

2013–2014 GSA-USGS Congressional Science Fellow Report



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Policy, Politics, and Procedure

I walked into my first day of orientation as a science policy fellow full of excitement and enthusiasm, ready to learn how to leverage my scientific background in the policy-making process. I had been doing air quality–related research throughout my undergraduate years and my Ph.D., but over the years I became increasingly interested in seeing how that work could be useful at the policy level. I was extremely honored to receive the 2013–2014 GSA-USGS Congressional Science Fellowship and eager to see what life working on Capitol Hill (or “the Hill”) would be like.

One of the lessons from orientation that resonated most with me came from Judy Schneider, a specialist on Congress for the Congressional Research Service, who shared some of her infinite wisdom on what makes Congress tick. Her mantra: “Policy, politics, and procedure.” As outsiders of Congress, and especially as scientists, we have focused on what makes good policy, but in Congress itself, it is important to remember that policy is usually subject to both politics and procedure. As it turned out, an eventful and historic fall season on the Hill has provided some revealing examples.

First, though, I should describe the incredible experience that is the fellowship placement process. It begins with a mixer between the Congressional fellows and staffers from interested offices. After the mixer, we can begin to schedule interviews with any interested office (both personal and committee offices, within the House or the Senate). This is a grueling process, with several interviews each day—on my busiest days, I met with five separate offices—and continuing for several days in a row, but it is an extraordinary opportunity to learn about the different offices and connect with staff across the Hill. One of the most memorable moments for me was chasing down a staffer I had never met in the Metro station to introduce myself. It turned out to be a great decision, because I ended up choosing to work with that staffer in the personal office of Senator Bernie Sanders from Vermont.

I felt that Senator Sanders’s office was a perfect match for me in many ways. The senator has been an outspoken advocate for

action on climate change, an area that was high on the list of topics I wanted to work on during my time in Congress. He is also the only senator who sits on both the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee and the Environment and Public Works Committee, providing the opportunity to work on an extremely broad range of scientific issues—another priority of mine. Perhaps most importantly, the office atmosphere was exactly what I was looking for. I am thrilled that I found such a great office to work in and am looking forward to what will hopefully continue to be an educational and illuminating year.

Now, back to policy, politics, and procedure. As you might know, October brought some unexpected challenges to the Hill. One of Congress’s primary jobs is to pass the yearly appropriations bills that provide funding for much of the federal government. If the two houses can’t work through the appropriations process in time, they have the option to pass what is known as a “continuing resolution,” which continues funding at previous levels to give Congress some time to work out their differences. In this Congress, when 1 October rolled around, the appropriated funds ran out and no continuing resolution was passed, leading to the first federal government shutdown in 17 years. Very few people would argue that shutting down the government is a wise policy choice, but in this case, politics won out over policy.

My first full day in the office was 30 September, so the shutdown heavily shaped my first few weeks on the job. Many members of our staff were furloughed. The remaining staff, myself included, all took turns answering phones and working the front desks. These tasks are not normally part of a fellow’s duty, but I was extremely grateful for the opportunity to experience that part of working in a Congressional office. I gained a lot of respect for the staffers who sit at those desks every day—it is not an easy job. Outside of answering phones, working during the shutdown was far quieter than I had expected for my first weeks on the Hill, as most of our meetings were canceled and there were very few committee hearings or briefings to attend. I was pleased when Congress passed a continuing resolution and things could get back to (relatively) normal, both for me and for the many employees in the federal government who had been furloughed.

A few weeks later, we were provided with a perfect example of the importance of procedure in the inner workings of the Senate. Some of you are probably familiar with the “filibuster,” a procedural strategy used by the minority party to block votes. In November, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid decided to use another procedural tactic, the “nuclear option,” to eliminate the filibuster for nominee confirmations (excluding Supreme Court nominees). With no option to block votes, the minority party chose to use another procedural technique, slowing down the confirmations by refusing to give “unanimous consent” to temporarily change the rules to speed up the votes. As a result, for a few days the Senate had votes at odd times, even in the middle of the night. These procedural battles can be very difficult for those

outside of Congress (and even some on the Hill) to understand, but they are an important part of how the system works.

So, it has been an exciting start to my fellowship year. After budget battles and the nuclear option, where are we headed next? Who knows—as they told us during orientation, every year is different, and often unpredictable. No matter what happens, I know this much: I am in for one of the most fascinating and chaotic years of my life. Keep in touch if you'd like to know how things are going in this mysterious world ruled by policy, politics, and procedure.

This manuscript is submitted for publication by Anna Mebust, 2013–2014 GSA-USGS Congressional Science Fellow, with the understanding that the U.S. government is authorized to reproduce and distribute reprints for governmental use. The one-year fellowship is supported by GSA and by the U.S. Geological Survey, Department of the Interior, under Assistance Award No. G13AP00095. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the author and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. government. Anna is working in the office of Senator Sanders (I-VT) and can be reached at Anna_Mebust@sanders.senate.gov.

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