

Buddhist, Hindu make history in new Congress

by [Daniel Burke](#)

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Congress will become a shade more religiously diverse this January, after Tuesday's (Nov. 6) election of the first Hindu representative and first Buddhist senator.

Tulsi Gabbard, a Democrat from Hawaii, will become the first Hindu-American congresswoman, after defeating her Republican rival on Tuesday.

Ami Bera, a California doctor who was raised Hindu but now identifies as a Unitarian Universalist, according to the Hindu American Foundation, narrowly leads the race for California's 7th congressional district.

The 31-year-old Gabbard was born in American Samoa to a Catholic father and a Hindu mother, and moved to Hawaii when she was 2. The Iraq War veteran said she follows the Vaishnava branch of Hinduism, which venerates the deity Lord Vishnu and his incarnations.

Gabbard will take the congressional seat of another Democrat, Mazie Hirono, who will be the nation's first Buddhist senator when the new Congress convenes in January.

Hirono, who is also the first Asian-American woman elected to the Senate, was one of three Buddhists in the House of Representatives. The other two, Rep. Hank Johnson, D-Ga. and Rep. Colleen Hanabusa, D-Hawaii, both won re-election on Tuesday.

Hirono was raised in the Jodo Shinso school of Pure Land Buddhism, one of the most popular traditions in East Asia. She has said that she "believes in the precepts of Buddhism" but does not practice the religion daily.

The Hindu American Foundation hailed Gabbard's historic election on Wednesday, calling it a "testament to the greatest ideals of American pluralism."

"That Gabbard won while proudly espousing her Hinduism and voicing a willingness to be a strong voice for Hindu Americans brings over 2 million Americans into the political landscape for the first time," said Aseem Shukla, co-founder and Board member of HAF.

Gabbard has said she hopes her faith will help strengthen ties between the U.S. and India, Hinduism's spiritual homeland. "How can we have a close relationship if decision-makers in Washington know very little, if anything, about the religious beliefs, values, and practices of India's 800 million Hindus?" she said.

Despite Tuesday's results, Congress is likely to remain overwhelmingly Christian. More than 85 percent of the 112th Congress, which ends in January, are Catholic or Protestant, according to the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. Just two members are Muslim. Democrat Syed Taj, a Michigan doctor who was bidding to become the third Muslim member, lost on Tuesday.

Congress also lost its single self-proclaimed atheist when Rep. Pete Stark lost his House seat on Tuesday. It may soon have another, however, as Arizona Democrat Kyrsten Sinema, who drew support from the National Atheist Party, clings to a slight lead. —RNS