow against the liberal wing of the party – one that would be followed by the retirement or defeat of other liberal Republicans in years to come. In this framing of events, there is nothing new about Cantor's loss; primary electorates are more ideologically extreme than the general electorate, and thus incumbents must always remember first to cater to the party faithful and to the most dedicated activists within their party. Brat's victory is part of a normal process of reinforcing orthodoxy within each major U.S. political party – or, at most, a symptom of the parties' accelerating movement toward the ideological extremes.

But I offered an answer to the reporter rather different from both of the previous takes – an answer that he did not use in his subsequent filings. I compared the deposed Eric Cantor to the primary defeat two decades ago of Congressman Guy Vander Jagt. That defeat is long forgotten and a refresher may be needed. Vander Jagt was the chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee – the man in charge of plotting election strategy for the party. He lost his primary in 1992 to Peter Hoekstra, who argued that Vander Jagt wasn't paying enough attention to his Michigan constituents. Hoekstra was no anti-government crusader; rather, he was a smart politician who exploited his opponent's biggest weakness in a particular House district. Vander Jagt's defeat was a surprise, but even at the time it was taken by observers to be a sign that he had forgotten the old adage that all politics is local.

Why should we care that there are three possible answers to the significance of Cantor's defeat? It matters, because each implies different things for the future of the Republican Party. Is it being torn apart from within? Is it steadily moving to the right? Or is it simply the usual collection of politicians who use the best campaign strategies to win office? In support of my sense that number three is the best take, I offer the following evidence from the past forty years' worth of Congressional primaries:

- Except in election years when redistricting has happened following the decennial Census, only three or four incumbents typically lose their primaries. The number of serious challenges has risen slightly over the past three elections since 2008, but there are still fewer serious primary challenges on average than there were during the 1970s.

- More challengers are, of late, running explicitly ideological campaigns – from the left in Democratic primaries, from the right in Republican primaries. Why this is happening is debatable. Maybe it is due to ideological polarization; or perhaps ambitious challengers are just adopting campaign themes likely to draw more media attention.
- Heightened scrutiny of primaries by the media, combined with the increased ease some candidates can have in raising money from a national donor base on the Internet, has created national, ideologically oriented constituencies for some primary candidates. Idaho primary challenger Bryan Smith, for instance, raised nearly \$750,000 from donors who do not live in Idaho. Every year for the past decade, there have been one or two challengers like Smith. Independent expenditures by groups seeking to use primaries to make a point have also skyrocketed – and such groups really do not care too much whether the challenger finally wins, as long as he or she gets a lot of attention.
- Surprisingly small slivers of the electorate vote in Congressional primaries. Voters who do turn out are not necessarily ideological “extremists.” They are often drawn to the polls not by the Congressional primary itself, but by some other, higher profile race on the ballot. States also vary in ballot access rules. Both special rules and low turnout mean that national groups aiming to use primaries to show their clout can take advantage of low-turnout races or odd procedures in states such as Utah or Idaho.

Primaries, in short, are weird elections, and there are a lot of them, making it easy for groups to score points here or there in every election year. That doesn't mean that big generalizations about the direction of entire political parties or American politics overall should be read into scattered primary outcomes.

My sense is that Eric Cantor's loss was not really out of the ordinary; it was one of a smattering of defeats that happen each cycle. This view is not as exciting as the other two versions of what this instance tells us about the Republican Party today and tomorrow. But my version better fits the facts, and if my answer is true, then the moral for Republican Party leaders is simple. Ignore or debunk the dramatic stories and do not read too much into what happened with Eric Cantor. Some incumbents are always going to lose. Beyond the district or state involved, it doesn't mean anything much – unless everyone thinks it does.