News

How El-Sayed and Talarico connected with voters in historic Senate victories

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Abdul El-Sayed, a Democrat, declared victory in the 2026 midterm elections on Nov. 4 after defeating Republican Mike Rogers in Michigan's United States Senate race, becoming the first Muslim elected to the Senate, according to BBC News.

In Texas, Democrat James Talarico defeated Republican Ken Paxton, becoming the first Democrat elected to the Senate from Texas since 1988, according to The Texas Tribune.

Although the candidates campaigned in different political environments, both drew on their backgrounds, experiences and personalities to establish connections with voters, something University of Connecticut political science professor Seth Warner said helped them win.

"I think one of the first things that benefited both James Talarico and Abdul El-Sayed was that they're relatively young, energetic and personable," Warner said.

El-Sayed's progressive campaign mobilized grassroots support by rejecting corporate and special-interest campaign contributions. His messaging focused on tangible benefits for everyday Americans, emphasizing three central ideas: "money out of politics, money in your pocket, and Medicare for All," according to Bridge Michigan.

El-Sayed won the battleground seat by roughly 7%.

His campaign faced challenges towards his Muslim identity. At rallies in states like Iowa and Kansas, President Donald Trump told crowds, "Mohamed, I call him Mohamed, not Abdul," while also falsely labeling El-Sayed a "jihadist" and saying, "we'll have to put him through metal detectors."

In his victory speech in downtown Detroit, El-Sayed introduced himself using his full Arabic name, Abdulrahman Mohamed El-Sayed, according to Michigan Public. He also delivered part of his speech in Arabic, BBC News reported.

His victory resonated with members of Michigan's Arab American and Muslim communities. According to Black Voice News, Dearborn, Mich., is the largest city with an Arab majority in the United States, with 55% of its population identifying as Middle Eastern or having North African roots.

Yasmin El-Sayed, an Arab Muslim attendee who is unrelated to the senator-elect, teared up after his victory speech.

"Having grown up in a post-9/11 world, being Muslim, being Arab myself, never in a million years did I think we would see what we saw today," she said to Michigan Public.

Warner said El-Sayed's candidacy demonstrated the importance of what political scientists call "descriptive representation," in which voters see aspects of their own identities reflected in elected officials.

"Descriptive representation is something that's particularly important in Democratic politics, given how diverse the Democratic Party's coalition is," Warner said.

Warner said descriptive representation likely played an important role in El-Sayed's primary campaign, although there was considerable discussion about how much it would influence the general election.

He also distinguished between two concepts that shape electoral campaigns: mobilization and persuasion.

"Mobilization means getting people who are already inclined to support you out to vote. Persuasion means making sure you don't alienate people who might otherwise defect to the other side, and potentially attracting swing voters," Warner explained.

Warner said there were concerns about whether El-Sayed could translate enthusiasm among his existing supporters into broader electoral support. While he could mobilize voters already inclined to support him, questions remained about his ability to persuade undecided voters and those who might otherwise support the Republican candidate.

"Michigan is an extremely diverse state. There are many Jewish residents, particularly in the suburbs of Detroit. Some, though certainly not all, have strong attachments to Israel," Warner said.



Democratic Senator Abdul El-Sayed declared victory in the 2026 midterm elections on Nov. 4 after defeating Republican Mike Rogers in Michigan's United States Senate race. El-Sayed made history when he became the first Muslim elected to the Senate.

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In Texas, Talarico's campaign offered another example of how candidates used their personal backgrounds to connect with the communities they hoped to represent.

Talarico's work as a middle school teacher shaped his commitment to public education, including increasing teacher pay, expanding early childhood education and opposing private-school vouchers.

Talarico also incorporated his Christian faith into his campaign messaging, connecting his religious beliefs to issues such as accessible health care, public education and economic equality.

"Christianity is both spiritual and political, because politics is just another word for how we treat our neighbors," Talarico said during a June 2025 sermon, according to The Texas Tribune. "Jesus took on the system. That's Christianity at its best."

Talarico is a Presbyterian seminarian pursuing a Master of Divinity at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary and has said he is studying to become a pastor.

Warner said religious messaging can resonate with voters in parts of the country where faith remains an important part of the culture.

He noted that Democrats have increasingly recognized the need to adjust their messaging to different electorates, particularly in politically competitive areas.

"In certain parts of the country, religion remains deeply embedded in the culture," Warner said.

Like El-Sayed, Talarico also emphasized reducing the influence of money in politics, framing his campaign around economic inequality.

"The biggest divide in this country is not left versus right, it's top versus bottom," Talarico said during his campaign, according to The Wall Street Journal. His policy priorities included banning corporate political action committees and super PACs, the publication reported.

Despite their shared emphasis on connecting with voters, Warner said the candidates faced different challenges in their respective states.

Warner noted that while Talarico outperformed expectations in Texas, El-Sayed fell somewhat short of expectations in Michigan. He also emphasized that the candidates faced different opponents.

"Ken Paxton had very low approval ratings and had faced impeachment on corruption charges from members of his own party," Warner said.

Warner said El-Sayed was running against a more credible opponent, making his electoral challenge different from Talarico's.

He also pointed to the importance of adapting campaign messaging to the needs and political attitudes of a candidate's constituency.

"Across the country, successful politicians tend to understand their constituencies and communicate in ways that reflect what those constituencies need," Warner said.

He said Talarico demonstrated an ability to adjust his messaging to appeal to Texans, even if his personal political views were more liberal than those of many residents.

"He demonstrated an ability to adapt his messaging to his constituents and communicate that he wanted to represent them rather than simply pursue his own political ideas," Warner said.

El-Sayed and Talarico are scheduled to be sworn in on Jan. 3, 2027.



Democrat James Talarico defeated Republican Ken Paxton on Nov. 4 in the Texas Senate race. Talarico became the first Democrat elected to the Senate in Texas since 1988.

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