Kaiser Health News

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Cite this as: *BMJ* 2020;371:m4118<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m4118>

Published: 30 October 2020

US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION 2020

US election: How covid-19 pushed doctors into the political arena like never before

During the coronavirus pandemic science has taken a bit of a beating in the US. **Victoria Knight** of Kaiser Health News reports that some health professionals and scientists have responded by jumping into politics

Victoria Knight *reporter*

Hiral Tipirneni is running for the US Congress from the state of Arizona. The people she wants to represent have inadequate access to testing and tracing, says Tipirneni, an emergency department physician, and should be mandated to wear masks.

On the campaign trail she has called on her Republican opponent, Congressman David Schweikert, to denounce President Donald Trump's gathering of thousands for a recent rally in Arizona as well as Trump's repeated calls to slow down covid-19 testing as a way to hold down the case count.¹

"I believe in data. I believe in facts," Tipirneni says. "I believe in science guiding us, whether it's the opioid crisis or tax policy or immigration reform. Those decisions could be and should be driven by the data. Science is not partisan."

Physicians and scientists on both sides queuing up

Tipirneni is one of four Democratic physicians running as challengers for the US Congress in 2020, all in closely watched, tight races. In addition, three Democratic physician incumbents are running to retain their seats and are expected to win.

Meanwhile a new political action committee, Doctors in Politics, was formed this year by physicians who were frustrated by what they viewed as a failed federal response to covid-19. The group's aim is to elect 50 Democratic or independent doctors to political office by 2022, says Dona Murphey, one of the group's founders and a neurologist. But for now they're focused on 2020.

It's not just Democratic doctors. The group 3.14 Action (named for the value of pi) is supporting Mark Kelly, an engineer and former astronaut seeking a Senate seat in Arizona, and Nancy Goroff, who has a doctorate in chemistry and is running for the House of Representatives from New York. Science is an integral part of their policy platforms, with an emphasis on the coronavirus pandemic.

On the Republican side, there are already 11 Republican doctors serving in the House and three in the Senate. This year several Republican doctors are running for the first time for Congress, including Leo Valentin in Florida and Ronny Jackson, previously Trump's White House physician, in Texas. In a doctor versus doctor contest, Roger Marshall, a

current member of the House, is facing Democratic physician Barbara Bollier in the race for Kansas's open Senate seat.

David Lazer, a professor of political science and computer science at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts, and one of the leaders of a covid-19 polling consortium, thinks their timing might be right.

"My intuition is that this is a good year to be running as a doctor or scientist," he says, pointing to a September survey by the consortium that showed that trust in doctors and scientists was higher than trust in any other US institution or political entity.²

Covid-19 has become a divisive political issue in the US, with Trump, the leader of the Republican party, taking some decidedly antiscience stances. During the pandemic the president has dismissed public health advice from experts, touted unproved coronavirus treatments, and questioned the effectiveness of masks, much to the dismay of Democratic legislators.

The Republican-Democratic split is reflected in the attitude of party members. Cary Funk, director of science and society research at the Pew Research Center, a non-partisan think tank in Washington, DC, points to a May report from the center.³ The report shows that the public's overall trust in medical scientists has increased since 2019—but only because of a growing trust among Democrats. Republicans' trust in scientists, already lower than Democrats' trust, stayed about the same from 2019 through the first few months of the pandemic.

"The Trump administration has systematically done everything it could to downplay, dismiss, or deny science," says Michael Gerrard, an environmental lawyer and professor at Columbia University, New York. "This is most prominent with climate change and now with the coronavirus, but it's all across the board." Gerrard has tracked more than 300 instances in which he found scientific initiatives to have been restricted or questioned by federal officials since 2016, 21 of them related to covid.⁴

The perceived antiscience stance has brought scientific organizations that don't normally step into the political fray into the heart of it.

The presidents of the National Academy of Sciences and National Academy of Medicine, for instance,

released a joint statement on 24 September expressing alarm over what they considered to be political interference in the president's response to covid-19.⁵

And a multitude of scientific and medical publications have gone on the record out of concern about the fate of science in government. *Scientific American* formally endorsed the Democratic presidential candidate, former vice president Joe Biden—the first time it has made such a political pick in its 175 year history.⁶ The journal *Nature* has also endorsed Biden.⁷ The *New England Journal of Medicine* published a scathing critique of the federal government's pandemic response, "Dying in a Leadership Vacuum."⁸ Although *NEJM* did not formally endorse a candidate, the editorial says, "Our current political leaders have demonstrated that they are dangerously incompetent."

Science as a divider? Yes and no

Some political scientists and pollsters say that while Democrats' use of "pro-science" messaging in their campaigns could help them get elected, it also may ultimately lead to increased polarization.

"We've sometimes seen a modest difference in political parties when it comes to scientists generally, but it's gotten a little bit bigger," says Funk, referring to the Pew surveys.

And this perceived alignment of science with the Democratic party could be bad for scientists, says Dominik Stecula, an assistant professor of political science at Colorado State University. "From a scientist's point of view it hurts the goals that you're trying to achieve, because what ends up happening is that, increasingly, Republicans treat scientists as an out-party group, a constituency of the Democrats," he says.

But Republicans deny that they ignore science or downplay its significance. They say that, instead, Democrats often take positions that stifle scientific innovation by increasing taxes and regulation, citing research and development in the pharmaceutical field as an example.

"Democrats calling themselves the party of science sounds a bit like Trumpian self-flattery," wrote Doug Badger, a visiting fellow in domestic policy studies at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, in an email. He doesn't think that Republicans and Democrats approach science differently, since most research is conducted far from the political sphere.

Science isn't a Democratic-Republican issue, says Representative Lauren Underwood of Illinois, a registered nurse who flipped her district to Democratic when she was elected in 2018 on a pro-science platform. She's running for re-election this year.

"We learn science in every grade, in every level of education," she says. "There may be some partisan differences in how we take partisan findings, but I think it's dangerous if we start to presume that science is polarizing."

Underwood thinks her background as a health professional helps her work with Republicans in Congress. For instance, she joined with Representative Phil Roe, a Republican physician who is co-chair of the House GOP Doctors Caucus, last spring to introduce legislation on protecting the medical supply chain. And Roe, in turn, says that sharing medical backgrounds has brought him together with Democratic doctors and other health professionals to work on health policy.

Like Underwood, Roe also dismisses the idea that science—especially that related to the pandemic and the development of a covid-19 vaccine—is further polarizing the

electorate. In his view it's less about science and more about the race for the White House.

"Of course it's been politicized, it's a political year," says Roe. "If we hadn't had an election, I think it would look different."

Competing interests: None declared.

Provenance and peer review: Commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.

This article is published in collaboration with Kaiser Health News, a non-profit news service covering health issues. It is an editorially independent program of KFF (Kaiser Family Foundation) that is not affiliated with Kaiser Permanente.

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