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ALEX GARLAND



Former climate scientist Jess Spear (third from left), now an organizer for the activist group Socialist Alternative, campaigns on the streets of Seattle in 2014.

ACTIVISM

## A call to serve

*The political arena need not be off-limits to scientists.*

BY CHRIS WOOLSTON

As if full-time research weren't time-consuming and challenging enough, nanophysicist Michael Stopa embraced a second occupation while at the bench: politics. He served as a delegate for US president-elect Donald Trump at this year's Republican National Convention. Before that, while he was a senior scientist at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, he blew his cover as a semi-secret conservative by running unsuccessfully as a Republican for the US Congress in 2010 and again in 2013. "My face was on the front page of the Harvard *Crimson*," he says of the university's student newspaper. "At that point, I was exposed."

Stopa, who now works at a technology

startup near Boston, Massachusetts, says that his outspoken politics have cost him at least one close professional collaboration — and maybe more — but that hasn't quietened him. He still talks politics on the *Harvard Lunch Club* weekly podcast. In each session he takes part in, he discusses his conservative views, including his belief that illegal immigration threatens the United States.

The acrimonious US presidential election is over, but politics are forever, and Stopa isn't the only scientist joining the fray. Many researchers take public political stands on Twitter and elsewhere, and some are engaging with political parties or running for office (see 'Join the party'). Politically active scientists can struggle to find the time and energy to bridge both worlds, and there's always the risk that

an unpopular stand could cause friction. But there are also benefits: politics can provide another avenue for networking and outreach. And, ideally, scientists will be able to give governments the kind of input needed to produce informed policy. Political involvement can also create a sense of real-world accomplishment that is sometimes hard to find in the lab. "Nothing's more rewarding than combining the two passions," says David Mazzocchi-Jones, a neuroscientist at Keele University, UK, and a member of the local Labour Party.

Despite the opportunities, few scientists have reached high office in government. Frauke Petry, chairwoman of the right-wing Alternative for Germany Party, has a chemistry PhD, as does chancellor Angela Merkel. Of 535 members of the US House and Senate, ►

## JOIN THE PARTY

## Getting political

Want to get involved in politics? Here's how to take the plunge.

- **Step forward.** Scientists willing to volunteer their time and talent are always in demand. "If you go to any party office anywhere in the world and say that you really want to help out, they aren't going to say no," says David Mazzocchi-Jones, a neurologist at Keele University, UK, who is active in the UK Labour Party. "Or call up a local politician and offer to help. No politician will turn you away."
- **Find your issue.** Jess Spear, a former climate scientist who is now an organizer for activist group Socialist Alternative in Seattle, Washington, recommends campaigning for a local issue even if it's not specifically

science-related. If you're passionate about an increase in the minimum wage or a new tax, then making phone calls or writing letters could be a rewarding political introduction.

- **Get in the race.** Win or lose, campaigning is a proven way to spread your message. Just be ready for the verdict. "You have to have a thick skin," Mazzocchi-Jones says. "Scientists are used to rejection, but getting rejected by 40,000 people is different."
- **Join an activist group** — but only if you're ready to be a team member. "It's important that educated people come to activism with humility," Spear says. "You are there to build with others, not teach them, and you are not an expert in the political arena." **C.W.**

▶ just two congressmen — a physicist and an engineer — have PhDs in the hard sciences. The UK-based Campaign for Science and Engineering counts 90 Members of Parliament who have at least some background or interest in the sciences, engineering or medicine, including Thérèse Coffey, who has a PhD in chemistry. That's down from 103 science-minded MPs in the previous parliament. "Scientists are very under-represented in politics in the UK," Mazzocchi-Jones says. "Twenty years ago, there were quite a few more."

Researchers who manage to break into the political world could have a huge impact on policy, says Jeff Schweitzer, a former marine biologist who worked as a science-policy analyst for the US Clinton administration in the 1990s. "The biggest thing that a scientist brings is a method of thinking," he says. "They have a vocabulary that non-scientists might not have." Scientists in government can help to bridge the gap between policymakers and the researchers who study, in great detail, how the real world actually works, he adds.

Mazzocchi-Jones, a Labour councillor for Newcastle-under-Lyme, believes that his science background has helped him to handle the issues that matter to his constituents. "When we're deciding on a new recycling system, I can say, 'Show me the numbers,'" he says.

Governments are increasingly facing critical issues such as climate change and fracking (hydraulic fracturing) that call for scientific wisdom, says David Dunbar, a bioinformatician at the University of Edinburgh, UK, who is active with the Scottish National Party. "The scientists you see in the UK Parliament seem to be thinking in an evidence-based way, and that's a positive," he says. "The party line isn't always evidence-based. And neither is public opinion."

Scientists who aren't themselves politically active can still do their bit to keep politicians

informed, even if only through a quick e-mail or a chat with a local representative. "We need to engage more with politicians," Mazzocchi-Jones says. "It's not going to get us anywhere unless we talk to them directly." He says that his interest in politics was rekindled in 2014 when he helped to organize the UK Physiological Society's Engaging with Parliamentarians outreach programme, where he and other scientists paired up with politicians to exchange ideas. He says that both sides must find ways to identify common ground. "Scientists have to step forward and be recognized," he says, "and politicians have to listen."

Politics can be a sticky subject, however, especially when someone is out of step with their colleagues. Stopa says he felt some tension at Harvard, and not just with the friend and collaborator who severed ties with him. When Stopa's contract wasn't renewed, he was eager to move on. "It's hard to be surrounded by people with different ideologies."

Stopa doesn't regret publicly announcing his conservatism, but he understands why some conservatives prefer to keep quiet. "There's an ongoing debate about whether or not to come out of the closet," he says. "You have to make that decision for yourself. If you think it might negatively affect your career, you might be better off not saying these things."

Schweitzer sees political activism as a right. No one in science should be afraid to put their politics on display, he says. "If that's an obstacle," he adds, "you're not at the right institution."

Sometimes, political anonymity isn't much of an option. "A lot of my colleagues and students live in my ward," says Mazzocchi-Jones.

"I know for a fact that they've received leaflets with my face on them." And his dual roles occasionally collide in awkward ways. "Colleagues will tell me, 'My bin didn't get collected last week,'" he adds, by way of example.

So compelling is political work for some scientists that they turn it into a full-time profession. Stacey Danckert, who has a PhD in cognitive neuroscience from the University of Waterloo, Canada, declined a prestigious two-year grant from the Alzheimer Society of Canada in 2013 because she found it tough to balance research, politics and family commitments. "I decided to follow my passion for the environment," she says.

She left the lab and is now policy coordinator for the Green Party of Ontario and a twice-unsuccessful Green Party candidate for the Provincial Parliament of Ontario. In her view, it's almost impossible for a scientist to run for political office while staying in the lab. "It's important to get your name out, and you can't do that without spending a lot of time," she says. "The two pursuits require endless dedication."

Similarly, Jess Spear, a former climate scientist who worked at the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture in Seattle, Washington, left research to join Socialist Alternative, a socialist activist group, in 2011. After running unsuccessfully for the Washington state House of Representatives in 2014, she is now a full-time organizer for the group. "The more I got involved in climate science," she says, "the more I became aware that we don't just need more data. We need political will."

Schweitzer believes that scientists who can handle university politics have the mettle to excel at local, regional and national politics. "The skills are very transferable," he says. "You have to show that you can get along with people, and you have to build networks."

Perhaps most importantly, scientists tend to have a track record of working with large bureaucracies. "You need to be able to manipulate the system to your will to get things done," he says. "If you tend to get frustrated and just throw up your hands, politics probably isn't for you."

Before jumping into politics, Schweitzer briefly ran his own lab at the University of California, Irvine, an experience that he says was invaluable in his second career. "In order to have credibility in Washington DC, you have to have had at least a short career as a lab scientist," he says. "I wasn't in the lab very long, but in their view I was a real scientist."

Mazzocchi-Jones manages, for the most part, to keep his work separate from his ideology. He says that he has a student who is an outspoken supporter of the UK Independence Party, a right-wing, anti-immigration party. "I find his politics abhorrent," Mazzocchi-Jones says. "But in the end, science unites us." ■

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