The Problematic Primacy of Primaries

The defeat of Eric Cantor, the Majority Leader of the House of Representatives, by David Brat, a little known professor of economics at Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, in the Republican primary in Virginia on Tuesday shocked professional politicians, pundits, and political junkies. Since none of them thought Brat had a ghost of a chance, they are now scrambling to assess causes and consequences, to date, attributing the outcome to anger over bi-partisan immigration reform legislation; an underestimate of Tea Party strength and populist anger at anyone and everyone in the "establishment"; support for Brat from social media sites like the Daily Caller and Breitbart.com; Cantor's impossible to like personality, and his tendency to take voters in his district for granted.

Less frequently commented on is what the election reveals about the impact of primaries on American politics. Designed to enhance the role of the people, primaries, which have determined the candidates put forward by the Republicans and Democrats for no more than forty or fifty years, have actually contributed mightily to political polarization, paralysis, and the thwarting of the will of the majority.

It is now universally acknowledged that in primaries voter turnout is almost always very low and individuals at the ideological extremes are more likely to participate than those closer to the center. Tuesday's election in Virginia was no exception. Sixty-five thousand individuals in the district cast ballots, about 12 percent of those registered to vote. Some of them, it's clear, were Democrats, who heeded the call of Georgia Representative Ben Jones, also known as "Cooter" from The Dukes of Hazzard television show, to make mischief by unseating Cantor.

Nonetheless, establishment Republican office-holders have gotten the message that has already been delivered to the likes of Robert Bennett, Orin Hatch, Lindsay Graham, and John Boehner: don't mess with the Tea Party; don't support immigration legislation, an increase in the debt
ceiling, or reforms to Obamacare; make an even more radical turn to the right or go on "Cruz control," if you don't want to be primaried. "That vomiting sound you hear," Jim Messina, Obama's former campaign manager, tweeted, "is wise R's who just realized what the '16 nominee will have to say and do to get thru primary."

Is there an alternative to primaries that does not return us to smoke-filled rooms where party hacks choose nominees? Here's a suggestion: a hybrid system of primaries and party conventions. Primaries might be held to choose delegates to a nominating convention. The number of delegates assigned to each candidate might be determined not only by the percentage of the vote he/she receives, but by the overall turnout of eligible voters (i.e. the higher the turnout the more delegates will be at stake). The remainder of the delegates, let's call them super delegates, might be, as they are at presidential nominating conventions, some combination of elected officials and individuals chosen by the chairperson of the party. Under this system, there would be an incentive for all candidates to increase the turnout on primary day, instead of suppressing it. Political parties would be stronger. And fringe candidates, like Christine O'Donnell, who won the Republican primary for the U.S. Senate in Delaware a few years ago, and spent time in the general election assuring voters that she was not a witch, will be less likely to sneak in under the radar.

Placing a limit on the power of primaries would, in fact, be more democratic. Getting 55 percent of 12 percent of the electorate should not have the immense impact on our politics and our public policy it had on Tuesday. Our electoral system is broken. It's time to figure out ways to fix it.