

## **THE PROBLEM WITH PRIMARIES**

*\*By Prof. María Fornella-Oehninger*

The virulent strain of nativist, anti-establishment, anti-corporatist and anti-immigrant sentiment is rocking the foundations of traditional party systems in all industrialized democracies. Its causes are many, but in broad terms it is safe to say they surfaced right after the 2008-09 economic collapse, an era that was characterized by intense polarization and confrontational approaches against governments, corporations and financial institutions which crossed party lines and traditional political cleavages. The sweeping changes brought about by globalized capital and corporate interests, and the blurring of national borders that accompanied them, have alienated big swathes of the population and given rise to new forms of strident populism everywhere.

In the United States the main manifestation of this phenomenon is taking the form of a populist revolt, a singular form of class warfare inside the Republican Party, between the established party hierarchy and the Tea Party movement.

As the next legislative election approaches, the internecine feud within the Republican Party continues to create challenges for its top candidates who must veer more right-wing to secure the nomination and then turn back to the center of American politics to win the general election. Before 2012, the GOP tried to co-opt the extreme right and used their rhetoric, but after the 2012 election losses, the party took uncertain steps to distance itself from the movement. Today, the movement rather than the establishment seems to be dictating the party line, so there is paralysis in Washington once again. The leadership will still have to govern and legislate on some central issues-increase the debt limit, fund the government, and renew the authorization charter of the Export-Import Bank, among other things, and in so doing, further alienate Tea Party voters. The Republican-dominated House will no doubt stay away from the avoidable taboos, such as considering immigration reform (for which the Senate already

passed its own bill one year ago!) and in consequence, one more time unintentionally secure the Latino vote for the Democratic Party. They will continue blocking the minimum wage raise and the Fair Paycheck Act, thereby losing the minorities and women's vote. In this context, the 2016 presidential horizon looks brilliantly promising for Democrats and their two presidential hopefuls, Hillary Clinton and Elizabeth Warren.

The defeat of Virginia Representative and House Majority Leader Eric Cantor in the June 10th Republican primary for the seventh Congressional district is symptomatic of deep divisions not only within the Republican Party but in the electorate at large. Eric Cantor, a Republican with impeccable conservative credentials who had been re-elected seven times and who was first in line for House Speaker, lost by ten solid points to a little known college professor who ran against him by portraying him as the pro-Wall Street, pro-K Street typical Washington insider, indifferent from Main Street needs and demands. This race is very significant for several reasons. For starters, the anti-Washington, anti "corporate welfare" and anti-Wall Street sentiment is widespread among independent voters and those GOP legislators that have been "pro-bailout, pro-Obama stimulus spending and pro-immigration," as articulated by Tea Party leaders, live in fear of being chastened by voters.

That is why this week Republicans in Congress who were holding their breath, are exhaling with a sense of relief as Senator Thad Cochran wins the primary runoff against Tea Party challenger Chris McDaniels who ran on a promise to voters that he would add his voice to the fight against Obamacare and big government spending. It appears then that the anti-incumbent sentiment has not been strong enough to become a sustained trend: so far, only two sitting representatives have not won re-nomination in the House and all 18 Senate races have been won by those holding the seats, including Lindsay Graham of South Carolina, who was a leader in favor of Immigration Reform in the Senate, but has been vocal in confronting Obama with his dismal record in foreign policy, from Benghazi to Syria to Ukraine, and now all the way back to Iraq. But even pollsters have been taken by surprise in most cases, whether as to the narrowness of results (such as the one in Mississippi, which required a runoff election) or to the unfathomable upsets (Cantor's represents a historical defeat: no Majority leader had been voted out in a primary election since the nineteenth century). There are many reasons why nobody saw this coming, first among them the constant problem of voter

turnout, especially in primaries, followed by new strategies by candidates (David Bratt, the college professor that beat Cantor, did door-to-door canvassing, taking time to speak to prospective voters, and he beat a competitor who had outspent him 40 to 1) and by the strong commitment of a small group of activists that mobilized the grassroots against Cantor's pro-business stance.

The outcome of these races is further complicated by the fact that many Democrats are taking part in open primaries, which makes them even more unpredictable. Democrats participated in both races, voting **against the incumbent**, Cantor, in Virginia (he was perceived as the main obstacle for bringing to the floor a vote on immigration bills that apparently would have had the votes to pass) and **in favor of incumbent**, veteran Senator Thad Cochran in Mississippi (he courted the African American vote, pointing out the amount of federal funds he had brought to the state in his 36 years as Senator, and they acquiesced, fearing Mc Daniels would be a worse choice for their interests in such a red state as Mississippi).

These idiosyncratic variations and distortions should not distract us from the fact that the defeat of ultra-conservative House Majority leader from a white, affluent Richmond suburb is extremely significant and will have many ramifications in the near future. First and foremost, it has led to an immediate reshuffle of the party internal House leadership, as Cantor resigned his post as Majority leader. The first in line to fill his post, House whip Kevin McCarthy from California, used his insider skills to mobilize his contacts and call in his favors fast enough to pre-empt a challenge by a Tea Party congressman from Idaho, Raul Labrador, in a secret, internal party ballot. He has thus become Majority leader only eight years after he was first elected to Congress for California 23rd district. If re-elected in November, he will be first in line for House Speaker when Rep. Boehner gives up his post. This coveted position would have been Cantor's crowning achievement after a solid career of 14 years in Congress: he had hoped to become the first Jewish Speaker of the House.

In spite of McCarthy's success in pre-empting challenges from outside the party leadership, the next one in line to move into McCarthy's whip position, deputy whip Peter Roskam from Illinois, lost the ballot to Tea Party challenger Steve Scalise from Louisiana, who mobilized the vote of Southern legislators and won, thereby establishing a presence for the movement inside the

GOP hierarchy. Scalise, who was elected to Congress in 2008, has also risen rapidly through the ranks, as chairman of the ultra-conservative Republican Study Group and as a vocal advocate against big government. Party Whips in Congress are in charge of counting votes for and against legislation. They are enforcers, offering incentives and doling out punishments for votes among their caucus members. Their role becomes particularly important in close votes. The whip is also the main liaison between the party leadership and the rank and file.

Primaries are proving to be much more dangerous for establishment Republicans than a prospective national election at the end of this year, in which they are poised to win both some Senate and House seats, mainly due to slow economic growth and low support for Obama, but more pointedly due to the opportunity created by the retirement of a significant number of long-serving senior legislators. Rather than the November election challenge against Democrats, primaries have become the main obstacle to surmount and the main focus of funding for incumbents and party establishment candidates. Memories of seats lost due to Tea party primary winners in the national 2010 and 2012 election still loom heavily in GOP minds. Karl Rove's words of advice to both the Tea Party activists and the GOP leadership in February of 2010 still resonate in the halls of Congress:

*"If Tea party groups are to maximize their influence on policy, they must now begin the difficult task of disassociating themselves from cranks and conspiracy nuts. This includes 9/11 deniers, "birthers" who insist Barack Obama was not born in the U.S., and militia supporters espousing something vaguely close to armed rebellion." "The GOP is also better off if it foregoes any attempt to merge with the tea party movement. The GOP cannot possibly hope to control the dynamics of the highly decentralized galaxy of groups that make up the tea party movement. There will be troubling excesses and these will hurt Republicans if the party is formally associated with tea party groups" (Wall Street Journal, Feb. 18 2010)*

Because they are extremely vocal as well as media favorites (whether to disparage or to endorse them) and have made some undeniable inroads into the halls of power, the Tea Partiers have indeed made a splash in US politics, and they have re-shaped the agenda on issues of taxes and spending (with mixed success). But so far this term, 273 of 275 House incumbents and 18 out of 18

Senators have won re-nomination, even if in most House cases these contests were won by small margins. This is evidence that there is still some discipline in party ranks, and newcomers are forced to follow the party leadership. For example in Kentucky, Sen. Rand Paul, largely recognized as the presidential candidate for Tea-Partiers and libertarians alike, did not campaign in favor of the Tea Party candidate who was running against Senate Minority leader Mitch McConnell, and gave the former only lukewarm support. Senator McConnell, a tough, seasoned veteran, was reported to have had a private, one-on-one, closed-doors conversation with Rand Paul before the primary campaign started...

It then becomes clear that membership still has its privileges, and the Tea Partiers' disdain for insider politicking and the compromises required by politics in general won't take them very far. That is the stuff of politics, so now these political neophytes are getting into the fray, they will have to learn a few organizational lessons from the savvy insiders they are trying to replace. Nonetheless, one of the first comments made by Kevin McCarthy Fox News as he moved into Cantor's position was that "Yes, he would let the Export-Import Bank (reauthorization) to expire because it is something the private sector can do better". This represents a reversal from his 2012 position, and one that distances him from the business community and the party establishment, who want the Bank to remain.. (Tea Partiers want to do away with the Ex-Im, the IRS and the Department of Education, among other institutions they find superfluous). In another interview, McCarthy asserted that the GOP had more to gain (politically) if it moved closer to libertarian ideas. So it has become apparent then, that the Tea Party as a movement and as a faction of the Republican Party is here to stay, at least for the near future. Its strength will depend on how they can accommodate their desires to the realities of governing the United States of America in the XXI century.

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