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Cummings challenged from both right and left

GOP and Green Party candidates eye House seat

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For Rep. Elijah E. Cummings, one of the defining moments of his tenure in Congress came two years ago.

That's when Cummings -- a Democrat who is seeking re-election to Maryland's 7th Congressional District, which he has represented since 1996 -- joined about a third of his House colleagues in opposing a resolution authorizing the use of force in Iraq because of concerns he had about the necessity and funding of the war.

"People of the 7th need somebody who will call it like it is," Cummings said. "Somebody had to raise those questions. I had guts enough to do it. People should not forget that."

Not surprisingly, his opponents in the Nov. 2 general election in the 7th District, which includes much of Baltimore and parts of Baltimore and Howard counties, disagree with his interpretation of what his vote represents.

Virginia T. Rodino, the Green Party candidate, says Cummings was not forceful enough in his opposition to the war. "I would have taken it further," she said.

Antonio Salazar, the Republican nominee, paints the congressman's position as a matter of partisanship, not prescience.

"It was consistent with his position of opposing the administration on everything," said Salazar, who says he "probably" would have voted in favor of the resolution. "He opposes Republican initiatives all the time."

Both are making a first run for elective office and are critical of Cummings -- but the similarities between the two challengers end there.

Works for Nader

Rodino, a 29-year-old academic and media assistant for independent Ralph Nader's presidential campaign, was designated by her party to be the district's nominee. She has raised less than the \$5,000 required by federal election laws to trigger the filing of campaign finance reports. She says Cummings is " beholden to the interests of the Democratic Party" but acknowledges she has no realistic chance of victory at the ballot box.

"What I feel is, I'm part of a long-term movement that extends beyond Nov. 2," she said.

Salazar, a 44-year-old bank executive from Ellicott City who has taken a leave of absence from his job to campaign full time, won a three-way race for the Republican Party nomination with 53 percent of the vote. He has raised more than \$90,000 for his campaign -- including \$10,200 of his own money -- and had just over \$20,000 on hand at the end of the final reporting period. He calls Cummings "too far to the left" and speaks confidently of his chances.

"I didn't leave my job to make a name," he said. "I'm in this race to win."

Historically, Cummings, 53, has proved to be a formidable candidate.

Elected in 1996

A lawyer and four-term member of the Maryland House of Delegates, Cummings was first elected to Congress in the spring of 1996 in a special election to replace Kweisi Mfume, who gave up his seat to head the National Association for the

Advancement of Colored People. In the four general elections since then -- in 1996, 1998, 2000 and 2002 -- Cummings never received less than 73 percent of the vote.

His position as chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus for the past two years has also given him a strong national profile.

His campaign had raised more than \$700,000 as of the end of September, and had \$344,000 in unspent money.

About half of the money Cummings has raised has come from individuals, and half has come from political action committees. Among the PACs, organized labor has been the largest donor, with a total of \$161,000 in contributions, according to an analysis by PoliticalMoneyLine, a nonpartisan information service.

Although the 7th is more diverse since its boundaries were redrawn after the 2000 census -- it now includes such areas as Ellicott City and Columbia in Howard County, along with parts of western and southwestern Baltimore County -- 60 percent of the district's population is African-American and 56 percent live in the city. The median household income is \$38,885.

In Congress, Cummings has received high marks from civil rights, environmental and labor groups, and low ratings from business and taxpayer groups. Last year, he took the preferred positions of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, the Sierra Club and the AFL-CIO 100 percent of the time, according to Project Vote Smart. But he sided with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce only 25 percent of the time and with Citizens Against Government Waste only 12 percent.

Those ratings prompt Salazar to brand Cummings as uncompromisingly liberal and too unwilling to make necessary cuts in spending. "I don't see him as someone who is willing to make hard decisions on spending issues," said Salazar, pointing to Cummings' support for funding of the high-speed maglev train as one example.

As for his own views, he describes himself as a "moderate Republican." He is against a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage but also opposes abortion on demand. He says his banking background gives him an understanding of budget, tax and regulatory issues.

Cummings says he supports maglev because local officials have told him they believe it is important. He takes credit for helping to secure millions of dollars in federal grants and does not back off from his support of more funding for programs ranging from Head Start to drug treatment.

"I will not apologize for fighting for the people of my district," he said.

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