Democratic doctors and scientists ride the blue wave

Here's how their backgrounds may influence health policy

By Anil Oza and Sarah Todd – STAT News
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Democratic physicians, nurses, and scientists won dramatic victories across the U.S. on Tuesday, part of the sweeping blue wave that saw Democrats regain control of Congress in midterm elections that spotlighted health care, public health, and trust in science.

Among the most notable victories: Epidemiologist Abdul El-Sayed won a Michigan Senate seat and pediatrician Annie Andrews flipped South Carolina's Senate seat for the Democrats in a major upset, helping hand control of the chamber to Democrats. Ohio's newly elected governor, physician Amy Acton, was the state's pandemic-era health director.

Democrats took back the House of Representatives with newly elected representatives including registered nurse Mitchell Berman, who flipped a seat in Wisconsin; health care executive Rebecca Bennett, who flipped a seat in New Jersey; microbiologist Jasmine Clark in Georgia; microbiologist Manny Rutinel, who flipped a seat in Colorado; and pediatrician Richard Pan in California.

More than 500 Democratic doctors, nurses, scientists, and others with backgrounds in public health also ran for state and local office nationwide, according to 314 Action Fund, a grassroots organization that this year put $30 million into backing Democratic physicians, health care workers, and other scientists in key races.

"Health care has been the number one issue in this election, whether it's affordability or accessibility," said Shaughnessy Naughton, founder and president 314 Action. "Both are out of reach for too many Americans. Having doctors and public health officials not just as policy advisors, but as elected officials, makes a huge difference in that discussion."

The new crop of Democratic physicians in Congress marks a major change from recent years, in which the most prominent physicians were Republicans: Louisiana gastroenterologist Sen. Bill Cassidy, Kansas OB-GYN Sen. Roger Marshall, Wyoming orthopedic surgeon Sen. John Barrasso, and Kentucky ophthalmologist Sen. Rand Paul. Marshall was defeated on Tuesday, and Cassidy lost his primary.

“What you’ve really seen in medicine is a generational change in how physicians identify politically,” Naughton said. Many older physicians owned their own practices, identified as Republican, and ran for office in opposition to the Affordable Care Act. “Then you have this next generation of physicians that are thinking more holistically about health care and the effects of external conditions on the health care of their patients,” she said, “whether it’s access to healthy food or a healthy environment, good education, gun violence, climate change.”

Historically, scientists and physicians have been reluctant to engage in politics. President Trump’s rise and the coronavirus pandemic pushed scientists into the political arena. His first term inspired the March for Science, and policies throughout his second term have led to consistent pushback from scientists, scientific societies, and advocates.

Kristoffer Shields directs the Eagleton Science and Politics Program at Rutgers University, which studies the intersection of science and politics and places scientists in state-level offices. He said he has seen more civic engagement from scientists across the board, from running for office, to weighing in on issues in their areas of expertise, to pushing more scientific societies to take positions on policy.

He cautioned that because the election was such a strong rebuke of Trump and the Republican party, it is difficult to say how much scientists’ and clinicians’ professional backgrounds figured into their success.

“Last night it was good to have a ‘D’ next to your name. The question is, ‘Does it continue to be good to have a Dr. next to your name?’” he asked.

Major wins for doctors

El-Sayed's race was one of the most closely watched, though not because of his background in health and science. Still, his expertise is likely to figure into his legislative priorities.

In an interview last month, he told STAT he wants to set the groundwork to reform the Department of Health and Human Services in 2029. Passing "Medicare for All," which he has written a book on, was one of the three pillars of his platform and will be high on his list of priorities.

Acton's victory against the billionaire former biotech executive Vivek Ramaswamy is noteworthy in a race that doubled as a weathervane on voters' concerns over affordable health care and the future of public health.

Ramaswamy frequently attacked Acton over her role in policies like lockdowns and school closures during Ohio's response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Acton's campaign, meanwhile, foregrounded concerns about Medicaid access and rising health care costs.

Acton's background as a physician and former state health director could be a major boon for trust in science in the state, said Julie Scofield, a member of the coordinating committee for the volunteer group Defend Public Health and former executive director of the National Alliance of State and Territorial AIDS Directors.

Governors like her, she said, "are going to make sure that they can talk about vaccines, that they can start to reach out and engage with communities around the conditions that exist that support their health across infectious diseases and chronic diseases."

Andrews, the South Carolina pediatrician turned senator, has said that it was the current administration's efforts to undermine the childhood vaccine schedule, kick people off Medicaid, and cancel scientific research grants that motivated her to run for Senate.

She's vowed to fight back against these changes in Congress and advocate for a public health care option to keep expanding health care access. Andrews had previously been a vocal advocate for gender-affirming care for minors, but more recently ran ads outlining her stance against "gender surgery for minors" and "men in women's sports."

What physicians will do with their political power

While physicians and others with health backgrounds are part of the new Democratic-controlled Congress, Trump remains president and holds veto power over legislation they may try to pass.

Still, “we will have the opportunity with this new Congress to repeal some of the cuts to Medicaid and restore funds for Medicaid and food assistance that were both really damaged in the last two years,” said Scofield. “I think the biggest thing we’re looking forward to is Congress reasserting its power of the purse.”

The specific influence that physicians and others with health backgrounds in Congress will wield depend in part on what committees they’re assigned to, said Matthew Motta, an associate professor of health law, policy, and management at Boston University’s School of Public Health.

On committees that oversee federal spending, “these are precisely the folks who could be in key leadership positions in Congress to make an effort to codify protections to science funding, to academic research.” He would also expect members of this group to have an appetite for restoring the Affordable Care Act subsidies that expired under the Trump administration.

A paper published last year found that funding for science typically increases when Republicans control the House or the presidency. The new slate of scientists who were elected may not have as much sway because they lack seniority, said Alexander Furnas, a science policy researcher at Northwestern and an author on that paper.

There is a possibility that “scientist members can carve out these niches as leaders where other members can follow their cues on science-related issues, and they could do that outside of the institutional channels of committee power,” he said.

A common thread among the physicians running for office was calling for accountability for Kennedy. El-Sayed has repeatedly said he wants to hold the health secretary accountable, Andrews has referred to him as

her “archnemesis,” and incoming Georgia representative Jasmine Clark has derided his MAHA movement.

“RFK Jr. is a talker. So is Dr. Oz on the Republican side. … I think it would be really useful to medicine to have somebody that’s equally as quick and outspoken to dismiss some of those claims,” said Andrew Wehrman, a historian at Central Michigan University who focuses on politics and medicine.

On Tuesday night, Acton was already putting her medical background into action. She stopped her victory speech and left the stage to help a member of the audience who fainted.

Clark is a strong example of scientists’ changing engagement with politics. Her first foray into politics was getting involved with the 2018 March for Science, before running for the state legislature. Now, she is set to be the first Black woman with a STEM Ph.D. in Congress.

“There’s an acknowledgement that we can’t just ignore the politics that’s happening around us because it does impact science,” she told STAT Wednesday morning. She sees the fervor among her colleagues as a response to the Trump administration, and its swift changes to higher education and science over the past two years. “All in all, we realize we have to lean in because if we don’t, then policy isn’t going to happen for us. It will happen to us.”