

# Daily Herald

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## What's luring more scientists to step into the political fray?

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Posted Sunday, July 08, 2007

Bill Foster helped discover the top quark and design the giant accelerator at Fermilab.

Robert Abboud is a nuclear engineer who holds five patents and kept the Zion reactor up and running.

Dr. Steven Sauerberg is a West suburban family physician who testifies in medical malpractice cases.

All three are running for Congress next year.

With physics professor Mike Fortner of West Chicago already serving in the Illinois House, a new, if small, trend is emerging in suburban politics: scientists seeking office.

"If you don't play in the political arena, no matter how good you are technically, you cannot institute change," said Abboud, the Barrington Hills mayor who's exploring a run against Republican U.S. Rep. Donald Manzullo in the 16th Congressional District.

Foster, running in the 14th Congressional District as a Democrat, suggests the stigma of science is no more, opening an avenue to elected office. The pocket protectors might remain, but the contribution scientists make gets more respect.

"When I was growing up, being a technologist was a geeky thing to do," said Foster, who's in whether or not former Republican Speaker Dennis Hastert retires. "Sometime around the Internet boom, it became OK (to be a scientist)."



**Bill Foster, Fermilab scientist**



**Robert Abboud, nuclear engineer**

Given their outsized intellect, politics hasn't always held much magnetic pull in the scientific community.

"When you get into a scientific world, there are things to do there that you find rewarding. You get into your life, you get going in your scientific career and you like it," said Sauerberg, a Willowbrook doctor running as a Republican against Democratic U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin next year. "Unless there's a compelling reason to come out of it, you don't."



**Steven Sauerberg, family physician**

Adds Abboud: "This is sausage-making. As scientists, we were trained from almost a moral perspective. You find the political process just abhorrent."

Nationally, Congress has just seven scientists among the 535 people serving in the House and Senate. There are three chemists, two physicists, an engineer and a microbiologist. That's up from just two scientists six years ago. The two chambers also count among their ranks a dozen medical doctors, including just-appointed Wyoming Sen. John Barrasso. By way of comparison, there are 220 lawyers in Congress.

There haven't been many science types running in Illinois, however. Blair Hull, who ran in the 2004 Democratic U.S. Senate primary, was a math whiz, but used his intellect to make many millions as a trader.

Like Hull, what Foster, Abboud and Sauerberg also have in common is that they're wealthy enough to plan to put some of their own money into their campaigns. There's another trend in Illinois politics that dates back 15 years, without a high level of success - the bored rich guy syndrome.

"If I didn't see many things that I think were not being done well in government and I was just doing it for fun, I'd agree with that," said Foster, 51, when asked about the "bored rich guy" theory. "But there's a long list of things that I think everyone would agree government is not doing well."

Foster's parents worked as Capitol Hill staffers for Sen. Paul Douglas of Illinois. Foster said his father was a chemist and civil rights attorney, so he'd grown up seeing a transition from science to politics. Foster, a millionaire from starting a theater lighting company with his brother, went from Fermilab physicist for 22 years to volunteering last year as a staff member for freshman Congressman Patrick Murphy of suburban Philadelphia.

For Sauerberg, Sept. 11 brought a personal political awakening.

"It made me much more aware of my nation - that it was under threat," said Sauerberg, 54. "It made me aware I wasn't as active in political participation as I should have been."

All three nascent congressional candidates say that a scientific approach to solving problems instead of the current adversarial one employed by the lawyer-centric Congress would help the nation progress.

"The issue (in Washington) is not to find the real truth, the issue is to win," said Abboud, speaking from Boston, where he attended the American Nuclear Society's annual conference. "The science perspective depends on not having an adversarial conversation. You start a discussion that says, 'I don't know what the truth is, so we'll go on a mission to find the truth.'æ"

But to get elected, all three also know they need to connect with voters.

"The problem with people of science is that from the moment we're born, you have to be cold and objective," Abboud acknowledged. "If we in the science community think that we are going to represent constituents by interacting with them the way we interact with our peers, that's never going to work."

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