

Academia is running for Congress

Midterm elections usually reflect strong opposition to the party in the White House, and the 2018 elections do not seem to be any different. Women, many who see themselves as targets of the current political environment, have achieved great success in special elections since 2016, and they seem to be heading to even greater success in this year's elections.

According to Emily's List, the largest national organization devoted to electing female candidates, in the 10 months before the election in 2016 about 1,000 women contacted that organization about running for office or getting involved in other ways.

Since the election, the number has exploded to more than 25,000. And something similar is happening with higher education.

According to 314 Action, a D.C.-based nonprofit advocacy group formed two years ago to encourage scientists to engage in politics, at least 60 scientists are bidding for seats in the U.S. Congress this year.

Some 200 people with science and engineering backgrounds are also running for state legislative seats, with a similar number vying for school board and other local and county level positions.

Here are some examples of academics (all of them happen to be Democrats) who have already thrown their hats into the ring.

Julia Biggins, a biotech scientist, is challenging freshman representative Barbara Comstock (Republican) in Virginia's District 10, considered a purple, or tossup, seat. Democrat Chrissy Houlahan, an industrial

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engineer with very good fundraising skills, is challenging Republican Ryan Costello for District 6 in Pennsylvania. Jason Westin, a clinical oncologist, will be running against nine-term incumbent Republican John Culberson in the purple District 7 in Texas. Molly Sheehan, a biophysics postdoctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania, is vying for the open seat in District 7 of Pennsylvania. For Illinois District 14 (suburban Chicago) Matt Brolley, a young engineer, is looking to unseat Republican Randy Hultgren, a social and fiscal conservative. The list goes on and on.

By the way, women make up the majority of scientists planning a run for Congress this year.

These academics have many different reasons for seeking a political career after a life in academia.

Molly Sheehan, for example, knows she does not have the money or the networking connections that lawyers, industrialists, or political operatives usually have. Yet, she has raised more than \$35,000 and loaned herself \$170,000. That is a lot of commitment for a postdoctoral student. She said that given the anti-science and anti-intellectual environment in which we live, she needs to do something.

Randy Wadkins is a professor of biochemistry at the University of Mississippi in Oxford, near where he

grew up.

Wadkins has been public about his distaste for Trump's and the Republican majority's policies in Congress.

But what chance do these first-timers and political neophytes with science and engineering backgrounds really have of making a dent in the policies of this highly partisan Congress? There are many obstacles.

At a minimum, a run for a Congressional seat costs, on average, about \$4 million. If your district is in an urban or suburban area, we are talking several millions more because of television costs. You may win millennials (they rarely watch TV) but attracting an older, more disciplined electorate may be a different story.

It is also difficult for a first-time Democrat to win in a traditional red district. You will also have to contend with the fact that the Republican-election machine is well adept at demonizing and ridiculing people whose credentials are as intellectuals.

One of the things they used to say about Barack Obama was that he was too "professorial." On the Democratic side, on the other hand, they are very bad communicators, particularly when it comes to the defense of intellectualism. Finally, to run a campaign you need professionals supporting you. If you have never run or been involved in a campaign, you will have a hard time figuring out how to do it effectively.

How about the positives? This year some conventional wisdom may not apply. Not only is it a midterm election, which usually leans against the

party in power, Trump has become a figure who has energized a large opposition.

Further, Republican candidates elected in primaries seem to be more and more leaning towards the far right, which makes them look more extremist in the eyes of even moderate Republicans.

With the Trump Administration, known for its scandals and incompetence, Republicans might prove an easy target for people who are just different, who can show they are rational or just "normal" in comparison.

The crux of the matter will be at the communications level. Not only are Democrats bad at constructing effective messages, but people in academia may not have the training to present themselves as likable individuals capable of showing that they understand that the general public is not their captive classroom audience.

These candidates need to be able to connect themselves with people who really do not care much about science, while being able to explain the facts in simple terms.

These facts, in a world of lies and "alternative facts," sometimes are not easy to convey in the form of a "talking point." Also, they may not be very adroit at dealing with personal attacks and in how to counter them.

But, as they say, time will tell.

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