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## AFTER CANTOR LOSS, GOP FISSURES APPEAR ON IMMIGRATION POSITION

By Beth Reinhard  
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The latest round of Republican primaries shows that immigration policy continues to vex a party looking for its next standard-bearer amid a battle between its establishment and tea-party wings.

Perhaps no other issue better illustrates the fault line in the GOP between a political class seeking to build a national coalition and grass-roots activists pushing to reinforce conservative ideology. Both sides are trying to leverage the results of Tuesday's primaries to rally support for their cause, while potential presidential contenders struggle to find their footing.

Tea-party leaders are touting the defeat of Majority Leader Eric Cantor – assailed by his little-known opponent as “the No. 1 cheerleader for ‘amnesty’ in Congress” – as a cautionary tale that shows the peril of straying from conservative orthodoxy. Many opponents of an immigration overhaul say it would reward illegal immigrants with “amnesty” for breaking the law by granting them legal status.

After a primary upset unseated House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, many are asking how such an upset could have happened. It has also caused a scramble to fill the open position. Jerry Seib, Kristina Peterson, Reid Epstein and Bob Ourlan discuss.

Political strategists and pollsters are rejecting that interpretation of Mr. Cantor's defeat, eager to head off an anti-immigration backlash that they say would jeopardize the GOP's appeal in 2016 to a diversifying voter pool.

Overshadowed by Mr. Cantor's defeat on Tuesday, South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham won his GOP primary in one of the most conservative states in the country, even though he had spearheaded legislation to allow illegal immigrants to earn citizenship. Mr. Cantor, by contrast, backed citizenship only for children brought to the U.S. illegally, and he decried “amnesty” in the closing days of his campaign.

“Republicans who respond to [the Cantor] election by ramping up anti-immigration rhetoric are making a mistake, because that is not where most Republicans are, and that is not going to help us win in 2016,” said Republican pollster Chris Wilson, who advises one of the most conservative potential 2016 candidates, Texas Sen. Ted Cruz.

Another potential 2016 candidate, Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul, on Wednesday joined those who favor an overhaul of immigration laws in disputing the notion that the issue had doomed Mr. Cantor. “I say everywhere I go, I am for immigration reform,” Mr. Paul said, though he voted against the bill Mr. Graham championed.

“I believe that every single serious candidate for the Republican presidential nomination will be for some version of immigration reform,” said Republican pollster Whit Ayres. “Trying to

win a presidential election by getting a larger and larger share of a smaller and smaller non-Hispanic white proportion of the electorate is a losing proposition.”

But resistance to an immigration overhaul from the conservative base that dominates GOP primaries tugs on the 2016 field. During a heated Senate primary in 2010, now-Sen. Marco Rubio opposed an immigration plan similar to the bill he helped pass in the Senate last year. Amid mounting opposition from House conservatives, Mr. Rubio later muted his role in the immigration debate. Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush tempered his longtime push for citizenship in a book last year and recommended only legal status for illegal immigrants.

The party’s conflict over immigration is also playing out at the state level. Republican gubernatorial nominee Greg Abbott has called for changing a law, signed by Texas Gov. Rick Perry, another potential 2016 candidate, which granted discounted, in-state tuition to the children of illegal immigrants. The state party recently adopted a platform that favors repealing the law altogether.

In another sign of the confusing currents within the party on immigration, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie signed a law this year offering in-state tuition rates to the children of illegal immigrants, though he had criticized Mr. Perry during the 2012 primary for signing a similar law.

In Florida, Gov. Rick Scott – who vowed to crack down on illegal immigrants during his 2010 GOP primary – recently signed a tuition bill like the one in Texas as he faces a competitive general election.

Republican Gov. Paul Le Page of Maine is trying to cut off state welfare assistance to undocumented workers, while Republican Gov. Rick Snyder is touting immigration as a way to reinvigorate the city of Detroit.

Even the major tea-party groups are divided on immigration reform. Sal Russo, a top strategist for the Tea Party Express, recently urged Congress to pass a law giving legal status to illegal immigrants. Another group, the Tea Party Patriots, opposes relaxing immigration laws. Jenny Beth Martin, president of the Tea Party Patriots, said she would oppose a presidential bid by Mr. Rubio because of his position on immigration.

“The border should be secured first and foremost, and until that is secure, nothing else needs to happen,” said Ms. Martin, who says Mr. Cantor’s position on immigration contributed to his loss.

Republican voters also gave mixed messages on immigration in the last presidential election. Newt Gingrich, who advocated a more “humane” immigration policy, won the primary in conservative South Carolina. Republican nominee Mitt Romney, whose hard-line position during the 2012 primary haunted him in the general election, recently said the GOP needs to tackle immigration reform before 2016.

“I think don’t think there is anyone who doesn’t agree that the immigration system is broken, so you have to start there,” said Republican strategist David Kochel, who ran Mr. Romney’s campaign in Iowa. “You have to say the system is broken before you call for immigration reform and people get their back up.”