

Dennis Kucinich Documentary:

Research Paper

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May 31, 2011

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I am constructing this research paper for the purposes of writing and producing a documentary on Dennis Kucinich, the U.S. Representative from Ohio's 10th congressional district. The tentative name for the documentary is *Wake Up America! The Dennis Kucinich Story*. In this paper, I will first present 7 top issues of Congressman Kucinich's platform, highlighting his views, philosophies, and political positions. I will also discuss elements of his childhood and political history that may have contributed to each of these stances. Second, I will briefly take a look at the Cleveland-based congressional district that Kucinich represents. Third, I will cover the history of Kucinich's political career, focusing primarily on controversial events that occurred during his one term as Cleveland's mayor (from 1977-1979). Finally, I will take a look at Kucinich's critics, examining how he is commonly perceived by his detractors and consequently defined within the mainstream media. In addition, I will briefly look at Kucinich through the lens of Westen (2007) and Lakoff (2008) to contemplate why such a dynamic, exciting political figure has not been taken more seriously in American politics, but rather has become marginalized, even within his own party.

Where Kucinich Stands on the Issues

Economy

One of Kucinich's most central themes in his speeches is the idea of "economic justice" or "economic democracy" (Kucinich, 2003). Kucinich actually sees economic democracy as "a condition of political democracy" (Kucinich, 2003, p. 4). In order to attain meaningful social reform, economic reform must take place first (Kucinich, 2003). He is critical when the media or other politicians spend too much time "trifling with social issues." In a speech to the National Press Club in 1977, he stated, "The substitution of social issues in place of economic issues (far

from offering an alternative route to progressive policies) trifles with people's problems, and offers false solutions" (Kucinich, 2003, p. 8).

Kucinich (2006a) feels that the most critical economic health indicator is unemployment, and he also believes there is no "acceptable" level of unemployment. Therefore, one of his top priorities is to make sure that everyone who is able to work has a job with a reasonable living wage. He insists that it is a moral responsibility of a government to step in and provide public sector jobs when the private sector fails to provide enough opportunities. In order for the government to achieve this, he suggests bolstering the public sector through a massive public works program. Such a program would be designed to repair, rebuild, and adequately expand water treatment systems, public transit, municipal utilities, common-area parks, and schools. He also proposes that the federal government provide zero-interest infrastructure loans, using money that "comes from an innovative adaptation of the normal money supply circulation activity of the Federal Reserve Bank" (Kucinich, 2006a).

Finally, Kucinich, along with many Libertarians, has repeatedly pushed for an audit of the Federal Reserve Bank (Grim, 2009). According to Grim (2009), he has demanded more transparency, and he has even suggested placing the Fed under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Treasury, rather than continuing to allow it to act independently without regulation. In May of 2009, Kucinich introduced a bill to allow the government to audit and oversee the Fed's response to the economic crisis back in 2007-2008. He also eventually signed onto a related bill that Ron Paul introduced. That bill ended up being sponsored by over half of the House of Representatives (Grim, 2009).

Kucinich's perspective on economic justice likely stems from the fact that he grew up in extreme poverty. In his book *Courage to Survive*, Dennis (2007) exclaims, "I did everything I

could to bring some money into the house” (p. 116). As the oldest of seven children, he felt the great burden of having to work from a very young age in order to help take care of his family. Frequently falling behind on bills, they were forced to move 21 times, occasionally even living out of their car. In these memoirs, Kucinich (2007) recalls:

Late one night, I watched Mom and Dad sitting in the kitchen beneath a dim yellow light, somberly counting pennies atop our chipped white metal-topped kitchen table. I knew every single penny was important to our family. Every single penny was needed for food and shelter and clothing. (p. 116)

Kucinich clearly knew, firsthand, what it was like not to be able to get ahead no matter how hard they worked.

Libertarians and Republicans often challenge the type of economic stimulus that Kucinich advocates. This opposition could be clearly seen when Obama first came into office in 2009 and introduced his large stimulus plan to rescue the economy. At that time, Libertarian blogger and economist, Arnold Kling, felt the plan was a product of “elite groupthink” (Kling, 2009). He believes it is much more effective and less risky to implement a small stimulus. He presents a number of supports for this claim. For example, he believes that large amounts all at once can be difficult to allocate and spend in a short amount of time, and thus the money may go to waste once it is handed over to state and local bureaucracies. Once the bill is passed, the money may not actually be dispersed until the economy has begun recovering on its own. He also worries that it puts America at risk in the event of a natural disaster or military attack because such spending could reduce the nation’s credit rating.

According to Time Magazine’s Fox (2009), economists’ theories about stimulus are immature and underdeveloped. He believes that Obama’s stimulus plan is politicized and not

backed by sound theory. He also suggests that tax cuts are generally a quicker way to stimulate the economy because they can be implemented much faster than spending allocations. Furthermore, tax cuts don't foster new and larger bureaucracies, as government spending might. While Democrats, such as Kucinich and Obama, often argue that investing in infrastructure makes the spending well worth it, Fox is not convinced. He points out that such major construction projects take quite awhile to get off the ground and started. Fox believes that rushing them just for the sake of immediate economic stimulus ultimately could lead these projects to fail.

While Kucinich is more concerned with unemployment than general economic stimulus, it appears his opposition would still disagree that a massive public works project is the best way to solve this problem. These critics would much rather push out small, incremental stimulus packages, or simply just cut taxes, in order to address larger economic issues related to unemployment.

Unfortunately, as a real life experiment, Obama's stimulus package has not made the picture that much clearer on whether such a strategy truly works to decrease unemployment in the long run. Perhaps, it is simply too early to tell. Meanwhile, Republicans are quick to identify stimulus funds that have been frivolously wasted on unproductive and trivial projects (Stolberg 2010). Kucinich's philosophy is not without its supporters though. Krugman (2009) endorses a Works-Progress-Administration-type program like Roosevelt established as part of his New Deal. Matthews (2011) believes that the 2009 stimulus package should have been doubled in order to be more effective. In addition, Stolberg (2010) reports that most economists believe Obama's measure did help to keep the jobless rate lower than it would have otherwise been. Despite this assessment, even Obama admits unemployment is still at an unacceptable level, as

jobs continue to disappear.

Department of Peace

Another central theme that runs through all of Kucinich's political positions is peace and nonviolence. With these overarching values in mind, Kucinich (n.d.c) has repeatedly proposed the establishment of a Department of Peace. He envisions this department as a necessary counterpart to the Department of Defense. It would help to operationalize principles of nonviolence, diplomacy, disarmament, and peaceful consensus building, both domestically and abroad (Kucinich, n.d.c). The mission of this department would be to "make war archaic," establishing a new governmental structure that supports peaceful reform while, at the same time, encouraging a new societal consciousness that is centrally based on nonviolence (Kucinich, 2003). A Department of Peace would not only focus on international conflict resolution, cooperation, and treaties, but it would also provide a systematic and structured way to handle prevalent violence issues within our own society, such as domestic abuse, gangs, and police-community relations. This department would deal with underlying causes and attitudes, working with educational institutions, at all levels, to implement curriculums that include peace education and conflict resolution strategies (Kucinich, n.d.c).

Dennis experienced a lot of violence in his own home while growing up. His parents deeply loved each other, but fought constantly. Kucinich (2007) reminisces, "Sometimes a split lip, sometimes a bruised arm, sometimes a chipped tooth, inflicted carelessly amidst screams and roars, taunts and threats, dangerous home-grown violence" (p. 70). He continues:

Not wanting to get drawn into the battle, I cowered underneath beds, in corners and in upstairs closets, staying out of the crossfire. Through it all, I worried that Mom or Dad would get hurt real bad. In nightmares I saw red images of soaked towels wrapped around

heads, necks, arms; blood spattering on the floor. (p. 70)

One can see why Dennis might yearn for peace and harmony in the world and why he might be especially sensitive to issues of domestic violence.

Kucinich is certainly not the first to propose a Department of Peace. In fact, this idea has been around since our nation was first founded. Benjamin Rush, a Founding Father, suggested that a Department of Peace should be put in place as a check and balance to the War Office (Zwerdling, 2007). Since 1935, many members of Congress have made similar proposals for such a department, on both sides of the aisle, but these bills have never gained enough traction for party leaders to endorse them and push any of them forward.

It is difficult to find consistent arguments against the Department of Peace (Zwerdling, 2007). During a debate on CNN Headline News (2008), Cheri Jacobus, a Republican political strategist, argued that the Department of Peace was unnecessary because the Department of Defense and State Department already serve peacekeeping functions. She insisted that having to consult with a Department of Peace before taking military action could put our country at great risk and make us weaker. According to Zwerdling (2007), a number of citizens in Fairmont, Minnesota became very upset after the town's Peace Club convinced city council to endorse a Department of Peace. Many of these citizens were veterans, and they feared that such a department would take away America's sovereignty by giving the United Nations power over the country. Others believed that a Peace Department would signal to America's enemies that it is weak and unwilling to fight, thus making the country more vulnerable to attack.

Workers' Rights

Kucinich (n.d.g) considers workers' rights to be his purpose and greatest passion. He frames workers' rights as a social justice, human rights issue, and insists corporations must be

accountable to their workers. He believes that “attacks on unions are a means of redistributing the wealth upwards” (Kucinich, n.d.g). Workers’ rights, for Kucinich, include entitlement to a job with decent wages and benefits, a safe workplace, the freedom to organize and strike, compensation for injuries, and a secured retirement.

Kucinich advocates that the U.S. withdraw from the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). He is convinced that NAFTA has only lead to a massive trade deficit and millions of jobs lost, as corporations move manufacturing jobs out of the country in order to avoid paying livable wages to workers in America (Kucinich, 2003). The international agreement has also superseded federal, state, and local laws designed to protect workers and human rights (Kucinich, 2003).

When he was young, Dennis came home from basketball practice to find his mother crying, telling him that his father was in the hospital after being injured at work (Kucinich, 2007). His dad was a trucker and a crate had fallen off the tailgate onto his reconstructed knee, which had been shot out while he was a Marine in WWII. Kucinich (2007) remembers:

I started to get stomach cramps. That sulphurous smell rose from my belly to my mouth and made me sick. Evicted Again! I wanted to stay in this mice-and-roach-infested place. It was our home. Mom wasn’t feeling well. Dad was in the hospital and out of work. Things were becoming complicated again. (p. 148)

He talks about how his mom and dad waited hopefully for a workmen’s compensation package after the crate had crushed his leg, but it never came, as they continued to sink deeper into debt. These sorts of experiences showed Dennis how deeply workers’ rights issues affect a working class family. As he went door-to-door during his first political campaign, running for city councilman, he shared his sentiments:

Their hearts didn't tell of the phantom pains of chopped-off fingers and thumbs discarded in superior punch presses; of crushed limbs or brandings from splashing liquid ore; of blinding grinder sparks; of coal-encrusted lungs gasping for breath... The agony that working people tuck away in their guts, the awareness of machines smashing mens' bodies, enraging their spirits but leaving them partially deaf and dumb. (p. 287)

Despite Kucinich's sentiments about NAFTA, many believe the agreement is quite valuable to the health of our country's economy. Quitnner (2008) explains how free trade agreements can create critical export opportunities for small business owners and ultimately make them more competitive globally. According to Rewko (2008), NAFTA was designed to stimulate trade and remove obstacles between nations so that businesses can more easily buy and sell goods throughout all of Canada, Mexico, and the United States. Unlike Kucinich, he believes that NAFTA is not the cause of job losses in America and that suspending this agreement will only create market instability.

An in-depth analysis of the debate over workers' unions is beyond the scope of this research paper. However, it is important to point out that many disagree that unions are ultimately good for the collective whole of society. Milton Friedman (1980) offered evidence that while unionization may lead to higher wages, the trade off is often less available jobs. Thus, there is a higher rate of unemployment. He also argued that a disparity across industries, in which some are unionized and some are not, could be detrimental in that it might artificially drive wages down in industries that don't have unions. In other words, unions only benefit a small subset of workers at the expense of others. Finally, he points out that unions can lead to inefficiencies in business and a higher cost for consumer goods.

Kucinich was quick to support the government workers in Wisconsin who were fighting to

keep their collective bargaining rights. However, many argue that public sector unions make much less sense than unions in the private sector. McGinnis & Schanzenbach (2010) argue that public sector unions have a disproportionate and damaging influence on public policy that can negatively affect the general population of a state or city. They give the example of prison guard unions, which may lobby against the decriminalization of drugs, despite the potential societal benefits, simply because it could lead to a loss in jobs amongst the union's members.

Healthcare

Like Martin Luther King, Dennis Kucinich (2006c) sees healthcare as a civil right and a matter of social justice. Therefore, he strongly supports a single-payer system. In a speech given to the Service Employees International Leadership Conference (SEIU) in 2002, he stated, "Health care is a matter of human dignity. Health care is a matter of the common good. Health care ought to be one of the blessings of liberty" (Kucinich, 2003). He is very concerned about the number of Americans that don't have insurance and the rapidly rising costs. His goal is to improve access and quality of care, while also encouraging prevention (Kucinich, 2006c).

In 2005, Kucinich, along with Representative John Conyers, sponsored healthcare bill HR 676 that he called "the only comprehensive solution to the problem" (Kucinich, 2006c). The bill proposes a "streamlined national health insurance" that is publicly financed but privately delivered. It would be more complete than current private plans, including coverage for prescriptions, mental health, dental, and alternative therapy such as holistic medicine.

Dennis had a lot of health problems as a child, including Crohn's disease and asthma, but he often avoided going to the doctor because his family couldn't afford to pay the medical bills (Kucinich, 2007). His Crohn's disease actually came very close to killing him as a young adult, after he ignored serious symptoms and avoided treatment so that he wouldn't miss out on work.

He also saw his mother and father go in and out of the hospital and then become repeatedly evicted because they couldn't pay their rent, partially as a result of mounting medical debts. Additionally, Dennis worked as an orderly and a surgical scrub in a hospital as a teenager. In *Courage to Survive* (2007), he states, "Hospital work caused me to take a different view of life. I listened to patients' life stories, learning about their families, their jobs, and their hopes" (p. 228). Later, he acknowledges, "No procedure was ever routine. I began to understand the kind of hours doctors must commit to their patients" (p. 231).

In May, 2011, the Vermont legislature passed a single-payer healthcare bill and it was signed by the governor (Remsen, 2011). According to Remsen, many in the state oppose this single-payer healthcare solution because they say it will substantially increase taxes and hurt job growth. The arguments against single-payer healthcare are quite similar at a national level.

Education

Kucinich (n.d.d) is a chief advocate of free but voluntary early childhood (pre-kindergarten) education. He also proposes tuition-free college education for a majority of students in public state universities. He is committed to providing more opportunities to poor and impoverished children by expanding the Head Start program and protecting college students on welfare from losing their student status at public universities during times of financial hardship.

To achieve his goals, Kucinich (n.d.d) has introduced or co-sponsored several comprehensive education bills to achieve these goals, including the Universal Pre-Kindergarten Act (HR 555), America's Better Classroom Act, and the Expand and Rebuild America's Schools Act (HR 4945). He also proposed a constitutional amendment to officially make equal, high-quality public education a basic citizen right. Kucinich plans to pay for his education programs by making cuts in the Pentagon budget, reversing tax cuts to the most wealthy, and ending public

vouchers for private charter schools.

Kucinich (n.d.d) is opposed to teaching kids to pass standardized tests with a curriculum that is exclusively weighted towards math and science. He advocates a broader curriculum that includes creative subjects such as art, music, and writing, with an emphasis on critical thinking.

As a child and teenager, Dennis was forced to work odd jobs around the school to pay for his books and his tuition. In addition, just before his high school graduation ceremony at St. John Cantius, Dennis was humiliated when the pastor called him into his office and told him he couldn't graduate because he was two years behind on his tuition (Kucinich, 2007). The pastor told him, "We run this school like a business. You owe us money. You are going to pay it" (p. 222). Dennis eventually talked the pastor into letting him graduate and then paying his debt back later, but it clearly was a very upsetting and embarrassing moment for him.

Despite Kucinich's personal, humiliating experience as a child in private school, there are many supporters of school vouchers that allow more children the option of going to a private institution instead of a public one. Trinko (2011) argues that vouchers are a benign option that has the potential to do some good. For example, she points to recent studies that have shown students participating in voucher programs are significantly more likely to graduate. She also points out that vouchers improve academic outcomes more than classroom reductions and tutoring.

Environment and Energy

Like most progressives, Kucinich (n.d.e) is for more environmental regulation and enforcement. He supports the Kyoto Treaty and wants to reduce our dependence on oil through the development of a mix of alternative green sources, including solar, wind, and hydrogen. He speaks often of needing to be in harmony with nature and the earth. In a speech at the UN World

Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002, he states: “In our drive to bring the earth to subjection, humanity has separated itself from nature. This disconnect translates for some as economic progress” (Kucinich, 2003, p. 37). He continues:

Our cause is human development, which can only succeed when all development is in harmony with the earth and attuned to the natural rhythms that move the tides and ride the currents of fresh air, and pulsate in the human heart, ever striving for freedom and expression. Our challenge is to bring economic systems into harmony with humanity, to create a socially and economically just world, where peace and prosperity abound everywhere. (p. 37)

For Kucinich, alternative energy sources do not include nuclear power. He has been a longtime critic and skeptic of relying on nuclear power as a viable option. According to a 2004 statement he made in front of the Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats and International Relations, he is concerned about nuclear power plants being both a national security and a public safety threat. While he worries nuclear power plants may become terrorist targets, he is more concerned that the corporations who build, maintain, and run the plants are not always following appropriate safety measures, and that the enforcement by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) is not nearly strong or diligent enough to force them to comply.

To support his skeptical views on nuclear power, Kucinich, during his 2004 subcommittee statement, repeatedly cites the relatively unknown 2001 incident at the Ohio-based Davis-Besse plant. After the NRC determined the plant had structural risks, FirstEnergy, the plant’s owner, resisted shutting down the plant for almost half a year because they were worried it would cause an “unnecessary financial burden.” Later, workers discovered five cracked control rod nozzles and significant damage to the reactor vessel head. The NRC admitted that the reactor’s lid was

close to bursting, which could have lead to a radioactive environmental disaster. Kucinich also feels that the NRC is doing a poor job of improving plant security, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, hiring incompetent security firms and refusing to be fully transparent to Congress or the American public. In the wake of the recent Japanese nuclear plant crisis, in March 2011, Kucinich demanded that plants owned by FirstEnergy and other “bad actors” with poor performance records should be shutdown (Eaton, 2011).

Finally, in an article he wrote for *U.S. News and World Report*, Kucinich (2010a) uses a monetary, economical argument, asserting that nuclear energy is a very risky investment for American taxpayers, as evidenced by the fact that even Wall St. is hesitant to invest in it. Therefore, he does not approve of the federal government subsidizing nuclear power plant development. He believes that the risks are far too high and that it is simply not cost-effective. He claims that while nuclear plant construction costs are soaring, wind, natural gas, and even solar costs are steadily falling. He also recognizes that nuclear plants take many years to bring online and make productive while windmills and solar panels can be constructed and put into commission much faster, even if a particular project is forced to scale back the original scope. Finally, he believes the cost of nuclear waste transportation and disposal, as well as the potential cost of a catastrophic accident, makes nuclear energy even less appealing.

Dennis often noticed the impact of industrial pollution while growing up in Cleveland. In one section of his autobiography, Dennis (2007) describes,

Outside the window of my room, the sun and smoke hovered over the somber mills. The smell of sulphur dioxide and autumn was in the air. The treetops were yellowing and red dust painted the neighborhood houses. Gritty particles came through the hospital windows, settling as a dark film on the inside window ledge. (p. 307)

He also talks about the dying neighborhood that he used to live in, lamenting:

In its final hours, it had been drawn and quartered by freeway developers, bound up in ribbons of abandoned railroad tracks and dumped on the banks of the fetid, terra cotta Cuyahoga River, which was brimming with rats, debris and industrial chemicals that burned the eyes and caught in the throat. (p. 287)

These direct and personal experiences with environmental destruction seem to have had a profound effect on him and his current political stances.

In the wake of the Japanese nuclear reactor crisis of 2011, Kucinich's stance against nuclear power has perhaps been significantly bolstered. However, many proponents still insist that new technologies have led to major safety advances (Miller, 2009). Additionally, proponents see nuclear power as our most viable green alternative to environment-polluting coal and fossil fuels. Hammond (2010) insists that nuclear power, "generates the most power in the cleanest way possible using the shortest amount of time." He also argues that nuclear reactors take up much less environmental space than solar and wind farms, while more consistently producing electricity, regardless of the current weather.

Media Reform

Media reform is an important issue to Dennis Kucinich. According to his official website, he is opposed to the corporate consolidation of media and disturbed by their massive lobbyist influence, both in Congress and in the WTO (2006b). He is calling for free airtime for candidates and parties during election cycles and more substantial political coverage with a greater diversity of viewpoints. He believes that media conglomerates should be split apart through anti-trust laws and that cross-ownership and vertical integration should be outlawed. He also advocates for more public media outlets and increased funding for public broadcasting programming that advertisers

are not able to influence. He insists on more local coverage, relevant to the surrounding community, and is opposed to excessive violence on television.

In 2007, Kucinich announced he would chair a new House subcommittee devoted to media reform, including oversight of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Kucinich said he would use this subcommittee to reinstate the Fairness Doctrine, which requires television and radio stations to allow airtime for candidates to respond to controversial allegations made against them (Clark, 2007). He also said he would push for a federal shield law to protect journalists and bloggers from being jailed if they choose not to reveal their sources to authorities (Clark, 2007).

After high school, Dennis worked as a copy boy in the city room of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. While there, he was assigned to go around the city and retrieve pictures of fallen soldiers in the Vietnam War from their families (Kucinich, 2007). Another one of his tasks was to answer phones. Through this activity, he learned the powerful connection between a media organization and the surrounding local community. Dennis (2007) explains:

The telephones linked the city room with the streets of Cleveland. It was through answering the phones that I came to an understanding that many people were calling the newspaper because they had their own stories to tell. Not because they wanted to be in the news, but because they needed help, and the newspaper represented to them a public court of appeal. (p. 235)

According to his official website, Kucinich (2006b) has also hosted his own radio shows, worked as a local TV news anchor in Cleveland, and lead his own TV production unit.

During his second presidential campaign in 2008, Kucinich engaged in a legal fight with NBC after they excluded him from a debate they were televising in Nevada, even though he had been initially invited (Stelter, 2008). Ultimately, he lost the battle and was not allowed to attend,

leaving only Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and John Edwards on the stage (“Kucinich loses appeal,” 2008). He also was shutout of an earlier ABC debate in New Hampshire (Stelter, 2008). Experiences like these show why Kucinich is passionate about reinstating the Fairness Doctrine and requiring stations to provide equal, free airtime to candidates and parties.

Ohio’s 10th Congressional District

Dennis Kucinich has represented Ohio’s 10th congressional district since 1997. He is currently in the middle of his 7th term. According to Wikipedia (“Ohio’s 10th congressional”, n.d.), this district covers western Cleveland, including many of its suburbs in Cuyahoga County. It is virtually all urban and it is heavily Democratic. The ethnic makeup is close to 90% White, with the rest of the population made up mostly of Blacks and Hispanics. The district was originally created on March 4, 1823.

Kucinich has been reelected 6 times, each time by a comfortable margin of over 49,000 votes (Tracy, 2010). However, he is facing a new greater threat, but not from an opposing candidate. Every 10 years, the Federal Census is taken. Redistricting usually occurs in each state a year later. The current governor is always the one in charge of this process. In Ohio, John Kasich, a Republican, took over the governorship during the last election. Based on 2010 census data, the population surrounding Cleveland has significantly decreased. Consequently, according to Tracy (2010), Ohio is likely to lose 2 of its 18 representatives this year. He reports that political observers believe Governor Kasich may target Kucinich’s 10th district for elimination. Kucinich is being proactive by appealing directly to the public (Isenstadt, 2011). He even sent an email to his supporters, proclaiming, “We are going to have to prepare for a different kind of election, possibly in a different place because my district may be eliminated. We are going to have to organize in a different way now” (Isenstadt, 2011). In an open letter on his official

website, he has even hinted that he may run in a different district, possibly challenging a fellow Democrat in a primary runoff, if his district is indeed dissolved: “I have every intention of staying in Congress no matter what the special interests do to my district” (Kucinich, 2010b).

Political History

Councilman Kucinich

Dennis Kucinich began his political career in Cleveland at age 20 by running a campaign against an entrenched, eight-term incumbent councilman, John Bilinski. Kucinich was less than one-third Bilinski’s age. Even though he ultimately lost, Dennis came closer than any other challenger to defeating Bilinski. The margin was less than 500 votes (Kucinich, 2007). In 1969, Kucinich launched a second campaign against Bilinski and this time managed to beat him by the slimmest of margins: 16 votes (Kuznik, 1978).

“Boy Mayor” Kucinich

After a pair of unsuccessful attempts to gain a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, Kucinich ran for mayor in 1977 on a platform centered around 3 issues: reallocating city resources on neighborhoods rather than downtown, halting corporate tax abatement, and, most importantly, preventing the sale of the publicly-owned Municipal Electric Light Plant (Muny Light) into private hands (Miller & Wheeler, 2009). At 31 years old, Kucinich became known as the “Boy Mayor” when he was elected as the youngest big-city mayor in U.S. history (Wootten, 1978). His single, 2-year term as mayor couldn’t have been more turbulent. Besides dealing with blizzards, floods, a blackout, and a police strike, he faced a recall election that his opponents initiated after he publicly fired the police chief who he had a contentious relationship with (Wootten, 1978). Kucinich eventually earned the new nickname, “Dennis the Menace,” after he became engaged in a volatile conflict with his former city council colleagues, following what he

believed to be an unwarranted late-night office search of Joseph Furber, his commissioner of economic development, under accusations of mismanagement (Wootten, 1978).

An Electrifying Showdown

The biggest and most controversial event during Kucinich's short stint as mayor was his standoff with six banks that were trying to pressure him to sell Muny Light to Cleveland Electric Illuminating Company (CEI), a private competitor. The banks threatened not to renew credit to the city, as was customary, on \$15 million in loans if he didn't sell Muny Light by midnight on December 15, 1978 (Lamb, 2003). Kucinich had made a campaign promise and so he maintained a principled stance, refusing to surrender the public utility, and thus Cleveland became the first city to go into default since the Great Depression. He was convinced that CEI would hike electricity rates and cost the city millions of dollars, with the greatest burden being placed on blue-collar homeowners (Lamb, 2003). After the default incident, Kucinich was ridiculed across the country on television, in newspapers, and in public forums (Kisil, 2007).

Many years later, Kucinich was vindicated on his decision to keep Muny Light in public hands. People begin to realize, throughout the 1980s, that the default was a political stunt by the banks to turn public opinion against Kucinich (Lamb, 2003). According to Porrello (2001), some called it a "corporate overthrow of an elected official" (p. 174) after discovering that many bank directors and officers had contributed to the effort to remove Kucinich from office via the earlier recall petition. Eventually, congressional staff in Ohio, among others, adopted Kucinich's original stance that it was "a case of the bank and corporate community attempting to force the sale of an important city asset as a price for credit" (Porrello, 2001, p. 74). Since then, Mayor White, in 1993, recognized Kucinich's foresight, while the city council, in 1998, honored Kucinich for standing up to the banks and ultimately saving the city many millions of dollars

(Lamb, 2003). Today, over 30 years later, Muny Light still is publicly owned and running strong, under its new name, Cleveland Public Power.

The Mafia Assassination Plot

While mayor, Kucinich also faced an imminent mortal danger. During the fall of 1978, Cleveland police learned of a mafia plot to assassinate Kucinich (Porrello, 2001). Renner (2007) reports that Tommy Sinito was offered twenty-five thousand dollars to kill Kucinich, who was seen as a threat to the mob and its illegitimate business activities. Kucinich was on a mission to cleanup the city's nefarious business ties. According to Kisil (2007), he angered the Cleveland mafia by demanding a re-evaluation of the garbage hauling and other city contracts that members of the mob held a monopoly over for many years. Kisil explains that they relied on these contracts as a steady revenue source for their operations. They were also worried about being investigated and becoming federally charged with racketeering during this city contract review.

The initial plan was for Sinito to shoot Kucinich at a Columbus Day Parade during the week of October 9th, 1978 (Porrello, 2001). Ironically, Kucinich's chronic digestive health problems saved his life, however. He never made it to the parade because he was rushed to the hospital the day before with a ruptured ulcer (Renner, 2007). Plan B was for Sinito to snipe Kucinich from a rooftop across the street, as Dennis left Tony's Diner, where he had breakfast every single morning (Renner, 2007). According to Renner, the assassination was eventually called off, after the city was thrown into default. The mafia correctly assumed that this would lead to Kucinich's political defeat in 1969, thus making him irrelevant. After the default crisis, local police learned of the plot and notified Kucinich. Authorities continued to be concerned for his safety, so when he threw out the first pitch on the Cleveland Indian's opening day, he even wore a bulletproof vest (Kisil, 2007). He also began keeping a pistol in his house for protection

(Dubail, 2007).

Kucinich's Critics

Dennis Kucinich has had many enemies throughout his political career besides Cleveland Electric Illuminating Company, Cleveland Trust Bank, and the local mafia. There has also been quite a bit of critical, derisive editorials written about him over the years.

In his book *The American Mayor: The Best & the Worst Big-City Leaders*, Holli (1999) ranks Kucinich as the seventh worst mayor in U.S. history because of his “abrasive, intemperate, and confrontational populist political style,” “bad judgment in office,” and “disorderly and chaotic administration.” Holli believed that the city’s default on its bank loans occurred because Kucinich “stubbornly refused to compromise.”

As far back as the summer of 1978, a reporter in *Cleveland Magazine* recognized the polarizing effect that Kucinich has on people. Kuznik (1978) says the following about him:

Dennis Kucinich has become an emotional catalyst in Cleveland. In just six months as mayor -- and in the ambitious ten-year political career preceding that -- a bright hustler born on the East Side and bred all across town has inspired every reaction in the town populace from almost religious admiration to the most irrational hatred.

He is then compared by Kuznik to a “player in a Greek tragedy” as he is “drawn slowly in defeat and disgrace by some uncontrollable forces built into his defiant personality.” He portrays Kucinich as someone who is naively irrational and self-destructive, but also skilled at exploiting the media’s obsession with him to gain free publicity.

Kuznik (1978) finds the media to be so perplexed by Kucinich and his true motivations that he hired two well-respected, local psychiatrists to psychoanalyze him based on background data gathered about the mayor of Cleveland. In the analysis, the psychiatrists determine he is

impulsive and quick-tempered with little self-control. They see him as being too self-reliant to accept discipline or others' opinions. They question his maturity and view him as unable to delay gratification. Because he is short and he grew up disadvantaged, the psychiatrists believe him to be an egocentric man who always feels the need to sell himself and prove that he is a big, important leader. They feel that he tends to look at himself as a tough hero who must protect the people from all the villains in the world. These villains often conveniently happen to be his opponents. Finally, they see his administration as having a familial structure designed to compensate for the chaotic family life he grew up with as a child, and they see him as frequently being paranoid or fearful of outsiders.

It appears that Kucinich's reputation and some of the negative views about him have followed him into the U.S. House of Representatives, at least among his opposition. Kevin O'Brien (2010), a conservative editorial writer at the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* states, "When he was first elected, the not entirely tongue-in-cheek assessment was that with 434 adults to supervise him in the House of Representatives, how much damage could Dennis do?" O'Brien sees Kucinich and his supporters within his district as being eccentric and he accuses Dennis of continuously "wandering off into the political, fiscal and ideological weeds."

Kucinich's detractors sometimes accuse of him of being a flip-flopper who is inconsistent on his political positions. This is ironic, considering that much of the criticism about him is that he is too stubborn, dogmatic, and entrenched in his views. Unfortunately, for Kucinich though, there are a couple of glaring issues in which he has demonstrated major shifts over time.

One of these issues is abortion. Although, he does not mention his strong opposition to abortion anywhere on his official website, he has supported numerous anti-abortion bills in past terms (Pollitt, 2002). According to Pollitt (2002), he even voted against embryonic stem cell

research, as well as the coverage of contraception in federal workers' healthcare plans. While his religious, Catholic upbringing may help to explain some of these stances, they still are odd positions for a heavily left-leaning Democrat to take. Since his early years in Congress, he has tried to communicate a more nuanced approach to the abortion issue, stating that he would like to reduce the number of abortions through more social supports, better education and improved healthcare Pollitt (2002). To his credit, Pollitt also reports that Kucinich claims he wants to start a dialogue in order to "build bridges" between the two sides. The problem is that he now has placed himself right in the crossfire of a very contentious wedge issue. Pro-choice and women's rights advocates, such as Pollitt, are quite unhappy with his historical voting record on this matter, while anti-abortion conservatives are using his politicized efforts to hide his pro-life record to paint him as a weak flip flopper who can't be trusted to stand up for his principles.

Healthcare reform is another area where he has recently got himself into trouble. Although O'Brien (2010) seems to be against Obama's healthcare reform in general, he makes a fair point about Kucinich switching positions and compromising on a healthcare bill that he initially "vilified as an eternal guarantor of insurance company profits." Kucinich has vocally advocated for a single-payer system for many years, and he has recently been quite critical of the mandated insurance clause in Obama's plan, in which most people will be required by law to purchase private health insurance.

Kucinich is often portrayed by his opposition, such as O'Brien (2010) as having "crazy" ideas that are far outside and out of touch of America's mainstream. However, growing up on the rough streets of Cleveland in a very poor, blue-collar family, Dennis prides himself on being a common peer of the working class people.

At the same time, Naymik (2003) reports that a large constituency who supports him

includes affluent, new age, peace activists. She believes that this constituency is attracted to specific legislation such as banning weapons in space and establishing a Department of Peace. Many see such supporters as mystical hippies who are on the fringe of society, which in turn influence Kucinich's own public image among moderates and independents. Naymik believes that Kucinich's vegan lifestyle, as well as his own language of spirituality and universal interconnectedness in his speeches tend to contribute to this perceived persona. In addition, his close personal connections to eccentric Hollywood figures such as Shirley MacLaine, and his "willingness to listen to non-mainstream groups have created some controversy" (Naymik, 2003). MacLaine, in particular, caused him some trouble and ridicule when she revealed in her book that Kucinich believes he saw a UFO (Phillips, 2008). According to Phillips (2008), in her book, she states that Dennis claimed to feel "a connection in his heart and heard directions in his mind" when he saw the flying object in the sky at her home in Washington State. The UFO story became so gossiped about that NBC news anchor and moderator, Tim Russert, actually asked him a question about his belief in extraterrestrial life during a televised 2008 presidential debate.

Kucinich even receives backhanded complements from those who seem to admire him for his courage and ideology, such as this blogger ("Member of the week," 2011) on ClotureClub.com:

It would be unfair to simply look at Dennis Kucinich and his obscure political and legislative efforts as the work of a man who foolishly holds on to his ideals. The failures of the 2004 and 2008 Presidential campaigns have shown his message to be too unconventional for the general public. Despite the inability to gather strong support outside of his Democratic-leaning district and little success in passing legislation, Dennis Kucinich refuses to give up in his attempt to shape the agenda of the Democratic Party. If

the past is any indicator, Kucinich is incapable of anything else.

All of these narratives in the media add to the myth that Kucinich is a fringe politician with strange ideas that are unrealistic and ideological in nature, rather than the resilient, pragmatic, economically minded, social justice leader that he wishes to be seen as. Kisil (2007) sums up this myth well while discussing his leadership as mayor of Cleveland: “His naïve political thinking didn’t meet the challenge of tough urban politics.”

Most recently, Kucinich has been ridiculed in the media for suing the House of Representatives cafeteria for permanent dental and oral damage after he bit into an olive pit in a sandwich presented as containing pitted olives (Eaton, 2011). He also has raised eyebrows amongst media pundits and members of his own party by asserting that Obama’s decision to engage in military action in Libya without prior congressional consent is an impeachable offense (Cottle, 2011).

Despite his critics, Kucinich insists he is a mainstream politician. He continues to assert his own identity and challenge the role that his detractors have attempted to define for him, proclaiming, “I don’t start at the margins. I started in the ward clubs of Cleveland, and I don’t forget that. My politics come from the neighborhoods of the city” (Naymik, 2003). Many of his supporters agree, while also recognizing his unique qualities. John Hagelin, a Harvard physicist and former Natural Law Party presidential candidate, praises Kucinich, stating, “He’s got a lot of natural silence, and an open and clear mind... A lot of members of both parties get this. Dennis Kucinich is a little bit more expressive, bolder and less political” (Naymik, 2003).

The Political Brain and Mind of Dennis Kucinich

Perhaps the biggest thing that makes Kucinich a political enigma is the way he manages to repeatedly get re-elected in comfortable fashion, as well as the way he manages to stay relevant

in the media. Love him or hate him, he always is able to intrigue people. Yet, at the same time, as O'Brien (2010), a conservative detractor, gleefully points out, only 4 of the 104 bills that he has sponsored actually ended up becoming law. Moreover, these 4 bills are rather inconsequential in terms of substance. He often has failed to garner the necessary broad-based support, even from his own party to pass any significant legislation. This, of course, provides more kindling for people such as O'Brien to flame Kucinich with.

In the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections, the hapless Democrats offered up two candidates who were perpetually muzzled and emotionally stifled by their campaign handlers, thus making them appear as dispassionate, overly rational, and seemingly void of humanity. Since that time, cognitive brain scientists and political psychologists, such as Drew Westen (2007) and George Lakoff (2008), have been harshly criticizing the Democrats. They are frustrated with Democratic strategists' inability to construct cohesive narratives, principles, and frames that are emotionally rich and powerful so that average Americans can effortlessly and unconsciously identify with them. They are also perplexed at why Democrats often take a back seat, allowing Republicans first dibs at setting the agenda and defining progressive policies within unappealing and fear-inducing frames. Westen (2007) states, "We are not *moved* by leaders with whom we do not feel an emotional resonance" (p. 16). Lakoff (2008) emphasizes, "'Changing minds' in any deep way always requires changing brains" (p. 12). Later, he explains, "Politics is very much about cultural narratives" (p. 35).

Kucinich doesn't seem to play by the same rules as most other Democrats. He rarely comes across as dispassionate. He is extremely animated when he speaks. He is inflective with his voice. He frequently uses poetic techniques such as repetition and vivid metaphors. He is not afraid to use humor or be self-deprecating. He even leverages the emotional power of music,

such as in his “Prayer for America” speech (Kucinich, 2003). He also is willing to take on controversial issues directly, rather than avoid or dance around them. Most importantly, he has well-defined principles. He consistently communicates common themes and narratives throughout his speeches.

As I have shown in the first part of this paper, almost every position that Kucinich stands for revolves around the basic principles of peace and social justice. He intuitively understands the teachings of Westen and Lakoff, as evidenced on his official website, when he discusses the establishment of a Department of Peace (Kucinich, n.d.c). Kucinich proclaims, “We must change the metaphor of our society from one of war to one of peace.” He continues:

Americans have proven over and over again we're a nation that can rise to the challenges of our times, because our people have that capacity. And so, the concept of a Department of Peace is the vehicle by which we express our belief that we have the capacity to evolve as a people, that someday we could look back at this moment and understand that we took the steps along the way to make war archaic. Violence is not inevitable. War is not inevitable.

Nonviolence and peace are inevitable. (Kucinich, n.d.c)

Therefore, the question remains. How can Dennis Kucinich be such a dynamic, interesting, and emotionally evoking figure in American Politics, and at the same time be so ineffective when it comes to consensus building and the passing of legislation? Kucinich’s political career, personality, and communication style could be a fascinating case study for Westen or Lakoff. After all, Kucinich espouses many of the qualities that Gore and Kerry were unable to deliver; yet, he still fails to get many people in this country to identify with his ideas and proposed legislation. Rather, he is often perceived as quixotic, crazy, and outside of the mainstream. Perhaps, becoming a successful true progressive in U.S. politics is more complex than Westen

(2007) and Lakoff (2008) would like us to believe? Certainly some of the clues and answers to these puzzling questions lie within the views of Kucinich's strongest critics.

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