

U.S. CONGRESS

Physicist Wins Open Illinois Seat

Developmental biologist Donald Brown of the Carnegie Institution of Washington in Baltimore, Maryland, doesn't get many fundraising calls from candidates for Congress. But when experimental physicist Bill Foster called Brown in January, he gave the Illinois Democrat his ear, and soon after, \$1000.



Bigger science. Bill Foster (*center*) will join two other physicists in Congress.

Last weekend, Foster, a former researcher at Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory (Fermilab) in Batavia, Illinois, won a special election to fill the seat held by former House Majority Leader Dennis Hastert in a race that attracted national attention. And hundreds of scientists around the country gave their time and money to help put Foster over the top.

"The combination of my scientific and business backgrounds ... spells problem solver," says Foster, who ranks the economic downturn and pulling U.S. troops out of Iraq as his highest priorities and says more funding for basic science is a problem he also wants to tackle. "Bill's background as a scientist not from Washington helped him," says his campaign manager, Tom Bowen.

During his 22-year career at Fermilab, Foster, 53, also was part-owner of a prosperous lighting firm. Unhappy with the cancellation of a particle physics project he led and bitten by the political bug, Foster left the lab in 2006 to work on the successful congressional campaign of another neophyte, Democrat Patrick Murphy, for a seat in suburban Philadelphia. Calling himself the campaign physicist, Foster learned the ropes—and devised software to organize the efforts of volunteers knocking on some 140,000 doors.

Foster's lab ties helped him jump-start his own campaign. Nobelist and former Fermilab director Leon Lederman introduced Foster to Chicago power brokers and assembled a list of 28 Nobelists who publicly endorsed Foster. After work hours, Fermilab physicist and county alderman James Volk recruited colleagues to get involved. Lab engineer Thomas Peterson told voters in a campaign commercial

that Foster "brings people together." Volk and others braved the bitter weather "to collect signatures and knock on doors to get out the vote," he says.

The community also dug into its pockets, giving roughly \$160,000 according to campaign documents. Amounts ranged from \$250 from former Department of Energy official and Massachusetts Institute of Technology physicist Mildred Dresselhaus to \$2000 from Fermilab Director Pier Oddone. Foster was his own biggest contributor, spending \$1.4 million, and the Democratic National Committee put in a similar amount to help Foster capture what had been a traditional Republican stronghold.

Brown says he's proud of his role in helping Foster win the Democratic primary last month and then defeat Republican Jim Oberweis on 8 March by a margin of 53% to 47%. "It's a great omen for the Democrats," he says. "This Administration has been terrible for science."

Despite being the newest member of Congress, Foster won't be able to leave the campaign trail. That's because he faces Oberweis again on 4 November in a race for a full 2-year term. And scientists such as Fermilab physicist Michael Church, who contributed \$400, say Foster can count on their support again. "It'll be a tough election, and he'd need all the help he can get," says Church. —ELI KINTISCH

SCIENTIFIC WORKPLACE

Indian Government Offers Helping Hand to Women Scientists

NEW DELHI—In 2000, when Vijayalakshmi Ravindranath was appointed director of the National Brain Research Centre in Gurgaon, the neuroscientist made history. Ravindranath became the first woman to lead any of the 65 institutes under India's Ministry of Science and Technology—and today she is one of only two women who have broken the ministry's glass ceiling. When it comes to promoting women scientists in India, she says, "our record is dismal."

It may be surprising that women scientists are struggling in the nation that elected Indira Gandhi prime minister in 1966. But at a conference in New Delhi to mark International Women's Day on 8 March, more than 1000 scientists spoke of barriers to advancement and debated how to attract more women into research careers. At the meeting, science minister Kapil Sibal announced what he calls

"fledgling steps to ... empower women to have their rightful role in science," including new regulations to allow women with young children to work more flexible hours.

The statistics are sobering. Although women have earned 37% of all science Ph.D.s awarded by Indian institutions, they hold fewer than 15% of science faculty positions. Out of India's 114,000 or so government scientists, fewer than 16,000 are women. Only one of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research's 175 institutes has a female director: the National Research Centre for Women in Agriculture in Bhubaneswar.

The hurdles women scientists face are not unique to India. "Women are unable to cope with the triple burden of home, work, and societal prejudices, including gender-related nepotism," says Mahtab S. Bamji, a nutritionist with the Dangoria Charitable

Trust in Hyderabad and chair of a science ministry task force assessing the status of women in science in India. The panel will release its findings later this year.

At the conference, Sibal announced that his ministry's 65 institutions would provide flexible working hours for women scientists with children younger than 3 and establish crèches in all institutions. In addition, Sibal said, some of the 33 female members of the Indian National Science Academy (which has a fellowship of 774) will receive research grants of up to \$25,000 a year over 5 years.

Women scientists applaud the measures. But in the long run, as India's first woman president, Pratibha D. Patil, argued at the conference, gender parity will come only when discrimination against women has stopped. —PALLAVA BAGLA