

5 Takeaways From Kennedy's First Confirmation Hearing

Mr. Kennedy appears to have most Republicans behind him as he seeks the job of health secretary, though he couldn't escape his past stances on vaccines and abortion.

By Sheryl Gay Stolberg
New York Times

Robert F. Kennedy Jr., President Trump's nominee for health secretary, appeared to dispel some Republicans' qualms about him on Wednesday and inched closer to a confirmation vote [after more than three hours of intense grilling](#) from senators of both parties.

His hearing before the Senate Finance Committee touched on a wide range of topics, from Medicaid and Medicare, to a measles outbreak in Samoa and his long history of criticizing vaccines and the nation's public health establishment.

Mr. Kennedy is well known to Americans as the scion of a Democratic political dynasty who broke with his family to join forces with a Republican, Mr. Trump. Yet for many Americans, Wednesday may have been the first time they had heard Mr. Kennedy's distinctive raspy voice; he has spasmodic dysphonia, a neurological condition that causes certain muscles in the voice box, or larynx, to spasm.

Mr. Kennedy will face additional questions on Thursday from the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions. But the Finance Committee hearing is more important, because the Finance Committee is the panel that will vote on whether to send Mr. Kennedy's nomination to the Senate floor for a vote.

Here are five takeaways from Wednesday's session.

Mr. Kennedy appears to have won over most Republicans.

Perhaps all but one. Republicans seemed by and large to support Mr. Kennedy. At least two whose votes were in doubt — Senator Thom Tillis of North Carolina and Senator Todd Young of Indiana — asked questions that suggested they would support Mr. Kennedy.

“I think you’re handling yourself well,” Mr. Tillis told Mr. Kennedy, before asking him an easy one: “Are you a conspiracy theorist?” Mr. Kennedy replied that it was a pejorative that had been applied to him, “mainly to keep me from asking difficult questions of powerful interests.” Mr. Young asked Mr. Kennedy whether he would work to restore public trust in public health institutions; Mr. Kennedy said he would, through “radical transparency.”

But there is still at least one very important Republican to watch: Senator Bill Cassidy, Republican of Louisiana and chairman of the Senate Health Committee. Mr. Cassidy, a doctor, has not said how he will vote. He has been generally supportive of public health initiatives. After he met Mr. Kennedy, he said they had a “frank discussion” — Washington code for a disagreement. Mr. Cassidy said on Wednesday that he wanted to withhold judgment on Mr. Kennedy until after the Health Committee hearing.

He displayed a lack of expertise about key programs he would oversee.

Mr. Kennedy seemed confused about two of the large programs that would be under his purview as health secretary: Medicare, the government insurance program for older Americans, and Medicaid, the federal-state partnership that covers low-income people. Under questioning by Mr. Cassidy, he said he would like to integrate the two programs. Mr. Cassidy asked him how he would do it.

“I do not know the answer to that,” Mr. Kennedy conceded. “I look forward to, uh, exploring options with you.” At another point, he said of Medicaid: “The premiums are too high, the deductibles are too high, and everybody’s getting sicker.” But except in very rare cases, Medicaid enrollees do not pay either of those types of fees.

Calley Means, a health care entrepreneur who has been an adviser to Mr. Kennedy and was instrumental in [connecting him to Mr. Trump](#), dismissed Mr. Kennedy’s stumbles, saying that senators were focusing on minutiae that Mr. Kennedy could easily learn, while Mr. Kennedy was focused on the big picture — improving health for all Americans.

“They’re speaking different languages,” Mr. Means said after the hearing of the senators and Mr. Kennedy.

Mr. Kennedy cannot escape his shifting statements, especially on vaccines.

Mr. Kennedy’s vaccine skepticism continues to be Democrats’ strongest line of attack. Even some of Mr. Kennedy’s allies concede that the focus on vaccines, in the news media and among lawmakers, could derail his confirmation. Mr. Kennedy tried on Wednesday to change the subject. It was telling that Del Bigtree, his former communications director and also a fierce critic of vaccines, was seated in the back of the room with the

general audience, while healthy-eating advocates were up front with Mr. Kennedy's family.

Democrats came prepared with a number of Mr. Kennedy's past statements and pushed him hard, including on abortion. Mr. Kennedy's positions on that issue have been all over the map. He ducked questions about whether he would support attempts to sharply restrict the abortion pill mifepristone, a policy goal of abortion opponents. But overall, he said, he would support Mr. Trump's anti-abortion agenda.

That drew a sharp rebuke from Senator Maggie Hassan, Democrat of New Hampshire, who noted that when Mr. Kennedy came to her state as a presidential candidate in 2023, he described himself as "pro-choice" and said the government did not have "any business telling people what they can or cannot do with their body." She wanted to know what had changed.

"When was it that you decided to sell out the values you've had your whole life in order to be given power by President Trump?" Ms. Hassan asked sharply. Mr. Kennedy sidestepped the question, saying, "I agree with President Trump that every abortion is a tragedy."

During one particularly contentious exchange, Senator Michael Bennet, Democrat of Colorado, brought up Mr. Kennedy's claim that Covid-19 was "[targeted to attack](#)" Caucasians and Black people and to spare Chinese people and Ashkenazi Jews, and his assertion that Lyme disease was "highly likely" to be an engineered bioweapon.

"I probably did say that," Mr. Kennedy said about Lyme disease. As for the Covid-19 claim, Mr. Kennedy told Mr. Bennet that he had not said the virus was "deliberately targeted."

Mr. Kennedy's travel to [Samoa](#), where a measles outbreak killed 83 people, most of them children, also provided fodder for Democrats. In 2018, two infants in Samoa died after being vaccinated against measles, prompting the government to temporarily suspend its measles vaccination program. The deaths were later attributed to nursing mistakes; the program resumed in April 2019. In June of that year, Mr. Kennedy visited the island nation. His critics have accused him of fomenting anti-vaccine sentiment there, and putting children at risk by discouraging immunization.

Senator Elizabeth Warren, Democrat of Massachusetts, pressed Mr. Kennedy on whether he accepted responsibility for the deaths. He said he did not.

But he later insisted: "I support the measles vaccine. I support the polio vaccine. I will do nothing as H.H.S. secretary that makes it difficult or discourages people from taking it."

Financial conflicts emerged as a potential stumbling block.

In his [ethics and financial disclosure statements](#), released last week, Mr. Kennedy said he would continue to collect fees for cases in which he referred clients to [Wisner Baum](#), a law firm that is suing Merck over its Gardasil vaccine. The vaccine protects against the human papillomavirus and is administered to adolescents [to prevent cervical and other cancers](#) later in life.

Senator Warren pressed him to say he would not continue to take payments as secretary and for four years afterward. Mr. Kennedy grew frustrated.

“You’re making me sound like a shill,” he complained. But he would not agree to Ms. Warren’s demand. After some back-and-forth, he finally said: “You’re asking me not to sue drug companies. No, I’m not going to agree to that.”

The MAHA movement is strong, and Mr. Kennedy is its undisputed leader.

Despite the tough questioning, it was clear from the makeup of the audience on Wednesday that the charismatic Mr. Kennedy has a well of support. Many of his ideas have been welcomed across the political spectrum: removing conflicts of interest in the federal health bureaucracy, limiting the use of food stamps to buy sugary foods, and mandating health and fitness programs in schools.

The seats in the back of the room were filled with Kennedy fans, many of them women who wore hats bearing messages like “Make America Healthy Again” and “CONFIRM R.F.K. Jr.” They cheered and clapped when he entered the room.

Among those sitting up front with Mr. Kennedy were Zen Honeycutt, the founder of Moms Across America, a grass-roots advocacy group, and Vani Hari, the creator of the website FoodBabe.com. Ms. Hari said she was drawn to Mr. Kennedy for his willingness to take on big industries, like food and agriculture.

“I think he represents the fight against corruption,” she said.

Ms. Honeycutt added: “He brings integrity, compassion and courage to the American people because of his willingness to stand up for the health and safety of our country, risking his reputation over and over again, right? He puts himself in the way.”