



Republicans Are Deferring To Tea Party Funders And Activists

Vanessa Williamson, Brookings Institution

That Eric Cantor, leader of many ultraconservative House GOP maneuvers to block compromises with President Barack Obama, ended up losing his recent Virginia primary contest to an even more hardline political newcomer, David Brat, shows just how completely the ideological Tea has infused the Republican Party. By now, in fact, any discussion of which Republicans are "Tea Party" and which are not is a purely semantic game. But regardless of how the DC-focused political media characterize the latest outcomes, we need to keep the bigger picture in mind – a picture in which elite and grassroots Tea Party forces have pushed an already extremely conservative Republican Party further to the right since 2008.

The Republicans' swerve to the far right is a recipe for local victories but national defeats. Eventually, this version of the Republican Party will discover it cannot attract majorities in national or many state-wide general elections. But much harm can happen in the meantime. Wins in conservative strongholds have been enough for ultra-right Republicans to prevent or delay action on many of the major issues facing our country. For the foreseeable future, we can expect more of the same – pressures for the GOP to move right from above and below.

At the elite level of the Tea Party field of forces pushing on the GOP, the investments made by wealthy conservative ideologues are continuing to pay dividends. Since the 1970s, conservative elites have invested heavily in strengthening right-wing ideology via think tanks like the Heritage Foundation and Cato Institute, and also by reshaping parts of academia. Observers have stressed that Brat's challenge to Cantor did not have immediate election funding from Tea Party political action committees. But despite his campaign rhetoric excoriating Cantor's ties to investments bankers, Professor David Brat's career has been furthered by the corporate ideological right. His research and pedagogical efforts have been supported by the Branch Banking and Trust Corporation, one of the largest financial holding companies in the United States, which has spent millions to advance libertarianism in many universities. This corporation's money comes to professors and campuses with strict stipulations, like the requirement that faculty not only teach Ayn Rand but have "a positive attitude" toward that philosophy, as their agreement with Western Carolina University insisted.

Brat's funder is a lesser-known member of a small club of ultra-conservative donors – a club whose most prominent members include the Scaife and Olin families and, of course, the Koch brothers. Such sources of largesse for far-right advocates, policymakers, and academics are not waning, and as money flows from the wealthy ideological extremists there is no true countervailing force within the Republican Party donor class. Moderation is not fashionable in high-roller GOP circles these days.

Nor is there reason to expect any tide of moderation from below, even as the Obama presidency draws to an end. At the local level, grassroots Tea Partiers and other conservatives are impressive organizers, and will likely continue to wield leverage against complacent incumbents. Finally, the conservative media – including Laura Ingraham, the conservative radio star who played a major role in Brat's primary victory – will still be working to inflame and frighten the older white GOP conservative voters who turn out faithfully to vote and lobby.

The conservative base is especially likely to maintain its fervor if Democrats manage to win the White House again in 2016. Grassroots conservatives, so angered by the Obama presidency, will not calm down under a different Democratic president. One need only look at the level of anger stoked against Hillary Clinton in the 1990s to predict the Republican playbook should she run for president and be elected.

Yet the GOP's current strategy will make general-election victories difficult in constituencies where conservatives are not already the majority of voters. Polls have repeatedly shown that the Tea Party-style of Republicanism is unappealing to the average American – and according to the latest *New York Times*/CBS poll,

the general unpopularity of the Tea Party now stands at about 80%, with many non-Tea Party identified Republican voters joining independents and Democrats in expressing displeasure. Even so, rising unpopularity for the Tea Party does not ensure the Republican Party will move to the middle. In the American political system, power is very imperfectly proportional to votes, particularly when the top policy goals of parties or major factions can be achieved through inaction. On issues from immigration to climate change to economic inequality, gridlock suits the most active interests in and around the contemporary Republican Party just fine.

In the longer term, the Republican electoral calculus may change. Parties have been known to alter and even completely switch their positions in remarkably short periods of time. That may take a while for the Republican Party of the early 21st century, but it is worth remembering that the Grand Old Party was once the home of progressives on race and on women's rights. Looking forward, there may come a time for GOP realignment again, as the unevenly distributed costs of economic inequality and climate change are ever more strongly felt. In coming years, for example, drought-stricken farmers and flooded coastal communities will require government assistance to deal with the consequences of global warming, as well as its causes. Americans will be looking for leaders from both parties who can do better than argue amongst themselves while the water is rising.