

US House Republican leader defeated in primary election

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12 June 2014

Majority Leader Eric Cantor, the number two Republican in the US House of Representatives, was defeated Tuesday in the Republican primary election for the Seventh Congressional District in Virginia. Challenger David Brat, a local college professor, outpolled Cantor by 36,120 to 28,902, a margin of 11 percent. The day after the vote, Cantor announced he would step down as House majority leader next month.

Cantor's defeat was described as "shocking" and "stunning" by media pundits and both Republicans and Democrats on Capitol Hill, not only because Cantor's campaign claimed to be well ahead in pre-election polling, but because of his huge fundraising edge. Cantor outraised Brat by \$5.7 million to \$206,000, a margin of better than 25-1. There is no recent precedent for such a financial underdog to win a US election.

Brat attacked Cantor consistently from the right, particularly on the issue of immigration, where Cantor, while adhering to the overall Republican policy of demonizing "illegal aliens," had indicated some sympathy for efforts to give legal status to immigrants brought here as small children.

A professor of economics at Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, Virginia, Brat is the author of a tome titled *An Analysis of the Moral Foundations in Ayn Rand*. He sought to combine extreme individualism and anti-immigrant racism with populist sallies against Wall Street, which provided much of Cantor's financial support.

Emphasizing his differences with Cantor on immigration, Brat said, "It's the most symbolic issue that captures the difference between myself and Eric Cantor in this race but it also captures the fissures between Main Street and Wall Street." Brat went out of his way to denounce the US Chamber of Commerce, which contributed heavily to Cantor's campaign,

declaring, "They want cheap labor, and that's going to lower wages for everybody else."

In response to a question from the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* newspaper, Brat blamed immigrants for the dismal conditions facing millions of American workers. "With 50 million Americans in their working-years unemployed, the last thing we should do is provide amnesty or any form of work authorization to illegal immigrants," he wrote. "Yet, Eric Cantor believes that we need to import more low-wage foreign workers at the expense of lower wages and fewer jobs for Virginia families... A vote for Eric Cantor is a vote for open borders and corporate handouts."

While Brat had the support of ultra-right talk radio hosts Laura Ingraham and Mark Levin, the Tea Party groups chose not to back him actively, and corporate-backed lobbies such as the Club for Growth, which have financed many ultra-right primary challengers to incumbent Republicans, did not contribute to his campaign, regarding Cantor as unbeatable in a district he has held for seven terms.

Above all, the outcome of the primary demonstrates the extremely narrow base of popular support on which all of American bourgeois politics and both major political parties rest. Neither the Republicans nor the Democrats have the active support of broad sections of the population, which is increasingly alienated from and hostile to the entire political establishment. Both parties speak for a highly privileged corporate-financial aristocracy and upper-middle class.

The supposed popular status of their leading representatives is largely media-generated and bears little relationship to real social support in the general population. That a "mover and shaker" in Congress and US politics more generally such as Cantor is toppled by a virtual unknown in an election involving a relative

handful of voters testifies to the undemocratic character of the political system and its distance from the real aspirations and views of the vast majority of the people.

For the past four years, since the Republican victory in the 2010 congressional elections, Cantor has been built up by the media as a political titan, a man of powerful national influence.

According to the media presentation, the majority leader single-handedly blocked a budget deal negotiated between House Speaker John Boehner and President Obama in August 2011, forcing a budget showdown that led to a downgrading of the US government's debt rating. After opposing similar debt deals in 2012, he reversed course in the fall of 2013 and supported the agreement that ended the partial shutdown of the federal government. At each point, Cantor's actions were presented as the expression of significant changes in public opinion.

In the end, however, he was exposed as a political cipher. Cantor became the first House leader in history to lose a party primary. He proved unable to win renomination in his own party, in a district whose boundaries were tailored to guarantee a Republican victory and with an enormous financial advantage over his opponent.

If anything, the primary vote suggests mass indifference and hostility to the big business politicians in Washington. The voter turnout was higher than in previous Republican primaries for that seat, up 17,000 from Cantor's last contest, but still extremely low.

In the 2012 general election, nearly 400,000 people went to the polls in the Seventh Congressional District, about six times the number who participated in Tuesday's primary. Cantor's vote total was 8,500 lower than in his previous primary victory, in 2012, a decline of 23 percent. If he had simply maintained his vote from 2012, he would have prevailed narrowly in Tuesday's contest.

Brat struck a populist pose, branding Cantor a creature of the political establishment, while greatly exaggerating the actual policy differences between them, which were minimal.

According to one report, Cantor was backed by 377 political action committees, among them the American Chemistry Council (which donated \$300,000, more than Brat's entire campaign cost), the American College of Radiology, the National Rifle Association,

and the National Association of Realtors. Four of his top five campaign contributors were Wall Street firms: Blackstone Group, Scoggin Capital Management, Goldman Sachs and Altria Group.

A graduate of Hope College, a conservative religious school in western Michigan, Brat received a master's degree from Princeton Theological Seminary. He described his victory as a "miracle," declaring that "God acted through people." He told Fox News that voters chose him in part because of his "faith in God."

The Seventh Congressional District of Virginia, based on the northern suburbs of Richmond, the state capital, is overwhelmingly Protestant, with many large fundamentalist churches. The population skews toward the upper-middle class, with a median family income of \$64,751, higher than for any other district in the state outside the affluent Northern Virginia suburbs of Washington, DC. The median family income is more than twice that of the impoverished Ninth District (Appalachian southwest Virginia) and Third District (inner-city Richmond and Hampton Roads). The poverty rate is 5.3 percent, one third of the US average.



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