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Openness about health struggles is part of 'new normal' for politicians

Office holders in wheelchairs are an increasingly common sight. But candidates now also feel more comfortable disclosing diabetes, cancer diagnoses, and even mental health struggles.



Kentucky state Sen. Charles Booker

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Charles Booker's 2018 bid for the Kentucky state House nearly killed him.

The Democrat, who is now running for U.S. Senate for the second time, needed to dip into his personal funds to launch his campaign, leaving him struggling to make ends meet in his household budget. A week away from payday, he couldn't afford to both feed his family and refill the insulin that he needs as a Type 1 diabetic. So he did all the things he wasn't supposed to do. He skipped meals. He rationed the insulin he had. He ended up in the hospital for almost two weeks.

"They didn't think I was gonna make it out of there," Booker told *National Journal*.

His voice broke as he recalled the first time his daughters came to visit him in the hospital.

"My daughters laid on me to hug me and I couldn't hug them back," he said. "I was trying to lift my arms to hug them. They wouldn't move."

It's the sort of story few politicians share so openly in a culture—particularly a political culture—that prizes physical vitality. But amid a pandemic that has laid bare the cracks in the American health system and given more fuel to social-justice movements, that might be changing. Especially on the left, leaders have begun talking more about the disabilities and chronic health conditions they face, attempting to connect with voters who share their experiences.

“For years, I was ashamed of being a diabetic, like before the politics. I didn't want anyone to think I was weak, or that I couldn't do a good job or complete the task because my body wouldn't allow me to,” Booker said. “And so I understand that in the political arena, you want to show strength, you want to show the ability to lead. But I have realized the power of being vulnerable and speaking the truth is an important leadership quality. Because it allows more people to feel seen, and to know that they are valued.”

Booker, a progressive who supports Medicare-for-all, faces an uphill battle in one of the reddest states in the country as he competes to face GOP Sen. Rand Paul next year. He emphasized that diabetes is not a partisan issue—when he got to the state House, he worked with another diabetic, a Republican, to pass a law that would provide emergency prescription refills.

A [2016 Pew Survey](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/09/22/a-political-profile-of-disabled-americans/) (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/09/22/a-political-profile-of-disabled-americans/>) found that members of the public who are disabled are close to evenly split among Republicans and Democrats. Meanwhile, the [“disability belt,”](https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2018/05/15/disability-rates-among-working-age-adults-are-shaped-by-race-place-and-education/) (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2018/05/15/disability-rates-among-working-age-adults-are-shaped-by-race-place-and-education/>) the areas of the U.S. where disabilities are concentrated, overlaps some of the turf where the parties are competing most fiercely, particularly in the Sun Belt.

But for disabled candidates of both parties, making it into elected office can be challenging. According to Sarah Blahovec, the civic engagement and voting rights organizer at the National Council on Independent Living, candidates with chronic health conditions face a wide variety of barriers. She's the creator of Elevate, a campaign training series for people with disabilities, so she's seen them firsthand.

Candidates with limited mobility have to figure out how to canvas neighborhoods, utilizing golf carts or asking nondisabled friends to approach inaccessible front doors. Some candidates struggle with call time because of chronic pain or problems with their vocal cords, while those who are deaf have to figure out how to pay for American Sign Language interpreters at candidate forums when local parties don't want to cover them. Candidates who rely on Social Security risk their benefits, Blahovec said, since campaigning is considered gainful activity. On top of that, she thinks the political arena—on both sides of the aisle—can be particularly ableist, given the common approach to campaigning that requires candidates to ignore other priorities and focus on running 24/7.

These hurdles make it difficult for candidates to mount bids for local office, let alone build the profiles needed for statewide or congressional campaigns.

Nevertheless, a few have gotten across the finish line, like Sen. Tammy Duckworth, a veteran who lost her legs in Iraq and Rep. Jim Langevin, the [only quadriplegic to serve in Congress](#)

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/08/us/politics/congressman-jim-langevins-personal-quest-on-guns.html>) after being accidentally shot in his youth.

Several prominent Republicans have also been affected by disability and chronic health conditions, including Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, stricken with polio at a young age. Texas Gov. Greg Abbott and 26-year old Rep. Madison Cawthorn, the rising conservative star, both suffered accidents that put them in wheelchairs. Rep. Dan Crenshaw lost his eye in a roadside bomb blast in Afghanistan. Rep. Brian Mast, who worked as a bomb-disposal technician, lost

his legs in an explosion there as well. This cycle, Teddy Daniels could follow, as he challenges Rep. Matt Cartwright of Pennsylvania; Daniels has the words “wounded combat veteran” printed proudly on his website.



📷 Rep. Jim Langevin pf Rhode Island ASSOCIATED PRESS

“There's a lot of respect for disabled veterans from both Democrats and Republicans,” Blahovec said. “But I think they're even more viable on [the GOP] side. Because, you know, that's a disability that you get through something, quote-unquote, ‘honorable’ through serving your country.”

Among Republicans, conversations about disability and health sound different than they do among Democrats, a pattern which Blahovec attributes to a more individualistic, “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality on the right.

Even serious physical ailments can be difficult to raise; Rep. Mark Amodei recently revealed to [The Nevada Independent](https://thenevadaindependent.com/article/amodei-over-a-cancer-scare-weighs-congressional-seniority-in-decision-to-run-for-governor) (<https://thenevadaindependent.com/article/amodei-over-a-cancer-scare-weighs-congressional-seniority-in-decision-to-run-for-governor>) and [the Associated Press](https://apnews.com/article/health-nevada-election-2020-259aa3052e0b344926de2785foa33bff) (<https://apnews.com/article/health-nevada-election-2020-259aa3052e0b344926de2785foa33bff>) that he had had cancer on his kidney in the middle of election season, but waited 10 months to break the news. By the time he had all the information on the cancer last fall, his treatment was already wrapping up.

“To be honest with you, I had no appetite to go say, ‘Hey, I’ve got this, but I think it’s good and whatever, but there’s some unanswered questions,’” he told *National Journal*. “And that’s not against people in your business. That’s people in my business. I had no trust in the political culture, that it wouldn’t be tried to be used for some sort of political hit. ‘He’s not healthy, you shouldn’t vote for him, or he’s looking for your sympathies, the dirt ball.’”

“I guess if [the cancer had been something that would] have a material effect on your ability to carry out your duties, then I think you gotta go, ‘Well, can you continue on? Or is it special-election time?’” Amodei continued. “Fortunately, for me, we were nowhere near trying to figure any of that sort of stuff.”

With treatment for kidney cancer and a spot on his esophagus now behind him, he says having firsthand experience with the disease, just like having firsthand experience with anything else, makes him a better policymaker. He now has a deeper understanding of the paperwork and bills that come with receiving treatment. And as he considers a late-October decision between a reelection bid or a Nevada gubernatorial run, he’s not worried about cancer being used against him in the future.



📷 Rep. Mark Amodei of Nevada ASSOCIATED PRESS

“I think each thing is a case by case,” Amodei said. “After 10 years' service, if that's the biggest thing you got, you know what? That's fine. We'll weather that storm.”

Along with mental illness and HIV, cancer is one of the health conditions that voters penalize most strongly, according to research under peer review that was conducted by Loyola Marymount University political-science professor Gabriele Magni and Princeton University research scholar Andrew Reynolds.

“I'm sure people will think about the intensity of cancer treatment and whether or not someone is terminal, and they project what their belief is on that person's ability to survive, despite the fact that there are candidates who have successfully run for office with cancer treatment,” Blahovec said.

But the Magni-Reynolds research focuses on politicians who have the disease while they're running, not those who've faced it in the past. Democrat Janelle Perez, who is challenging Rep. Maria Elvira Salazar of Florida, shares her experience surviving cancer as a badge of her tenacity. Diagnosed with aggressive, incurable lymphoma six years ago, Perez now co-owns a Medicare managed care company and touts her work supporting people with disabilities. On her [LinkedIn page](https://www.linkedin.com/in/janelleperez/) (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/janelleperez/>), she does not hide that treatment required a two-year pause in her career.

For Democrats of all stripes, a focus on health care was a centerpiece of campaign strategy long before the pandemic. But a new willingness to share invisible disabilities and health conditions appears to be led largely by Black politicians, and progressives in particular. Along with Booker, Omari Hardy, a progressive running to succeed the late Rep. Alcee Hastings in Florida, has been open about a condition he faces: ADHD, which he pointed to as [a reason he struggles to meet filing deadlines](https://www.sun-sentinel.com/news/politics/fl-ne-omari-struggles-to-meet-filing-deadlines) ([https://www.sun-sentinel.com/news/politics/fl-ne-omari-](https://www.sun-sentinel.com/news/politics/fl-ne-omari-struggles-to-meet-filing-deadlines)

[hardy-late-campaign-reports-adhd-20210723-fgywxb7xangmtjynzefd7vl5bu-story.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/23/us/politics/hardy-late-campaign-reports-adhd-20210723-fgywxb7xangmtjynzefd7vl5bu-story.html)). New York City Public Advocate Jumaane Williams, another Black progressive who has ADHD, as well as Tourette syndrome, [has been talked about as a potential 2022 gubernatorial candidate](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/07/us/politics/jumaane-williams-upstate-trips-spur-talk-of-challenge-to-cuomo/) (<https://nypost.com/2021/07/07/jumaane-williams-upstate-trips-spur-talk-of-challenge-to-cuomo/>).

Their stories reflect how some minority groups are hit disproportionately hard by chronic health conditions. Magni's and Reynolds's research found that African-American voters were less likely to penalize politicians with health conditions, which they hypothesized was related to higher empathy because of more exposure to such conditions. About 25 percent of Black Americans have a disability, according to a 2017 analysis [cited by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/materials/infographic-disabilities-ethnicity-race.html) (<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/materials/infographic-disabilities-ethnicity-race.html>), compared to 20 percent of white Americans.

“The reason that I feel so convicted to tell my story is because I come from a very marginalized community that no one ever listens to,” Booker said. “The bottom is falling out for so many people in the pandemic. More regular folks are saying, ‘OK. We need leaders that understand what we're going through. And we can't afford the BS anymore.’”

In the House, young Black women have often shared a wider array of experiences around chronic health conditions. That includes Rep. Lauren Underwood, a vulnerable Democrat from Illinois who became a nurse after living with a heart condition since childhood. Like Perez, she doesn't act as though her health history will cost her the competitive races she is sure to face, and it hasn't yet.

Just like on the campaign trail, the Democratic Party's most left-leaning members of Congress have been most open about their health conditions, especially the kind that are most stigmatized. That was true even before the pandemic. In January 2020, a [tweet](#)

(<https://twitter.com/ilhanmn/status/1215054586383425544>) from Rep. Ilhan Omar stating that she deals with post-traumatic stress disorder garnered more than 100,000 likes. A week later, fellow Squad member Ayanna Pressley told [The Root](#) (<https://www.theroot.com/exclusive-rep-ayanna-pressley-reveals-beautiful-bald-1841039847>) that she was working to cope with her alopecia, a condition that caused her to lose her hair.

“I'm not here just to occupy space—I'm here to create it,” she said in that interview. “I think it's important that I'm transparent about this new normal.”