

Slingshot

The Defeat of Eric Cantor



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The Cantor Case in Context

“Cantor may have not known or cared, but in his quest for national power he had burned one too many bridges back home.”

—Jeff Singer, *Daily Kos*¹

On June 10, 2014, Eric Cantor was beaten in the Republican primary for the Seventh Congressional District in Virginia. Lots of politicians lose primaries. But Cantor was the majority leader of the U.S. House of Representatives. He was a young, active, well-funded incumbent. No majority leader had lost reelection or renomination since the position was created in 1899. It was a historic defeat.

The defeat of Rep. Eric Cantor for renomination by economics professor David Brat defied the conventional assumptions of American politics. An incumbent lost. An incumbent lost a primary. The floor leader and architect of a durable GOP majority was ousted in his own primary. And it happened in a safe district that had been drawn to keep the incumbent in power for at least the next 10 years. Cantor’s defeat was foreseen by no one and was subsequently explained by everyone.

As a case, the primary in Virginia’s Seventh is an example of “the cautionary tale,” an illustration of how a good thing goes bad in politics. As such, it attracted the excessive use of hyperbole and analogy that dominates journalistic and pundit “studies” of elections. It tells us about how the media and new class of immediacy analysts engage an event and generate explanations for the public in the short term, when the glare of attention is most bright. The cautionary tale is nothing new in the human experience. We recount our history and mythology in epic tales. Great leaders emerge. Empires fall; others rise. There are villains and heroes. Giants are slain by the most humble of opponents, and underdogs prevail in the face of long odds. When powerful leaders fall, people seek metaphors and analogies to lend context to events that unfold before their own eyes. The fall of Eric Cantor pulls part and parcel from all of these—the vanquishing of the king in waiting, felled by his arrogance; the political giant felled by the slingshot stone of an insignificant and unarmored David; the man denied because he misjudged political circumstances and thus fell on the wrong side of history and its forces.

JOURNALISTS VERSUS POLITICAL SCIENTISTS

Traditional journalists and the instant pundits of new age media engaged in a variety of speculative theories of why Cantor lost. Their speculations were often the typical “single-factor” explanations that are popular in journalistic circles, the effort to boil an unusual outcome down to a pithy 15-second cable news utterance or a 300-word Internet posting or a 140-character tweet. Eric Cantor was politically dead, and inquiries into how he died quickly concluded. Politics and journalists moved on to other primaries, other stories. For political scientists and political operators, the question of *why* a rich, powerful, well-heeled political leader fell remains to be answered.

Richard Fenno Jr. engaged the difference between journalists and political scientists regarding how they access a political story. In his book *Watching Politicians*, Fenno observes that journalists have inherently different goals than political scientists when they observe and write about politics. The journalist is often concerned with the immediacy of the story, of the topic as it appears on the surface. Journalists are there to test the candidate, to test the environment, and to not only inform it but also illuminate and shape public choices. There is the need to be first, to command the attention of the public. Journalists recount and explain the particular case before them, or, in the case of the punditry, try to explain an outcome and also derive from it broader lessons. Those efforts too might be accompanied by a desire to shape the choices of the broader public.

In contrast, political science approaches problems like Cantor’s defeat differently. American political science is concerned with the application of systematic methods to improve our understanding of democratic politics. Often this involves using large numbers of cases to explain politics. We survey the public or collect information on many elections or examine numerous decisions to try to determine the relationship between explanations and outcomes. But American political science also finds value in the illustrative case study. It is possible to drill into a case and find evidence that is representative of things that are generally true or to build theories for later testing with additional data. We can take data from the case and then see whether the data behaves as expected in similar cases. American political science places different explanations for an outcome into competition to see which offers the most leverage on the problem. Often those competing explanations to be tested are advanced by journalists, pundits, politicians, and the lay public. The political scientist is there to understand, to explain what is happening or what has happened in order to identify and craft more generalizable and testable propositions of politics.

The defeat of Cantor presents an opportunity to apply political science tools to a rare event in order to illustrate important aspects of American politics. Political science can test competing explanations and home in on both the indicators

and explanations of the Cantor loss as well as its representativeness of contemporary politics. In this book, we interrogate the Cantor case in the context of other cases and data to see how typical or unusual it is. In doing so, we shed light on the state of American politics in the middle of the second decade of the second millennium.

PLACING CANTOR'S DEFEAT INTO CONTEXT

To understand the Cantor loss, we need to ascertain whether the case is exceptional. Most often, political science seeks more data through multiple cases in order to create general models of politics. In this instance, we confront a different type of question—is the Cantor defeat unusual, or is it typical of incumbent defeats within their own parties. If the latter, then existing theories of politics are likely sufficient to understand what happened. If the former, however, then extant theories may be revealed to be insufficient, and the Cantor case can help us to refine them.

Before getting too much further into the Cantor story, however, it is necessary to provide some background information about candidate selection in general and how the nominating process works in Virginia more specifically.

Nominating Candidates

The specific structure of a state's candidate selection system determines in part the nature of the primary electorate. The combination of institutional constraints and the makeup of the primary constituency can have significant effects on who is selected as a party's nominee for the general election. In general, there are three types of nominating processes: caucuses, which permit small groups of party elites to select the party's candidate; open primaries, in which any registered voter may participate and cast a vote for his or her preferred candidate; and closed primaries, in which only members of a party may cast ballots to determine that party's nominee. Modifications to the open primary abound as well; for example, blanket primaries put all candidates for office on a single ballot regardless of party affiliation, while some primaries that would be otherwise closed allow for same-day party registration so that the voter may ultimately select whichever partisan ballot he or she prefers on that day.

It is well documented that voters who participate in the nomination phase of a multistage election are different from general election voters, but the particular form of nominating process adopted by a state also has implications for the numbers and types of voters who participate in the nominating of party candidates. Voter turnout is highly variable in primary elections. The extant literature on primary elections suggests that voter turnout in these contests is affected by perceptions of the competitiveness, with more voters going to the polls when they perceive the election to matter or when one party is so dominant in a county

or state that voters recognize the primary as their only opportunity to affect the election outcome.

In circumstances in which the primary election may be the only opportunity to affect the result of the general election, crossover voting may occur and may affect turnout rates. Research demonstrates that voters from the nondominant party may desire to nominate a candidate closer to their preferred ideological or partisan position, recognizing that the candidate selected in the dominant party's primary will likely be the winner of the general election contest. As one study of California's blanket primary notes to the extent that voters cross over, "In general it seems that the decision to cross over in primary elections is largely motivated by sincere and not sophisticated motivations."² That is not to say that there are not partisans from the out party that are interested in sabotaging the other party's nominating contest, but in general, the literature on crossover voting has concluded that such calculated behavior is unlikely to have a significant impact on election results. As political scientists Elisabeth Gerber and Rebecca Morton note, "While both strategic and sincere crossover voting are possible in these very open primary systems, sincere crossover by moderate voters dominates and leads to the election of moderate candidates from both parties."³

Who turns out may also be affected by the particular arrangements of the nominating phase. Caucus participants tend to be highly motivated and engaged partisans, and caucuses produce the most ideological candidates.⁴ Open primaries are expected to produce the most moderate candidates, owing to their broad and inclusive nature. Crossover voting by partisans from the other party is also possible and most likely in open primary systems. By comparison, closed primaries tend to produce more ideological candidates since the voters selecting them are themselves likely to be more ideological.⁵ Furthermore, who votes in primaries is often determined by candidate-specific factors. As Fenno noted nearly four decades ago, since party labels are neutralized in most primary elections, primary election voters tend to have a deeper attachment to the specific candidates in the race than do general election voters, who may be motivated simply by partisan considerations. As political scientist Barry Burden notes, "Because primary voters are often partisan diehards who care a great deal about policy positions, they prefer candidates with noncentrist positions."⁶

The Rules of the Game in Virginia

The Commonwealth of Virginia provides few rules for political parties with regard to nominating their candidates for public office. Section 24.2-509 of the Virginia Code makes party leaders responsible for determining how to select their nominees for office.⁷ This means that from election to election, the method of selecting the party's candidate may vary. Contributing to the parties' indecision

about how best to nominate candidates is the fact that Virginia does not register voters by party. As a result, the incentives for the state and local parties to hold nominating caucuses are increased because when a party does hold a primary election, any registered voter in the relevant jurisdiction may participate. At the same time, caucuses are expensive and must be paid for by the party itself, whereas the party does not pay to nominate its candidate through state-run primary elections; this argues against caucuses when party coffers are running low or when the party's nominee is a foregone conclusion. Complicating matters further, when only one candidate expresses a desire to run for office, the party may simply nominate this person through whatever internal means it wishes, such as during the party's own convention or by a vote of the central committee for the relevant jurisdiction.

Even within the same election, the process to nominate a statewide candidate may vary from the process to nominate a local candidate. And since the two major parties in Virginia make decisions about the candidate selection process independently, they frequently choose different selection methods, such as one party but not both will hold a primary to select a candidate. The fact that the parties often use different procedures in the same election cycle to select their candidates can be confusing for voters in Virginia, who sometimes are called upon to participate in primary elections but often are not.

The result is that Virginia selects its candidates in a hodgepodge of caucuses and primaries. In 2005, for example, Republicans nominated Jerry Kilgore for the 2005 gubernatorial election via primary. In 2009, the Democrats held a primary election to allow voters to select their preferred candidate from the three who had filed to run. But that same year, Republicans nominated Bob McDonnell as their candidate during their convention; McDonnell had been the only Republican to file for the office. In 2013, Virginia Republicans again opted to use a convention to nominate the then attorney general Ken Cuccinelli over the then lieutenant governor Bill Bolling. Bolling likely would have won the nomination had a primary election been used to select the party's candidate, but conservatives packed the party meeting where the nominating procedure was decided. The choice of the convention by the party leadership in 2012 was itself widely perceived as a victory for Cuccinelli, the more conservative candidate in the race, and indeed the convention almost certainly assured his nomination.⁸ Cuccinelli's nomination over Bolling, who was favored by establishment partisans, contributed to the efforts by establishment Republicans to keep conservatives from influencing the outcome of local nominating contests during spring 2014. These establishment efforts, led by Cantor supporters and campaign staffers, galvanized conservatives against Cantor.

Beyond the varied methods used to nominate candidates, Virginia's lack of party registration has been a perennial issue, particularly for the state's

Republicans. Since the mid-1990s, the state's Republican Party has from time to time required voters in Republican primaries to pledge their support to the Republican candidate in the subsequent general election. These highly controversial "loyalty oaths" have been widely panned whenever they have been proposed or implemented, but their use speaks to the desire of the state parties, particularly the Republican Party, to find workarounds to the commonwealth's open primary system. In 2012, Republican members of the Virginia state legislature began introducing bills to allow voters to register by party and to restrict voting in primary contests to those who share the party label; to date, none has been successful. Those who favor party registration claim that they are certain that crossover voting in Virginia is widespread, although supporters of measures to register voters by party or to close Virginia's open primaries have relied primarily on anecdotal evidence to support their claims. Nevertheless, in recent years Virginia's open primaries have provided many commonwealth voters from the nondominant party with their only real opportunity to affect election outcomes, particularly in local elections, since the number of uncontested seats in general elections to the Virginia state legislature has been high. On average, nearly half of the seats in the Virginia General Assembly have gone uncontested since 1999.⁹

Understanding Virginia's election rules is important for understanding the 2014 Seventh District Republican primary election. The Seventh District Central Committee could have elected to hold a convention or nonprimary nominating process, but it did not. In December 2013, the party notified the State Board of Elections that it would nominate its candidate in a primary. Within a few weeks, Brat formally announced and launched his campaign.

INCUMBENT DEFEATS

Cantor's loss is not explainable simply as the consequence of Virginia's unusual nominating rules—although as we will discuss in Chapter 2, the rules of the game affected party elites' decisions internally and therefore were at least a contributing factor to Cantor's defeat. Many incumbent members of Congress face challenges in their quests to be reelected, regardless of what process ultimately is used to nominate a candidate. But we would be remiss if we did not point out that incumbent defeats are rare. Incumbency rates in Congress have been 90 percent or better for decades, which suggests that regardless of the myriad ways that candidates can be selected, when an incumbent runs, he or she is very nearly always the nominee and the winner of the general election. But from time to time, incumbents do lose elections for reasons that have been well documented: changes in district boundaries, partisan "waves," scandals, and the like.

As a result, we turn now to looking at primary losses by incumbents generally to see whether we might gain some purchase on Cantor's loss specifically.

Since 1992, there have been only 59 defeats of incumbents in general primaries for the U.S. House of Representatives, excluding contests where redistricting forced incumbents together in the same primary. The majority of incumbent defeats in primaries since 1992 have affected Democrats, who make up 35 of the 59 incumbent losses. On the GOP side, there have been 24 incumbent defeats.

Starting with the 2002 primary elections, 25 incumbents have lost renomination for the U.S. House. We identify them in Table 1.1, which demonstrates that a slight majority of incumbents who lost renomination—13 of 25—were Republicans; however, since the slight majority of lawmakers since 2002 are also Republicans, this is not out of line.

As we consider the defeat of Eric Cantor and attempt to place it in its proper context, it becomes clear that the factors that typically lead to incumbent defeats

TABLE 1.1

Incumbent primary defeats, excluding redistricting matchups, 1992–2014

Year	Republican defeats	Democratic defeats	Total primary defeats
1992	5	12	17
1994	1	3	4
1996	1	1	2
1998	1	0	1
2000	0	2	2
2002	0	3	3
2004	0	2	2
2006	1	1	2
2008	3	1	4
2010	2	2	4
2012	6	7	13
2014	4	1	5
TOTAL	24	35	59

Source: Data compiled by authors.

largely are not present in the Cantor case. Redistricting, party identification, wave elections, scandal, advanced age, and the like, do not play significant roles in Cantor's loss, and in fact, Cantor lost in spite of electoral conditions that should have favored both his renomination and his reelection. We briefly address each of these in the following paragraphs.

Post-Redistricting Loss

According to elections scholar Robert Boatright in *Congressional Primary Elections*, most incumbent primary defeats come in cycles immediately after redistricting. The most recent redistricting cycle of 2011 demonstrates this; there were a large number of incumbent defeats in 2012. But of the 13 incumbents who were bested, eight lost to other incumbents of the same party who were redistricted into competition with one another, leaving just five incumbents defeated by actual challengers. We lay aside incumbent-versus-incumbent primaries in our analysis. By definition, someone will lose, and therefore the conditions for a true incumbent upset are not met, as neither is bested by a traditional challenger.

We explore the redistricting impacts on Cantor's Seventh District in Chapter 1 and Chapter 5, but suffice it to say here that his primary loss came two years after redistricting and did not involve an incumbent-versus-incumbent pairing, so his defeat is not a direct consequence of redistricting. But as we will show later, redistricting contributed to one of the factors that led to his eventual defeat, a rightward shift in the aggregate ideological makeup of the Seventh District.

Waves, Parties, and Incumbents

Cantor's defeat was also not a consequence of the year. When incumbents lose, it is often part of a partisan wave that sweeps aside people in general elections. The largest incumbent defeat waves of the past half century have ranged from 50 in 1974 (a Democratic wave) to 58 in 2010 (a Republican wave). But party does not explain incumbent vulnerability particularly well, if at all, since 2002. Of the 25 incumbent defeats in primaries since 2002, 13 were of Republicans, 12 of Democrats. Moreover, the 2014 congressional midterm elections benefitted Republicans generally. The party increased its majority in the U.S. House of Representatives, recaptured the U.S. Senate, and won three new governorships. There is no macro- or microlevel reason to believe that party identification explains Cantor's loss.

A close analysis of 2014 incumbent defeats reveals some interesting patterns. The 2014 elections claimed 18 incumbents in total. Five lost in the primaries; of these, four were Republicans. Of the four Republicans defeated, three were in Louisiana, Texas, and Virginia. Of the 13 incumbent general election losses, just two were by Republicans. Republican incumbents were more likely to lose within

their party than outside and in the South rather than outside the South. Republicans generally lost primaries, and Democrats generally lost general elections, but losses in general were rare. Of the dozen Democrats defeated, only one—John Tierney in Massachusetts—lost his primary. The 11 Democrats who fell in the general election were largely outside the South. Democratic incumbents John Barrow (GA), Joe Garcia (FL), and Pete Gallego (TX) lost general elections in the South. Most of the Democratic losses were in the Midwest and Northeast, where Democrats have been generally dominant since 1992.

The difference in the pattern of incumbent losses between Republicans (who lost primaries in the South) and Democrats (who lost general elections in non-southern states) provides a hint at one of the factors affecting Cantor's loss—the willingness of Republicans to mount challenges to their own in primary elections since 2010; but as we will see, the presence of a conservative challenger to Eric Cantor is just one of the factors contributing to his defeat. On the Democratic side, seven of the 12 defeated incumbents were either African American or Hispanic, suggesting that race played a role in their defeats. One of these incumbents, Rep. Cynthia McKinney of Georgia, was defeated twice for renomination in four years.

Southern Volatility

Approximately 30 percent of all U.S. House seats are in the 11-state South. However, of the incumbent defeats since 2002, just over half (13) were in the South. At first glance, this might suggest greater volatility in the South than in other areas; if so, Cantor's loss might simply be part of a broader pattern of southern instability.

Indeed, the evidence demonstrates that incumbent losses in the South do seem to fit certain patterns. In the elections following the 2001 decennial redistricting, it was mostly Democrats in the South that lost their seats; in contrast, since the 2011 redistricting, it has largely been Republicans who have lost their seats. To some extent, then, Cantor's loss—coming, as it did, alongside the losses of several other southern Republican colleagues—might simply be the result of increasingly restive constituencies in the South. At the same time, however, many of the recent incumbent losses in the South can be explained by idiosyncratic factors: Rep. Parker Griffith was a Democratic party switcher in Alabama who lost his first bid at renomination as a Republican. The only non-Hispanic white Democrat to be defeated, Rep. Chris Bell (TX), sought renomination in a Houston district that was substantially altered by a mid-decade redistricting in 2003. Although Cantor's loss fits this southern bias pattern in that he is a Republican who lost a post-2011 primary that took place in the South, it is impossible to contextualize it within other Republican losses in the South because, as we have

shown, there is no typical southern loss in the GOP. Certainly the evidence does not suggest that Cantor's loss resulted from the slightly reduced southern incumbency rate overall.

Quality Challengers

One indication of the vulnerability of an incumbent is quality of the competition the incumbent faces. As the political science literature on candidate emergence demonstrates, the best candidates for Congress are state legislators or other state and local elected officials. They have run successful campaigns before, and they understand the legislator's job. They have a base of support and organization in the congressional district because they represented part of it as a state or local official. They bring fund-raising abilities and an existing financial network. And when they run for open seats or as challengers to incumbents, they do better than all other nonincumbent candidates.

Two other potentially good types of candidates are lawyers and people who previously ran for a congressional office or other major office. Lawyers have long been overrepresented in elective office. This is in part because legal training provides avenues for political advancement that may not be available to candidates without such training. Lawyers, for example, qualify to work in posts within legislative assemblies or in the legal system, such as in prosecutorial or judicial roles, which may be important stepping-stones to running for office.¹⁰ Lawyers may also have important contacts within bar associations and other professional organizations that provide access to campaign funds. In addition, these candidates also bring public speaking abilities and networks of connections to their candidacies, as do candidates with prior experience running and winning elective office.

Then there are the amateurs. These are the folks that Canon described as the "actors, athletes, and astronauts" who bring a form of celebrity or notoriety outside the political realm through experiences that are generally popular in the public.¹¹

Table 1.2 lists the 25 incumbent primary challengers who bested incumbents from 2002 to 2014. Of these challengers, 12 were lawyers, 14 had held prior elective office, and four had sought office before. A total of 18 of the 25 had at least one of these experiences. Of the remaining seven, one had been a football player at the major university in the state, and three were recent military veterans.

Just three of the challengers in Table 1.2 lacked any of the experiences or characteristics that would make them quality challengers by the standards of the literature on congressional elections, and David Brat was one of them. Brat, an economics professor at a selective liberal arts college in the Seventh District, had never run a campaign and had little more than volunteer experience working in

TABLE 1.2
Characteristics of successful primary challengers to incumbents, 2002-2014

Year	State	District	Incumbent	Challenger	Multiple primary challengers	Challenger is officeholder	Challenger ran before	Challenger is lawyer	Other challenger distinctiveness
2002	AL	7	Hilliard (D)	Davis	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	
2002	CA	18	Condit (D)	Cardoza	Yes	Yes	No	No	
2002	GA	4	McKinney (D)	Majette	No	Yes	No	Yes	
2004	TX	9	Bell (D)	Green	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	
2004	TX	28	Rodriguez (D)	Cuellar	No	Yes	No	Yes	
2006	GA	4	McKinney (D)	Johnson	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	
2006	MI	7	Schwarz (R)	Walberg	No	Yes	Yes	No	
2008	TN	1	Davis (R)	Roe	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
2008	UT	3	Cannon (R)	Chaffetz	No	No	No	No	BYU Football
2008	MD	1	Gilchrist (R)	Harris	Yes	Yes	No	No	
2008	MD	4	Wynn (D)	Edwards	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	
2010	MI	13	Kilpatrick (D)	Clark	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	
2010	WV	3	Mollohan (D)	Oliverio	No	Yes	No	No	
2010	AL	5	Griffith (R)	Brooks	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	

(Continued)

TABLE 1.2
(Continued)

Year	State	District	Incumbent	Challenger	Multiple primary challengers	Challenger is officeholder	Challenger ran before	Challenger is lawyer	Other challenger distinctiveness
2010	SC	4	Inglis (R)	Gowdy	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	
2012	PA	17	Holden (D)	Cartwright	No	No	No	Yes	
2012	TX	16	Reyes (D)	O'Rourke	Yes	Yes	No	No	
2012	OH	2	Schmidt (R)	Wenstrup	Yes	No	No	No	Iraq Veteran
2012	OK	1	Sullivan (R)	Bridenstine	No	No	No	No	Naval Aviator
2012	FL	3	Stearns (R)	Yoho	Yes	No	No	No	
2014	MA	6	Tierney (D)	Moulton	Yes	No	No	No	Iraq Veteran
2014	VA	7	Cantor (R)	Brat	No	No	No	No	Professor
2014	TX	4	Hall (R)	Ratcliffe	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	
2014	MI	11	Bentivolio (R)	Trott	No	No	No	Yes	
2014	LA	5	McAllister (R)	Abraham	Yes	No	No	No	

Source: Compiled by authors.

politics. He was not, by any measure, a quality challenger—save, of course, for the fact that he ended up winning.

Nomination Format

One set of pundit explanations for Cantor's loss homed in on the outcome of a relatively low-turnout June primary in Virginia as representative of a broad based national trend. It was argued in the aftermath of Cantor's loss that open primary formats are more likely to lead to incumbent primary defeats due to low voter turnout rates and the lack of control over the composition of the electorate by the party. Presumably, independents and other partisans can engage in strategic behavior and cross over to cause mischief in the other party's primary. But evidence of such strategic voting is hard to find. Academic studies that have explored whether open primaries lead to greater electoral volatility have generally concluded that they do not.¹²

Further, our examination in Table 1.3 of the impact of each nomination method on incumbent success during the twenty-first century shows no real pattern. Incumbents have lost across every nomination format. Ten incumbents lost in open primaries—those primary contests where voters can choose to vote in the either party's primary. The number of partisan incumbents defeated in open primaries since 2000 includes five Republicans and five Democrats. Nine incumbents lost in closed primaries—five Republicans, four Democrats. A closed primary is a primary contest in which voters may vote only in the primary election for the party with which they are registered. Four incumbents have lost "modified open" primaries in which the parties open up their primaries to nonpartisans (e.g., those voters claiming to be independents)—three Democrats, one Republican. One incumbent lost in a party-nominating convention. And one was shut out of the runoff in Louisiana's nonpartisan blanket primary system in which all candidates for office regardless of party were placed on the same ballot, which all voters received. Although the format of the nomination process undoubtedly contributes to campaign strategies and election outcomes, it is clear that the type of nominating contest itself is not a sufficient predictor of incumbent success.

Scandal

Where there is politics, there is money and power. And near money and power one can often find scandal, real or invented. Of the incumbents bested in primaries, eight were involved in a scandal or controversy. Earl Hilliard (D-AL) and Cynthia McKinney (D-GA) were both bested in 2002 in part due to controversial statements made about September 11, 2001, and the Israel lobby. McKinney later returned to Congress in 2006 and was again defeated after a series of high-profile

TABLE 1.3
The circumstances of successful primary challengers to incumbents, 2002–2014

Year	State	District	Incumbent	Challenger	Seniority (years)	Nomination system	Incumbent age	Challenger age	Minority incumbent?
2002	AL	7	Hilliard (D)	Davis	10	Open	60	35	African American
2002	CA	18	Condit (D)	Cardoza	13	Modified	54	43	
2002	GA	4	McKinney (D)	Majette	10	Open	47	47	African American
2004	TX	9	Bell (D)	Green	2	Open	45	57	
2004	TX	28	Rodriguez (D)	Cuellar	8	Open	58	49	Hispanic
2006	GA	4	McKinney (D)	Johnson	2	Open	51	52	African American
2006	MI	7	Schwarz (R)	Walberg	2	Closed	69	55	
2008	TN	1	Davis (R)	Roe	2	Open	49	63	
2008	UT	3	Cannon (R)	Chaffetz	12	Convention	58	41	
2008	MD	1	Gilchrist (R)	Harris	18	Modified	62	51	
2008	MD	4	Wynn (D)	Edwards	16	Modified	57	50	African American
2010	MI	13	Kilpatrick (D)	Clark	14	Closed	65	53	African American

2010	WV	3	Mollohan (D)	Oliverio	28	Closed	67	47
2010	AL	5	Griffith (R)	Brooks	2	Open	68	54
2010	SC	4	Ing'lis(R)	Gowdy	18	Open	51	46
2012	PA	17	Holden (D)	Cartwright	10	Closed	55	51
2012	TX	16	Reyes (D)	O'Rourke	4	Open	68	40
2012	OH	2	Schmidt (R)	Wenstrup	8	Closed	61	54
2012	OK	1	Sullivan (R)	Bridenstine	11	Closed	48	37
2012	FL	3	Stearns (R)	Yoho	24	Closed	71	57
2014	MA	6	Tierney (D)	Moulton	8	Modified	63	36
2014	VA	7	Cantor (R)	Brat	14	Open	51	50
2014	TX	4	Hall (R)	Ratcliffe	34	Open	91	49
2014	MI	11	Bentivolio (R)	Trott	2	Closed	63	54
2014	LA	5	McAllister (R)	Abraham	2	Blanket	41	60

Source: Compiled by authors.

events, including a run-in with Capitol Police when she attempted to pass into a House office building without going through security and without displaying her member pin. Gary Condit (D-CA) lost a primary after a sex scandal emerged that Condit had been involved with an office intern who was found dead in Rock Creek Park. Rep. Albert Wynn (D-MD) had a series of controversies and at one point faced an opponent whose campaign was managed by his estranged wife. Alan Mollohan (D-WV) lost renomination after a series of investigations over alleged ethics violations, including one breach that was investigated by the U.S. Department of Justice. Rep. Carolyn Kilpatrick (D-MI) ran into ethics concerns, brought into sharper review by the criminal conduct of her son, former Detroit mayor Kwame Kilpatrick. Rep. Jean Schmidt (R-OH) was embroiled in various ethics investigations prior to her defeat in 2012.

But Eric Cantor was untainted by scandal in 2014. Earlier in his career, opponents had tried to link Cantor to House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, who was indicted in fall 2005 for crimes related to campaign finance activities. But there was little to tie Cantor to DeLay, and efforts to link Cantor to DeLay's illegal activities were ancient history by 2014. Unlike so many other incumbents who have lost their seats, Cantor's loss cannot be blamed on scandal.

Targeted for Defeat

Incumbents may lose when their votes or activities in Washington raise the hackles of politically important and well-funded groups. For example, Reps. Joe Schwarz (R-MI) in 2006 and Wayne Gilchrist (R-MD) in 2008 were defeated in high-cost primaries when they were targeted by the economically conservative group Club for Growth. In 2012 on the Democratic side, Rep. Tim Holden was defeated by Matt Cartwright when the League of Conservation Voters (LCV) and pro-health care reform groups targeted Holden in a redrawn district in western Pennsylvania. Holden had an anti-environmental voting record that landed him on the LCV "Dirty Dozen" list and had also voted against the Obama administration's health care reform law, the PPACA (Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act).

In *The Partisan Divide: Crisis in Congress*, former congressmen Tom Davis (R-VA) and Martin Frost (D-TX) and their coauthor Richard Cohen make the argument that Eric Cantor lost as a result of national factors, not local ones. They write, "It was the changing dynamics of leadership decisions that separated him from his Republican primary voters."¹³ This is a very different proposition from being targeted for not being heterodox to the party's prevailing ideology. Eric Cantor was not a RINO (Republican in Name Only).

But as we will show, there is little evidence that Cantor's work in Washington was top of mind for Seventh District voters. Although Cantor's work with

President Obama on immigration reform was widely reported as explaining his loss, almost no one—including Brat’s own campaign manager—thought immigration policy made a significant difference in the election results. Moreover, national political groups shied away from supporting Brat in tangible ways because they did not expect him to win and therefore did not wish to antagonize the likely next Speaker of the House of Representatives. Eric Cantor was better funded than David Brat by 50 to one, with the national organizations supporting Cantor, not targeting him.

Sophomores and Seniors

Conventional wisdom suggests that there are two opportunities to bump off an incumbent during his or her career. The first comes at the very beginning, when the incumbent is initially seeking reelection and getting established in the job. The other is deep in the career, often when an incumbent has become tired and aged and has lost the ability to mount a campaign against a determined challenger. Of the defeated incumbents, twenty (80 percent) were over the age of 50. A dozen were over the age of 60. In 20 of the 25 cases where the incumbent lost, the incumbent was older than the challenger. This is not necessarily surprising. The window of opportunity where most people initially get elected to Congress is between the ages of 35 and 55—campaigning is a demanding, taxing activity that is difficult for older people, and it is an activity that requires networks, resources, and a perception of maturity and gravitas that are often difficult for people younger than 35 to convey.

Many of the first termers who lose do so in general elections. They were elected in either a midterm wave or on presidential coattails. They often won in competitive districts. And with the change in electoral context, they find themselves disadvantaged for reelection. David Canon finds those who most often lose are the amateurs, who have more difficulty establishing themselves in the institution or who make visible mistakes that set themselves at odds with the electorate.¹⁴

Of the incumbents bested in the primary since 2002, seven were seeking initial reelection and one other was seeking a second term. Three had been in office for over 20 years. But the vast majority of the incumbents unseated in the primary (14) had been in office for eight to 18 years. Eric Cantor had served nearly 14 years in office when he was defeated. He was neither new to the job nor so advanced in age that he seemed a likely candidate to be ousted. On the contrary, his ascendance through the leadership ranks in Congress suggested that right up until the moment he lost, he was seen by his colleagues and constituents as being in the prime of his career. He was squarely in the broad middle of congressional tenure.

Tea Party Challenges

Recently, scholarship on incumbent losses has suggested that the tea party has changed electoral dynamics, contributing both to increased Republican Party success in congressional midterm elections and, potentially, to establishment-backed incumbent losses within the Republican Party.¹⁵ High-profile upsets such as those of Sen. Bob Bennett of Utah in 2010 or the open-primary win by Ted Cruz over establishment lieutenant governor David Dewhurst in Texas in 2012 feed the folk belief about tea party challenges. But the tea party movement inside the GOP is either a great success or a dubious failure, depending on one's perspective.

At the outset, we need to be clear that there is no single tea party. While there are tea party groups that are national in their scope, such as Sarah Palin's Tea Party Express and the Tea Party Patriots, these umbrella organizations generally encourage the public to get involved in local affiliates or unaffiliated grassroots efforts. Thus, the tea party is best understood as a collection of local, autonomous groups loosely committed to patriotism, small government, and low taxes.[¶] Because each local group operates independently from the others, it is difficult to make claims about the tea party as a national phenomenon. Extant studies that have examined the impact of the tea party suggest that the tea party can affect candidate emergence and success, especially for Republican congressional candidates, but that this impact is primarily local in scope. When a tea party organization is relevant within a congressional district, Republican candidates, including incumbents, are more likely both to be challenged in a primary and to be challenged from the Right. This may affect all candidates' perceptions of their "primary election constituency"—Richard Fenno's term for the group of people they can count on to support them in a contested primary election—and may make it more challenging for non-tea party-supported candidates to prevail in a contested Republican primary election (although whether that is the case or not will depend upon the district's demographics and the mechanics of the candidate selection process). A tea party endorsement may be useful in certain circumstances and may allow a candidate to win a contested primary, but the endorsement may also hurt the candidate's chances to win over the broader reelection constituency—the group of voters needed to win the general election, especially in two-party competitive districts.

The impact of local tea party groups has primarily come as a result of their grassroots efforts to get out the vote in support of candidates they prefer. The vast network of grassroots conservative activists that have embraced the tea party

[¶]Throughout this text, when we refer to the tea party's role in the Cantor–Brat race, we are nearly always referring to the local conservative grassroots activists that were active in the Seventh Congressional District and not to any of the national tea party groups, which sat out the 2014 primary race.

label can engage other constituents that might otherwise never have been inspired to participate in congressional elections.¹⁶ The tea party thus has succeeded in scaring some incumbent Republican caucus members into hardening their conservative stances on certain issues; it forces some Republicans further right in order to avoid challenge or court favor with the Populist political movement in their ranks. When tea party-backed candidates have entered the U.S. House of Representatives, it has likewise constrained the Republican leadership, forcing the party in Congress rightward.

Even so, the tea party's influence is likely due to perception of its power rather than a substantial threat to the status quo in the GOP. The tea party has very few electoral victories to claim in terms of knocking off incumbents since it emerged as a backlash movement to re-legitimize the Republican brand after the party's disastrous 2008 elections. In 2012, according to the popular blog *RedState*, tea party-backed candidates won 41 of 86 U.S. House primary races they contested.¹⁷ But those wins have not upset the status quo inside the GOP's election apparatus. Tea party organizations in 2012 backed 19 incumbents, all of whom won their primaries. In open-seat and challenger-only primaries, tea party-backed candidates won 22 of 40 contests. But in 27 challenges to GOP incumbents, no tea party-backed candidate defeated an incumbent. So tea partiers backed high-win-probability candidates who likely would have won without their support. The tea party broke even in open-seat and challenger-only primaries and was completely wiped out across its primary challenges to incumbents.

In 2014, tea party-backed candidates won 41 of 59 GOP primary contests. These were again disproportionately either open-seat and challenger-only contests or contests where the incumbent was tea party endorsed. Among GOP primary election defeats, only one is a documented instance of a House Republican losing to a challenger who was actively backed and endorsed by the tea party throughout his campaign—93-year-old Ralph Hall of Texas, who lost to former U.S. attorney John Ratcliffe in a runoff. If we count the Brat challenge to Eric Cantor, there are two. But as we will demonstrate, any tea party claim to being responsible for Brat's victory is dubious—at least relative to the tea party's efforts to influence the election outcome specifically. Brat was not backed by any of the national tea party organizations, and he repeatedly claimed not to be a tea party candidate.

"Git 'Em Alone"

Lastly, some election scholars have suggested that two-candidate primary contests are more likely to spell disaster for an incumbent because multiple challengers can fragment the anti-incumbent sentiment and result in the incumbent sneaking through with plurality support. For example, political scientist Louis Sandy Maisel, writing of his own failed effort to unseat an incumbent in a

Democratic primary in Maine in the 1970s, has observed that the best chance of beating an incumbent is to get him or her alone in primary, head-to-head. But recent data suggests otherwise. Of the 25 incumbent defeats in primaries since 2002, 16 were multiple challenger primaries; only nine were head-to-head challenges.¹⁸ Cantor was challenged head-to-head, which fits the folk science of how to beat an incumbent in a primary, but it is not typical of recent incumbent defeats.

SUMMARY

There is extensive literature on congressional elections generally and primary elections more specifically. Yet as the foregoing discussion has demonstrated, Cantor's loss defies explanation by most of the extant literature. He did not face a quality challenger. The nomination system within which he competed was not exceptional in hosting incumbent defeats. He did not have a great political scandal or even a small one. He was not targeted for defeat by national groups. He was not a party switcher, nor was he African American or Hispanic. He did not confront a fractured primary field of multiple challengers. He was neither new to Congress nor especially long serving, and he was in the prime age (50) of service in the U.S. House. He was not defeated in a redistricting year. And to the extent that 2014 was a wave election year, the wave broke in favor of Republicans, which should have helped Cantor, not hurt him.

It is said that nature abhors a vacuum; so too does the pundit class. In the absence of a clear explanation for why Cantor lost in a primary election to a political neophyte, dozens of armchair politicians and analysts weighed in with their own theories: Cantor was too close to President Obama; Cantor neglected his district; Democrats colluded to oust him; immigration reform doomed his candidacy. In truth, none of these is quite correct. Of all the possible explanations offered, that of GOP consultant Craig Shirley comes closest when he termed it "a perfect storm." We contend that Eric Cantor created a set of circumstances that placed his ambitions to lead his party in Congress and in Virginia in conflict with his reelection constituency and his primary constituency. Then his reliance on large money media campaigning proved inadequate to overcome the intense depth of opposition he had cultivated within Virginia's Seventh Congressional District. It can be argued that his campaign harmed him more than it helped him.

THE CAST OF CHARACTERS

Political science is more than the study of data and hypotheses. It is the study of people—political people—in a constructed system of popular control and popular

sovereignty. In these systems, we undertake campaigns, run by people and populated by them. All campaigns are affected by the personalities of those running and working to elect their preferred candidates, so it is impossible to understand Cantor's loss without understanding the major players in the Seventh District during spring 2014. These players included the following:

- David Brat, the challenger with a chip on his shoulder
- Zachary Werrell, Brat's 23-year-old campaign manager
- the Seventh District Republican Committee, which was stacked with Cantor supporters but whose actions alienated rank-and-file Republicans in the district
- Jamie Radtke, the cofounder of the Virginia Tea Party Patriot Foundation and the founder of the *Bull Elephant* blog, one of the most important grassroots conservative forums in the Seventh District (some in the district credit Radtke with convincing Brat to run)
- the grassroots tea party supporters whose active network mobilized on Brat's behalf even as the national tea party organizations made the decision to stay out of the race
- Cantor himself, whose growing distance from his constituents—both geographical and political—worked against his ability to connect with the voters and secure reelection

The Challenger: David Brat

When he entered the race for the Seventh District Republican nomination, David Brat was considered to have virtually no chance to defeat Eric Cantor. He had never run for public office, nor did he come from a professional background that would have groomed him for a successful political career. Most of Brat's professional career had been spent as an economist at Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, Virginia. His educational background includes a bachelor of arts degree in business administration from Hope College, a master's degree in divinity from Princeton Theological Seminary, and a doctorate in economics from American University. He worked for the Arthur Anderson consulting firm and consulted for the World Bank before joining the faculty at Randolph-Macon College in 1996. Brat's first work experience in Virginia government took place in 2005 when then Virginia State Senate Finance Committee chairman Walter Stosch hired him to serve as a special assistant for economic and higher education policy. Brat and Stosch lived in the same West Henrico County neighborhood; Stosch was impressed by Brat's academic credentials and his interests in economic and educational policy. In 2006, Democratic governor Tim Kaine named Brat to the Virginia Governor's Advisory Board of Economists, and Brat

served on other economic advisory boards for Virginia and the city of Richmond in the decade leading up to his election bid.

In August 2011, Brat made his first foray into elective politics when he sought the Republican Party's nomination to a midterm vacancy in the Fifty-Sixth District seat in Virginia's House of Delegates.³³ After a closed-door session, the selection committee ultimately chose a different candidate who was backed by Eric Cantor—Peter Farrell, son of Thomas Farrell, the CEO of Virginia's Dominion Resources, a power and energy company headquartered in Richmond. Farrell went on to run unopposed in the 2011 general election and assumed office in January 2012. He still holds the position. As local political analyst Bob Holsworth explained to the *Chesterfield Observer*, “[Brat] wanted a fair chance to run” for the Fifty-Sixth Virginia House District seat, but the local party establishment “didn’t give Brat a chance.”³⁴ The 2011 snub is widely considered to have been a major contributor to Brat's decision to take on Cantor in 2014.

Brat formally announced his candidacy on January 9, 2014, although word of the impending announcement was reported two days earlier by the *National Review Online*, which noted, “Brat can expect backing from much of the Virginia grass roots, especially the Libertarian and tea party activists who have long been frustrated with the state party's leaders.”³⁵ Indeed, while the campaign took pains to portray him as a traditional Republican, the multiple tea party groups throughout the district as well as national conservatives such as Glenn Beck, Ann Coulter, Mark Levin, and Laura Ingraham embraced Brat's campaign. However, Brat was not backed by any of the national tea party groups, who presumably decided to sit out the election rather than risk the ire of the likely next Speaker of the House.

Throughout the campaign, Brat touted the Virginia Republican Creed as the best explanation of his beliefs. This creed endorses a free market system, equal rights for all citizens, the observation of constitutional limitations, a strong national defense, and faith in God. Brat's attacks on Cantor were focused on Cantor's leadership position in Washington; as the challenger, he hammered the notion that Cantor was a “career politician” who was “out of touch” with his constituents and later extended this criticism to invoke the concept of “crony corruption” to explain Cantor's unsuitability to stand in Congress.³⁶

The Manager: Zachary Werrell

By his own account, when 23-year-old Zachary Werrell accepted the job working as Brat's campaign manager, no one else would take the job. Managing Dave Brat's campaign was widely perceived to be a losing proposition, and no established politicians were willing to take the career risk.³⁷ At the time of his hiring, Werrell was one of just two paid staff members for the Brat campaign.

Similar to many amateur challenges to incumbents, the campaign had few resources, a circumstance that changed only a few weeks prior to the June 10 primary. Young Werrell was a full-service campaign manager: coordinating strategy; sending out press releases (including an early one that somehow managed to misspell his own candidate's name); and working feverishly to find and coordinate campaign volunteers, who became known as "the Brat Pack." In his victory speech on election night, Brat referred to Werrell as "the man that worked 18-hour days, when I was passed out, exhausted from giving talks to people."³⁸

There was little sweetness to relish with his victory as a rookie manager. As is often the case when insurgents post unexpected primary wins, the money people and the pros showed up, and change soon followed. Within days of Brat's June 10 victory, Werrell was replaced as campaign manager by former Cantor political director Amanda Chase. In the media accounts that followed the announcement that he had been replaced, Werrell claimed he "simply needed a break,"³⁹ although there was speculation that the Brat campaign replaced him in the aftermath of unflattering media portrayals of his social media activities. On the day after the primary election, *Yahoo News* reported that Werrell's Facebook posts compared the death of Trayvon Martin to abortion and advocated for localities to be permitted to secede from a state.⁴⁰ Just over a week later, Werrell was replaced by Chase. The move surprised many local political observers, who credited Werrell with Brat's stunning upset and viewed Brat's decision to hire Chase as evidence that he would move toward more establishment positions. Others applauded Brat for recognizing that Werrell had become a liability.

Linwood Cobb, Fred Gruber, and the Seventh District Republican Committee

One indicator of coming trouble was within the district's Republican Party organization—in particular the battle for control of the district committee chairmanship. These local party meetings are important in Virginia because Section 24.2-509 of the Virginia Code makes party leaders responsible for determining how to select their nominees for office.⁴¹ This is different from most states, where there is a consistent process for selecting nominees to run for office. In Virginia, there is no state-mandated nominating process for party candidates. As a result, the parties have extraordinary control over candidate selection; often, the results of local party meetings have significant impact on the outcome of the party nominating process.

The relevant party committees may choose their candidates through whatever means they see fit—a primary election, a nominating convention, or in some cases, a vote of the relevant party leadership. Moderates within the party typically prefer to nominate candidates using a primary election, since

primaries typically involve a larger swath of rank-and-file voters and as a result have a tendency to lead to more moderate nominees. By comparison, more ideological party leaders tend to prefer conventions in order to nominate candidates. Since conventions require a greater commitment from partisans, they typically are attended disproportionately by highly energized, dogmatic partisans and tend to lead to more ideologically extreme candidates. Since in Virginia the choice of nomination method is made by the relevant party committee a few months prior to the date that the nomination must be made, the process to select leaders of these local party committees has also become contentious in recent years. That was certainly the case for the Seventh District Republican Committee in 2014.

A month before the Seventh District primary election, on May 10, the Seventh District Republican Committee planned to meet at Deep Run High School in Glen Allen, Virginia, for the purpose of electing a chairman. This meeting came toward the end of a series of divisive Republican meetings in the state. In previous years, such meetings had been essentially pro forma, with the established party leaders generally being reelected without any significant opposition. But the meeting in 2014 had to be moved a few miles away to the Hilton hotel in Short Pump when it became clear that longtime incumbent chairman Linwood Cobb would face a challenge from local tea party-backed conservative Fred Gruber.

Gruber's candidacy reflected the tensions that had emerged in central Virginia between grassroots conservatives and establishment party elites. Conservatives felt excluded from nominating processes and marginalized by the party elite. This led them to mobilize supporters, who were successful at electing conservatives to the steering committees of local party organizations. In response to the growing success of the right-wing element within the state party, establishment Republican Party leaders began using "slating" during local meetings to select delegates to the statewide party convention. *Slating* is a technique whereby a slate of a small number of party-approved delegates takes the place of the entire contingent of party members eligible to participate in the party's statewide convention. Local party leaders preferred slating to selecting hundreds or thousands of party members to attend the convention because they would be more likely to be able to pack the slate with mainstream party loyalists to the exclusion of right-wing, tea party-backed members.

On March 10, 2014, Virginia Beach's local Republican committee approved a slate of 32 "mainstream partisans" to attend the state convention in lieu of the 552 partisans to which the local group was entitled.⁴² A week after the Virginia Beach slating vote, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* reported on the efforts of local

activists to derail the more mainstream elements of Virginia's Republican Party by taking control of local committee meetings. These activists, according to the *Times-Dispatch*, were motivated largely out of hostility toward the practice of slating.

On March 24, 2014, the effects of slating elsewhere in the state were borne out at the Henrico County mass meeting, where in Eric Cantor's home county just north of Richmond, Right-leaning activists rejected a Cantor supporter, Don Boswell, who had been vying to lead the county party's mass meeting. Still, Cantor's allies were unconcerned. They saw the Seventh District Committee as less vulnerable to the effects of the tea party activists since their choice to head the committee, longtime Cantor ally Linwood Cobb, already enjoyed a substantial advantage over Gruber, his likely challenger.⁴³

The day of the Seventh District meeting, Cantor supporters were sure they had nothing to worry about. The *Washington Post* reported the following details:

Cantor's associates churned out mailers to support Cobb, a friend since he and Cantor met at a local Rotary Club meeting in 1992. Cantor's camp paid \$3 apiece in postage to send personalized trinkets to party loyalists. On convention day, the committee bought up all the Short Pump Hilton's conference rooms to stymie Brat and provided day care for the kids of Cobb supporters.⁴⁴

But when Cantor got up to speak during the meeting, he was met with boos and jeers. His criticism of his opponent was met with particularly loud heckling, forcing Cantor several times to have to clarify his meaning to quiet the protests. His remarks sounded defensive and frustrated; he complained about Brat that "[i]t's easy to sit here and throw stones in an environment where there are no consequences" as he chronicled his recent efforts to thwart President Barack Obama's agenda.⁴⁵ In the end, Cantor's handpicked district chairman, Linwood Cobb, lost to the tea party candidate, Fred Gruber, who managed 52 percent of the vote.

In response to the results of the committee elections, the former Virginia lieutenant governor Bill Bolling released a statement expressing his disappointment that Cobb had been ousted. In his statement, he voiced concern about the rightward direction the state party was taking and his belief that the conservative wing of the party was damaging the party's ability to win future elections. Bolling's press release called for "aggressive efforts" at moving the party back to the center, as he noted the following:

If we cannot accomplish this, we will drive away more and more traditional Republicans and it will become almost impossible for us to reach out to the broader cross section of Virginians whose support we need to win elections and earn the right to lead.⁴⁶

Bolling had himself been a victim of right-wing control of the party's nominating apparatus back in 2013 when he planned to run for governor. Instead, however, State Attorney Ken Cuccinelli and his conservative supporters forced a nominating convention that selected Cuccinelli over the much more moderate Bolling. Cuccinelli went on to lose the 2013 gubernatorial election. Bolling's comments reflect the position that many establishment Republicans in Virginia, including Cantor, had come to embrace as the only viable long-term strategy for winning statewide elections. Local tea party activists do not embrace that strategy, however.

Jamie Radtke

Indeed, where mainstream Virginia Republicans were disappointed with the Seventh District Committee's vote, local conservative activists were ecstatic. Jamie Radtke, one of the early leaders of the tea party movement in Virginia, was quoted by the *Washington Post* as saying, "There's been an ongoing battle for years between conservatives and establishment, and it's a sweet victory when you win but you also win on the front porch of Eric Cantor."⁴⁷

Radtke, a 40-year-old conservative activist, was one of the founders of the tea party movement in central Virginia, and she helped to start tea party organizations throughout the state between 2010 and 2012. (Like many states, Virginia has multiple tea party organizations battling for primacy and purity in leading the movement; there are over two dozen tea groups in the commonwealth.) In 2012, Radtke ran against former U.S. senator George Allen in his effort to be reelected to the U.S. Senate seat he lost in 2006 to Jim Webb. She lost but continued her local activism on behalf of Libertarian and conservative causes throughout central Virginia. Radtke is one of the founders of the *Bull Elephant* blog (thebullephant.com), which emphasizes "those issues and concerns important to conservative and libertarian grassroots Republicans."⁴⁸

As an early tea party supporter, Radtke had long felt that the mainstream GOP in central Virginia was marginalizing conservative voices. This view was reinforced throughout 2014, as the slating efforts in the local committees reduced the impact of the tea party within the party. Radtke was one of the principal architects of the effort to remove Linwood Cobb from his position as chair of the Seventh District Republican Committee and gave the nominating speech on behalf of Fred Gruber when the committee met on May 10:

The recent slating maneuvers that brazenly kicked to the curb almost 2,000 conservatives who wanted to participate in the Republican Party is not the right direction for our party either and certainly does not help us win elections. These tactics have been engineered and supported by Cantor, Linwood Cobb and others in leadership.⁴⁹

Radtke's work, primarily behind the scenes through the *Bull Elephant*, has continued to provide resources, especially information resources, to local tea party groups and activists. Her blog has become one of the most important forums for local conservatives, and in the lead-up to the 2014 Republican primary, the blog provided a running narrative that catalogued the Republican establishment's slating efforts and kept the pressure on local activists to work to unseat Cantor.

Local Tea Party Activists

Radtke operated from a position of strength. The Central Virginia Tea Party, which she helped to found, played a tremendous role in the primary election outcome, opposing Cantor and activating its local network of grassroots, conservative operatives in support of David Brat. Virginia's Seventh District experienced a 226 percent increase in individuals claiming tea party affiliation between 2010 and 2012.⁵⁰ The rapid expansion of tea party support within the district in the years leading up to the Brat-Cantor primary was a key factor in Brat's successful campaign. It is important to distinguish here between local groups of tea party-affiliated activists and the national tea party organizations. The latter did not endorse Brat, and Brat himself eschewed the tea party label throughout the duration of his campaign, even as the campaign recognized the importance of the local activists.

There were 11 local tea party groups in the district during the 2014 midterm election. Five of them—Louisa VA Tea Party, Constitutional Tea Party (Culpeper), Patrick Henry Patriots (Hanover), Richmond Tea Party, and the West Chester Patriots—are organized under the Virginia Tea Party Patriots Federation (VTPPF), which is a statewide federation of tea party chapters.⁵¹ The other 6 operate in West Henrico, Goochland, New Kent, Chesterfield, Mechanicsville, and Powhatan. Most of these tea party organizations meet independently from one another, but their leaders work together to coordinate grassroots strategy. Throughout central Virginia, these groups' bright yellow plywood billboards stand prominently on private property adjacent along well-traveled roads such as U.S. 1 through Henrico and Hanover Counties and U.S. 33 through Henrico County. The billboards highlight the tea party's disillusionment with local leaders ("Hanover County pays 83 employees over \$100,000. Where to cut?"); offer

commentary on local, state, and federal issues (“The federal deficit grows \$36,000 per second”); and during the 2014 primary election, offered support to Brat (“Cantor: socialist—Brat: economist”). The groups shared slogan ideas and strategies through their website the *Virginia Committee of Correspondence*,⁵² a reference to the pre-Revolutionary War colonial activists.

The extensive grassroots tea party network within the district rallied behind David Brat’s campaign and contributed to his victory, even as Brat took pains to distance himself from the tea party label. In a phone call with *Fox News*’s Sean Hannity, Brat said, “Although I had tremendous tea party support and just wonderful people in the tea party grass roots helping me out, and they’re clearly responsible for the win, I ran on the Republican principles.”⁵³

PLAN OF THE BOOK

The remainder of this book unpacks the Cantor loss carefully and with attention to the ways in which the circumstances that precipitated it both defy and support extant theories of incumbency and congressional elections and fit within them. We use the Cantor case to address several important questions about the state of congressional elections and governance, exploring what Cantor’s loss tells us about the changing political environment, the public’s orientation to its government, about the role of money in politics, and about the impact of the tea party on the Republican Party and in politics more generally. The Cantor case also allows us to engage questions relating to representation and to consider the limits of representatives’ ability to control the news in an era where any citizen with a smartphone can be an opinion leader.

The next chapter opens with the local and national reactions to Cantor’s loss before moving on to provide the background necessary to understand the Cantor case study. It includes an overview of Virginia’s Seventh District and a discussion of the ways in which the district has been affected by political factors such as redistricting and the changing politics of the South. Lastly, it provides a brief introduction to the major players in this David-versus-Goliath story.

Chapter 3 provides a detailed look at the backgrounds of both Eric Cantor and David Brat. We begin by describing Eric Cantor’s personal and pre-political career history before moving on to discuss his early career in politics. We also focus in detail on his electoral history, placing it in the broader context of state and regional politics. We then turn our focus to David Brat, discussing his pre-political career and candidacy in the context of the literature on challenger quality, political ambition, and also the small but useful literature on political “amateurs.” We begin by discussing his personal and nonpolitical career history and then move on to a discussion of his political career, from his first forays into

local politics on his neighborhood homeowners' association board to his volunteer and appointed positions in Virginia's legislative and executive branches. Finally, we discuss the ways in which Cantor's and Brat's paths intersected, albeit briefly, along the road to the 2014 primary.

Chapter 4 puts the Cantor–Brat race into the broader context of Cantor's tenure in Congress and his concomitant attention to his own power. As Cantor ascended to the leadership, he began to neglect his congressional district. Cantor's increased focus on Washington distanced him from his constituents. When coupled with a strong conservative grassroots presence and growing resentment over Cantor's role in debt ceiling negotiations in 2011 and 2012, his ambition began to imperil his electoral security. In Chapter 4, we discuss Cantor's rise through the House leadership, with particular emphasis on his role as a “Young Gun” and his efforts at candidate recruitment aimed at shoring up a Republican majority in the House of Representatives. We then segue to a discussion of Cantor's election to the position of majority leader and the rumblings of his plans to ascend to the Speakership. Finally, we discuss the ways in which the House leadership began to distance itself from the tea party-backed faction of the party during the 113th Congress. Back home in the district, Cantor's popularity plummeted. This created opportunities for challengers; in 2012, Cantor was challenged in a primary election for the first time in the 12 years since his first congressional election in 2000. In late 2013, Brat began to lay the groundwork for his 2014 primary challenge.

Chapter 5 focuses on the primary election campaign itself. In this chapter, we turn to a detailed analysis of Brat's campaign, from its initiation in November 2013 to its successful completion in June 2014. We also discuss Cantor's series of politically fatal miscalculations. At the outset, the chapter discusses Brat's campaign organization and his fund-raising challenges. It then moves on to a discussion of the traction that Brat gained when big-name conservatives such as Glenn Beck, Laura Ingraham, and Ann Coulter took up his cause. We also address Brat's candidacy as a reflection of an increasing factionalism within the Republican Party, particularly in the South, but specifically in central Virginia. Contrary to the narrative that emerged on election night—that Brat had waged a skillful campaign that tapped into voter concern about immigration reform—we demonstrate that there was a strong anti-Cantor sentiment within the district that almost certainly had a more significant effect on the election outcome than Brat's message on immigration. In addition, we discuss the Cantor campaign's significant missteps, including increasing Brat's name recognition districtwide, his reliance on polling data that he should have known was bad, and his lack of active campaigning for his seat. Cantor's missteps, Virginia's open primary system, and Brat's visibility in the district increased Brat's appeal while

undercutting support for Cantor even in areas that previously had supported him at high rates. Finally, we discuss the impact of crossover voting by Democrats and independents in Virginia's open primary and the implications of the open primary on this election. While the literature on open primaries and crossover voting has suggested that strategic voting is unusual and not likely to affect election outcomes when it occurs, evidence from exit polls and election returns demonstrates that Brat garnered an unusually high level of support from parts of the Seventh District that remain Democratic strongholds.

Chapter 6 provides a discussion of the media coverage that emerged following the Brat victory. We discuss the message of the election—that a representative who fails to attend to his or her district will face challenges for reelection—and how the media misunderstood this message. In fact, the media, campaign consultants, and political observers relied on outdated campaigning and polling techniques, and as a consequence, they missed the signs that Cantor was in trouble. We then move to the immediate aftermath of the primary on Capitol Hill, discussing Cantor's decision to step down as House majority leader and the scramble that ensued among House Republicans, which further exposed the deep rifts in ideology within the party.

In our concluding chapter, Chapter 7, we summarize the main themes of the book and offer perspectives on the House leadership shake-up and the consequences for Congress and public policy moving forward. We present our conclusions as a series of lessons that can be drawn from the Cantor loss. Cantor's loss reinforces long-standing theories of representation and congressional elections and offers powerful lessons for journalists and political scientists about the need to be more attentive to congressional elections and to dig deeper into the races they analyze. His loss also demonstrates that campaigns still matter and that despite recent claims that congressional elections have become national referenda on the two major parties, all politics really does remain local politics.

We end with an epilogue that summarizes the general election campaign between Brat and his Randolph-Macon College colleague Trammell and offers a first look at the 2016 congressional elections.