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## Cummings Takes Centrist View In Run for Seventh House Term

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Maryland's 7th Congressional District spans diverse worlds. U.S. Rep. Elijah E. Cummings argues that he is able to bridge those differences as he runs for reelection for what most consider a safe seat.

The district encompasses historically black Democratic neighborhoods of Baltimore, where almost one-third of the children are growing up poor. The district also includes affluent, liberal-leaning suburbs in Howard County, where the same proportion of families make more than \$100,000.

Cummings, who seeks a seventh term, faces Charles Ulysses Smith, 57, a Baltimore neighborhood activist, in the Feb. 12 Democratic primary.

"People on welfare and [in] \$5 million and \$6 million houses" is the way Cummings summarizes his constituency. He said he remains comfortable with the range of voters he represents. "I'm somewhere in the middle."

He said he draws inspiration for his place in the middle from late Minnesota Democratic Senator Paul Wellstone, who wrote that political centrism should reflect "the issues that are important to Americans and what they hope for."

"Affordable child care, good education," Cummings said. "Those go to the center of people's lives."

Cummings, 57, grew up in a poor family in Baltimore, attended Howard University and went on to receive a law degree from the University of Maryland. He served 14 years in the House of Delegates. In 1996, he was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in a special election after the resignation of Kweisi Mfume, who left Congress to become president of the NAACP.

Since then, Cummings has been easily reelected. He won his last race, in 2006, unopposed.

His challenger, Smith, who has unsuccessfully sought statewide office several times, also ran in the 2002 Democratic primary for the 7th District seat against Cummings, getting 2.3 percent of the vote to 89.3 percent for Cummings.

Two others are also facing off in this year's GOP primary for the 7th District seat.

Ray Bly, 58, of Jessup, who operates a small appliance and car repair business, has published an online autobiography, "Born, Screwed in the U.S.A." Dentist Michael Hargadon, 56, of Woodstock, said recently that Cummings would be hard to defeat.

The race "is pretty much socked in," said Hargadon, who ran as a write-in candidate for lieutenant governor in the last election. He said he decided to run for Congress so 7th District voters have a choice. "If you can't fill the two slots, you don't have a right to complain," he said.

Residents of the district had a chance to question the four candidates at a recent forum sponsored by the Howard County League of Women Voters.

Cummings, who dominated the panel discussion, advocated bringing U.S. troops home from Iraq as soon as possible, saying he has opposed the war "from the very beginning."

He said the federal No Child Left Behind educational standards law should be better funded "to make sure all our children do well."

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"We are fortunate to have many of the best schools in Howard County, but we have areas in the 7th District where schools are doing very poorly," he said. "The greatest threat to our national security is our failure to educate our children."

He spoke of his support for health-care reform, specifically for "a universal, single-payer health-care system."

Smith spoke in support of public transit and the development of alternative energy sources and also advocated an end to the war in Iraq.

"It's a meat grinder. They should have used diplomacy in the first place," said Smith, who regularly speaks of his service during the Vietnam War when discussing his candidacy.

On the Republican side, Bly also spoke of his Vietnam War service and advocated a universal health care plan to be funded by a national sales tax.

"I grew up in D.C. sleeping in the streets," Bly said. "I spent my time in Vietnam. If you are a Christian, you should believe that everyone has a right to health care." Bly also called for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from bases throughout the world.

Hargadon, a supporter of Republican presidential candidate [Ron Paul](#), spoke of his desire for the Iraq war to end. He also advocated sharply limiting the scope of federal government on a variety of issues, including health care.

"I question health care being a federal issue," Hargadon said in an interview the night of the forum.

On the other side of the spectrum, Cummings has emerged as a leading congressional advocate for better dental care for children of the poor and the working poor under [Medicaid](#) and [S-CHIP](#), after the death of a 12-year-old [Prince George's County](#) boy from an untreated dental infection. Cummings, citing memories of growing up poor and experiencing dental pain as a child, used his position on the [House Oversight and Government Reform Committee](#) to help lead an inquest into the death of the boy, Deamonte Driver.

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