

Jun 10, 2014

Eric Cantor Defeat Imperils Prospects for Immigration Overhaul

By [Laura Meckler](#)

[The defeat Tuesday](#) of House Majority Leader **Eric Cantor** to an underfunded challenger who ran as an immigration opponent is likely to further weaken already shaky prospects the House will consider immigration legislation this summer.

For months, Republicans have worried an immigration debate could make incumbents vulnerable to primary challenges from the right, and have put off any House action at least until after primary season. Tuesday's primaries were the last hurdle before what was expected to be a final push by immigration advocates for action.

Mr. Cantor's defeat is likely to be seen as confirmation immigration politics are too dicey for this election year and may spook rank-and-file members who advocates have been pressing for support.

"Is this helpful? No. Nobody can say this is helpful," said Rep. **Mario Diaz-Balart** (R., Fla.), who is working to win GOP support for a legalization bill for undocumented immigrants. He said he doesn't know what the impact will be but predicted, "This just makes it more complicated."

In his winning campaign, [Republican David Brat](#) repeatedly charged Mr. Cantor was a supporter of amnesty for lawbreakers. In response to [a questionnaire from the Richmond Times-Dispatch, he wrote:](#)

"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.... 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."

Some other Republicans who have been much more supportive of overhauling immigration laws have easily survived primary challenges. On Tuesday, Sen. **Lindsey Graham** (R., S.C.), an author and champion of the Senate immigration bill, [topped 50% in a crowded field to avoid a runoff in his race for a third term](#). In North Carolina, Rep. **Renee Ellmers** last month won her GOP primary against an opponent who made similar attacks. Both Mr. Graham and Ms. Ellmers defended their support for immigration legislation while Mr. Cantor portrayed himself as equally opposed to "amnesty."

Sen. **Charles Schumer** (D., N.Y.) pointed to the contrasting approaches. "Tonight's election shows the Republican Party has two paths it can take on immigration. The Graham path of showing leadership and solving a problem in a mainstream way, which leads to victory. Or the Cantor path of trying to play both sides, which is a path to defeat," he said.

But most immigration supporters acknowledged the defeat is likely to be read as a GOP rejection of immigration.

“Washington group think will be in full swing and people will assume it’s about immigration, but it has to be about something else,” said Rob Jesmer, a longtime GOP strategist who runs the high-tech group Fwd.us’s immigration campaign.

Lanae Erickson Hatalsky, an immigration expert at Third Way, a centrist Democratic think tank, predicted Cantor’s loss could be the end of efforts to pass a bill this year and maybe not until 2017, after the next presidential race.

“Republicans were biding their time waiting to get through primary season to see if they felt brave enough to move something on immigration reform. This confirms their worst fears,” she said. “If Eric Cantor can be pushed out for vaguely saying that kids who were brought here through no fault of their own should maybe have a path to legal status, why would his colleagues think they could survive a vote for comprehensive reform?”

Mr. Cantor is hardly seen as a proponent of immigration legislation. While he said months ago he supports a path to citizenship for people brought to the U.S as children, he hasn’t facilitated a vote on any immigration legislation. And when he put his agenda out for House action in June, immigration was conspicuously absent.

Mr. Cantor also helped block a vote this spring on an amendment to a defense policy bill that would let young illegal immigrants brought to the country by their parents earn green cards by serving in the military.

In the wake of Mr. Cantor’s defeat, some tried to put the blame on other matters unrelated to immigration.

“Politics is full of surprises but one basic rule is not to lose touch with the people you represent. While Eric Cantor’s loss will be attributed to many things, it was fundamentally about a congressman who spent far too much time in the Beltway and too little time talking with the people who elected him to lead,” said Jim Wallis, president of Sojourners, a pro-immigration religious group.

In an optimistic take from the pro-immigration camp, Mr. Wallis suggested that immigration legislation might be easier given that Mr. Cantor was widely seen as having ambitions to be House speaker, which had the effect of boxing in Speaker **John Boehner**, who has signaled he’d like to push ahead with immigration legislation.

“Perhaps now that Cantor is no longer lurking in Boehner’s shadows, one less potential hurdle has been removed to ending this moral crisis,” he said.

<http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2014/06/10/eric-cantor-defeat-imperils-immigration-overhaul/>