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Ohio Rep. Dennis Kucinich hailed by colleagues after primary loss

Congress won't be the same without Rep. Dennis Kucinich (D-Ohio), a champion of lost causes and an icon of the left, colleagues say.

March 07, 2012 | By Lisa Mascaro and Ian Duncan, Washington Bureau

Reporting from Washington — Perhaps no other member of Congress has been willing to try to stop a war, impeach a vice president, admit seeing a UFO and run for president twice.

But Democratic Rep. Dennis J. Kucinich of Ohio has been the political left's patron saint of lost causes. Now he faces perhaps his toughest crusade: finding his next job.

Kucinich, 65, lost a nasty primary Tuesday that pitted him against a onetime ally, Rep. Marcy Kaptur. Redistricting by the state Legislature all but eliminated Kucinich's home turf. Even star-studded help — campaign contributions from actor Warren Beatty and a daylong flurry of Twitter shout-outs from hip-hop legend Russell Simmons — couldn't save Kucinich.

Now the congressman, hailed as an icon of the left and a champion of the downtrodden, is a politician without a populace.

"Congress will be a weaker place without his voice," said Sen. Bernie Sanders, a Vermont independent who has known Kucinich for decades. "There is no question Dennis Kucinich has been a unique voice fighting for issues most other politicians would not go near."

The small and hyperkinetic congressman returned to the Capitol on Wednesday to handshakes and slaps on the back, and spent the afternoon casting votes. He said he had no Plan B after his defeat, even though he had at one point scouted out running for the House from Washington state, in case his district was eliminated.

"I'm totally at peace and have a sense of equanimity about it," Kucinich said in an interview, then paraphrased advice Merlin reputedly gave King Arthur after a tough match:

"The trick is whether you can triumph over victory as well as defeat," Kucinich said. "I've tried to see both victory and defeat as impostors and not to be too moved by either of them, and know that each brings new opportunities and new possibilities."

The eight-term congressman could sometimes draw snickers from those who viewed his passions — which included efforts to try to stop the Iraq war and impeach President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney, as well as his vegan diet — as throwbacks to an earlier era.

He and his wife, Elizabeth, who were married in 2005, adopted three rescue dogs, and his campaign boasts that Kucinich cosponsored "every piece of major animal protection legislation" in Congress.

But Kucinich has earned a place of honor among the political left because of his unwavering determination to speak his mind, even when it made those in his party uncomfortable.

Kucinich, elected to the Cleveland City Council at age 23, had a rough-and-tumble childhood, one that encouraged him to fight for the working class and downtrodden. His family, headed by a truck driver, had trouble paying the bills. He lived in 21 places before he was 18, including a car.

He bounced around in jobs as a hospital orderly and teacher before entering politics. By 31, he was the nation's youngest big-city mayor. On his watch, Cleveland went bankrupt after he refused to sell the public-owned utility to private interests and the banks pulled the city's credit. But his stance became popular with voters in later years.

After being elected to Congress in 1996, Kucinich began to position himself on the far left wing. He spoke against the war in Iraq 140 times, his campaign said.

His congressional colleagues said they couldn't imagine the House without Kucinich.

"It's going to be very boring," said Ohio Rep. Steven C. LaTourette, a Republican, who once rode a bicycle built for two with Kucinich on "The Tonight Show."

"He was able to be very critical without being angry," said Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass.), who is stepping down after this term. "Dennis was not a crank. He was a critic of the status quo, he was outside of it, but in a civil way."

On the other side of the aisle, Republican Rep. Jean Schmidt of Ohio also lost her seat in Tuesday's primary after being forced to run in a redrawn district. That created an opening for newcomer Brad Wenstrup, a conservative Army reservist who ran to Schmidt's right.

Some suggested Kucinich's national profile might have hurt him back home. After he mulled over running for Congress from Washington state, Kaptur likened him to basketball star LeBron James, who infamously ditched the Cleveland Cavaliers for the Miami Heat.

"Try this one: The other side of the coin that all politics is local is that all politics are national," Kucinich rejoined Wednesday, noting that the sliver that remained of his old district had voted for him overwhelmingly. "I approach my work in Washington from a decidedly different point of view."

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