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Traveling men: Kucinich and running for Congress in a new state

By JOSHUA SPIVAK

With Ohio set to lose two Congressional seats in the new reapportionment, the state legislature is apparently set to redistrict Dennis Kucinich out of the House and into political oblivion. Which means Congress' most prominent left-wing member is looking for an innovative way to stay in office: reports have claimed that Kucinich is considering moving to a very liberal area in Washington State to run for a newly created seat in that state.

There is an excellent chance that this is nothing but talk. The reality is that Kucinich, who has represented Cleveland since 1996, would have a very high hurdle to clear if he in fact wanted to move. But it wouldn't be an unprecedented one. And he would be joining some illustrious predecessors in making the leap.

In the nineteenth century, numerous members of Congress moved to new states to try their hand at continuing in office — though they usually ran after at least one term out of Congress. The most noteworthy example probably is Senator James Shields, who served Senate terms for three different states — Illinois, Minnesota and Missouri. Other big names from American history decided to run in a new state, too. Congress' most famous, Daniel Webster, first served two terms in the House as a member of the New Hampshire delegation before moving across the border to find lasting fame and fortune in Massachusetts as both a Congressman and Senator. In the same vein, Sam Houston served as Governor of Tennessee before becoming a legend and serving as both Senator and Governor of Texas.

For what was undoubtedly the world's most transient country, it makes sense that elected officials were able to transfer their talents to new states. But with the closing of the frontier and with the direct election of US Senators, there have been only a handful of elected officials who have been able to win federal office in two states in the 20th Century. The last one was Ed Foreman, who was elected to Congress in Texas and then following his loss in 1964, moved across the border to win a seat in New Mexico in 1968.

There have been a number of high profile candidates who have attempted to make the jump in recent years, though none have succeeded. Former Tennessee Senator Bill Brock actually got the Republican nomination for the Delaware Senate seat in 1994, but he was decisively defeated. Former Dukes of Hazard star Ben Jones served in the House from a Georgia district before running and losing in Virginia in 2002 against current House Majority Leader Eric Cantor.

The problems of running in a new state are very significant. But Kucinich may be on to something. The Bringing Home the Bacon portion of the job has been under attack since the last election, and there have been candidates who have garnered significant support while ignoring the nitty gritty of local politics.

Thanks to cable news, the Internet and social media, there are now a number of elected officials who might not be important players in Congress, like Kucinich or Michelle Bachmann, but have managed to develop a true national profile with very strong support from the party's base. This is not a completely new phenomenon, but it is easier to accomplish now more than ever. These national niche elected officials may very well be able to transfer their popularity, along with the large list of donors, to another safe district in a different state.

Dennis Kucinich may come under fire for thinking of moving across the country to keep his Congressional career alive. But he is following a long line of famous politicians who have performed the same feat. And thanks to the possibility of creating a national identity, others may follow in the same path.

Joshua Spivak, a public relations executive and attorney, is a senior fellow at the Hugh L. Carey Institute for Government Reform at Wagner College. He also blogs at <http://recallelections.blogspot.com/>.