

Jewish groups have mixed views on Eric Cantor, new House majority leader

by [Lauren Markoe](#) in the [January 25, 2011](#) issue

Virginia Republican Eric Cantor, upon becoming House majority leader this month, will be the highest-ranking Jewish member of Congress in history. For many Jewish advocacy groups in Washington, however, it's a mixed blessing.

Cantor is a telegenic lawyer from the Richmond suburbs who keeps a kosher home with his accomplished wife and three children. Colleagues on Capitol Hill call him a principled, understated politician with a good sense of humor and a knack for fund-raising—he can raise over \$1 million in a single evening.

In the new Republican-controlled House, Cantor, 47, is second in line only to House Speaker John Boehner. But while no Jewish lobby questions Cantor's commitment to Israel, they generally share few of his domestic policies.

"His conservatism simply doesn't appeal to mainstream Jewish voters," said Tom Dine, the former head of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the influential pro-Israel lobby. "Poll after poll shows that the American Jewish community is progressive, and a smaller percentage is concerned about only Israel."

Where most Jewish groups in Washington lobby for a strong social safety net, abortion rights and a strict separation of church and state, Cantor is most often on the opposing side. And even on Israel, some Jewish political leaders say, Cantor's approach is too aggressive for Israel's good.

Cantor, the only Jewish Republican in either the House or Senate, has GOP roots that go back at least a generation. His father, who owned a real estate firm, was treasurer of Ronald Reagan's presidential campaign in Virginia in 1980. But unlike many Republican Jews, Cantor's conservatism on fiscal issues mirrors his conservatism on social issues.

He is a reliable vote for legislation against abortion and takes a hard line against government funding of embryonic stem cell research. He staunchly supports gun rights and fights restrictions on the tobacco industry. Earlier in December, he called for the Smithsonian to close an exhibit that angered conservative Catholics because it failed to "uphold common standards of decency."

Cantor was unavailable to speak to a reporter for this story.

Republicans tapped Cantor for leadership roles soon after he arrived in 2001; in 2009, he became his party's whip, the member charged with enforcing party discipline. As whip, Cantor was instrumental in ensuring that President Obama's economic stimulus package failed to gain a single GOP vote as it passed the House.

With two other congressmen, Cantor published *Young Guns: A New Generation of Conservative Leaders*, a book on how the GOP lost its way and can return to its ideal of limited government.

Even Cantor's wife has noted his atypical standing as a Jewish Republican. Diana Cantor, a partner in an investment firm and chairwoman of the board of trustees of the Virginia Retirement System, once told the *Washington Post* that she was shocked, on their first date, when her future husband revealed his affinity for the GOP. "I said, 'I thought you were Jewish.' I'd never met someone who was Jewish and Republican," she remembered telling him.

Diana Cantor, whose father was a Democratic activist in Florida, has stated for the record that she does not share her

husband's views on abortion and other issues important to social conservatives. Jewish leaders may also have to take a similar "agree to disagree" approach in their dealings with Cantor as House majority leader.

"It's a relationship that has to be strengthened," said Richard Foltin, director of national and legislative affairs for the American Jewish Committee. While Foltin said no one questions Cantor's commitment to Israel, on social issues the AJC will engage Cantor "as far as we can. As advocates, on some issues we may have to go elsewhere."

Jeremy Ben-Ami, president of J Street, a pro-Israel lobby that tends to attract more dovish supporters than AIPAC, is more eager to point out the differences between Cantor and Jewish American voters, even on Israel. He notes that Cantor in October floated the idea of separating aid to Israel from the foreign operations budget to safeguard Israel's foreign aid dollars in a Congress that seems increasingly skeptical of foreign aid in general.

J Street, AIPAC, the National Jewish Democratic Council and much of the pro-Israel press publicly rejected the idea, arguing that the separation would foster an isolationism that would undermine Israel's security.

Ben-Ami says he is similarly disturbed by the overly tough stances Cantor and other Republican House leaders have taken against Israel's neighbors in the Middle East, such as Cantor's bill to end U.S. taxpayer support for the Palestinian Authority. "Fanning the flames of conflict is doing a disservice, because what constitutes friendship for Israel in the long run is helping it find peace and security with its neighbors," said Ben-Ami.

Republican Jewish leaders argue that Cantor isn't an anomalous Republican Jew and point out that in November's midterm elections, Republicans captured nearly a third of the Jewish vote—up from an average of about 25 percent in recent elections. Supporters predict that Cantor will help swell the ranks of GOP Jewish politicians

at all levels. —RNS