

Cantor's fall and the Tea Party dialectic

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The swift and unexpected political demise of House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R., Va.) at the hands of his own party's primary electorate last night has already called forth endless analysis. Beaten by an economics professor who ran on a shoestring and whose major source of institutional support came from talk radio hosts, Cantor has been charged variously with focusing too much on preparing to be the next House speaker, with running an ineffective campaign that spent no money on voter contact but \$200,000 on steakhouses, with being too soft on immigrants (Cantor proposed a path to legal status for immigrants brought into the country illegally as children), and with being too negative and unfair in his campaign ads. There is even speculation that Cantor was defeated by Democrats voting in Virginia's open primary.

Whatever the mix of factors, the primary defeat of a House majority leader—something that has apparently never happened in the 115-year history of that office—indicates a politician, and a party, caught sleeping by a restless electorate.

And there is a special irony in Cantor losing to a challenger widely identified with the Tea Party. Cantor's rise to the leadership coincided with the rise of the Tea Party itself, and in those long-ago days of the Democratic House majority he pioneered the strategy of uniform and unyielding opposition to President Obama's legislative agenda. Cantor brought Tea Party groups to the Capitol to protest the passage of the Affordable Care Act in 2010, and when Republicans took over the majority he was a magnet for conservative discontent with Speaker John Boehner.

It is from this position as Boehner's rival and heir apparent that Cantor made his most consequential intervention in the political battles of our day. In 2011, when Obama decided—foolishly, his own advisors later realized—to negotiate with House Republicans over policy changes to accompany an otherwise routine increase in the nation's borrowing authority, he and Boehner came close to reaching an agreement. Taxes would go up on very high earners, and in exchange for this Republican

concession, Obama would agree to cuts to retirement programs—a gradual reduction in Social Security benefits and/or raising the age for Medicare eligibility.

Obama thought such a “grand bargain” would burnish his deficit-cutting, bipartisan-accomplishing credentials ahead of his re-election campaign. Boehner knew he was being offered a substantively good deal, one weighted heavily toward reductions in the kind of safety-net spending he and his party were very eager to cut. The tax increases could just be undone by a President Romney in 2013.

Enter Eric Cantor, then the Tea Party point man in House leadership. Through a nervy combination of private and public pressure, Cantor used his status as the conservative threat to Boehner’s speakership to scuttle the bargain. There would be no compromise on taxes, and thus no cuts to retirement programs.

The irony is that Cantor’s tactic of total opposition handed Obama a clear substantive victory. After the president's re-election, most of the tax increases he’d sought ended up taking effect anyway, and Social Security and Medicare were protected from steep (and politically deadly) cuts. It was a totally unearned victory—Obama seems to share his party leadership’s odd hostility to the most successful programs in its history—but it has largely defined the politics of the years that followed.

And now Cantor, the accidental savior of American retirement, has been defeated by a candidate promising a still-harder line on immigration and fiscal policy. The pretense that immigration reform had a chance in this Congress or the next has finally been abandoned. Cantor’s attempt to straddle the demands of his party’s base and the demands of a wider, more diverse general electorate failed.

But in that failure, history seems to be repeating itself. By bringing Republican leaders to heel on immigration, the Tea Party is handing a major built-in advantage to the Democrats’ 2016 nominee. The practical consequences for immigrant communities will be dire for the foreseeable future. But Obama’s policy of aggressive detention and deportation, used as a cruel pledge of good faith toward bipartisan reform efforts, now has no political purpose. And once again the GOP seems bound to be identified with a hard-line immigration policy and a shrinking demographic base.

This has been the Tea Party's dialectic since the beginning: its electoral successes and its uncompromising positions give Democrats victories they don’t even have to

work for. Eric Cantor ends his political career as an object of ridicule, Inspector Clouseau as written by Thomas Hardy. But like Boehner, Cantor seems to have understood that you can't compete without the possibility that the other team will score some points. Either his former friends will take the same risks he ultimately did, or they will freeze American politics in a never-ending 2012.