



Tobocman: Eric Cantor's Defeat Hardly the End of Immigration Reform

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Steve Tobocman, director of the immigration reform group Global Detroit, was at the second annual Global Great Lakes Network Convening last week when he heard the news: Eric Cantor, the sitting House Majority Leader, had been defeated in a Republican primary by a political novice, Dave Brat, who ran a grassroots campaign on what amounts to chump change.

Political pundits immediately took to the airwaves grasping for answers to Cantor's shocking upset. Among the reasons they gave: Cantor's outspoken support of immigration reform. Tobocman, a former Democratic state legislator and House Floor Leader, had a different take on the Cantor debacle: Thirty-six thousand primary voters in Virginia may have voted against the Congressional face of the Dream Act, but the bigger story of immigration reform as a tool for economic development and urban revitalization, particularly in the Rust Belt states, is gaining momentum. Not only was last week's Global Great Lakes event bigger and better attended than ever before, Tobocman said Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan is now paying serious attention to the issue and tech leaders from across the state will convene a roundtable discussion on immigration reform next week.

"Attendance at this year's Convening was almost doubled from last year's," Tobocman said when reached by phone this week. "There were lots of national organizations there like the Brookings Institution and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce."

Tobocman said he understands why "people grab that headline of Cantor's immigration stance," but he pointed out that some observers have commented that the former House Majority Leader's lack of visibility in his district played just as much of a role in the primary's result.

Tobocman said if you want to look at voter referendums on immigration, a better indicator might be Maryland in 2012, when 58 percent of voters—1.4 million people—approved the Maryland Dream Act, which authorized in-state tuition at state colleges and universities for undocumented immigrants. The real immigration story, he said, has more to do with benchmarks like Republican governor Rick Snyder creating the Michigan Office for New Americans earlier this year in an effort to harness the economic power of immigrants and increase entrepreneurship.

According to Tobocman, last week's Global Great Lakes Network conference represents the largest event of its kind in the nation. It also integrated the local work of pro-immigrant economic initiatives in Detroit, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, Cleveland, Buffalo, and other mostly Midwest cities. Tobocman said that while few of these cities are seen as traditional gateways for immigrants, all have come to realize the value of immigrants to growing local economies and bringing life to struggling cities.

In Michigan, Tobocman said Detroit City Council members Andre Spivey and Raquel Castaneda-Lopez have convened a new task force working on immigration reform. "I believe you'll see Mayor [Mike] Duggan announce strategies soon of how the city, given its limited resources, can embrace immigration reform."

Spivey was at the Global Great Lakes Network conference too, and he impressed Tobocman with what he had to say on a panel discussion about relations between working-class African Americans and the immigrant community. Strategies are needed to support what Tobocman calls "incumbent talent" so that economic gains brought by a more welcoming immigration policy are leveraged and shared with low-income, non-immigrant communities.

"It's an issue we've been eager to tackle," Tobocman said. "In some communities, it's the number one issue. Largely, we've not seen organized opposition to Global Detroit's work in Detroit. In suburban and rural areas, people will sometimes say immigration reform is good, but what are you doing for non-immigrants?"

Tobocman said during the administration of former Detroit mayor Dave Bing, Global Detroit couldn't get support for a city immigration affairs office because Bing was afraid of how it would play out with African American voters. "Duggan doesn't seem to share that concern, but I think that has more to do with Duggan's comfort as mayor and the wide margin of victory he had in the election," Tobocman added.

Elsewhere in Michigan, a group of technology leaders, including the biosciences industry organization MichBio, are hosting a roundtable discussion on immigration reform at 10:30 a.m. on June 27 at the Michigan Chamber of Commerce in Lansing. In addition to MichBio, the attendees will include members of Michigan's congressional delegation, the Michigan Farm Bureau, the Detroit Regional Chamber, and members of the immigrant community.

Tobocman said the June 27 event is another indicator that there is growing movement on immigration reform in Michigan. More and more people, particularly outside the Beltway, consider their economic future the most important political issue, he believes, and they see how immigration reform can play a role in rebuilding cities plagued by population loss, disinvestment, and unemployment. "That's why it's important to see places like New York City, Minnesota, and Toronto doing so well with robust immigration," he said.