# Knowledge, Persistence, and Trust: *My Congressionally Inspired Roadmap to a Successful 2020*

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Like so many others, I had no idea that my 2019–2020 GSA Congressional Fellowship would include, well, 2020. I wasn't aware that my year on the Hill would be interrupted on either end by an impeachment, which completely derailed the Congress, and a pandemic, which also completely derailed the Congress. I didn't know that the Aaron Sorkin–inspired fantasy that I was so happy to be living, where I spent my days briskly walking the marbled corridors of the Capitol complex in nice suits while scribbling notes on cards and talking to scores of people darting in and out of frame, would be shockingly, abruptly shattered in March, never to return. I didn't know that Congress, and the world, would be run from couches and dining rooms for the rest of my year. I didn't realize how much would be totally thrown off, upended, and in some cases, destroyed by this year. If I knew this all a year ago, I really might have rejected the whole thing.

I'd have been a moron to do that.

Working in government in 2020 was a great gift because it forced me to strip down every bell, whistle, frill, or perk that would usually come with the job and focus solely on the reason to do the job in the first place: to use the power of the people to improve lives. Despite, and in some cases because of, the unrest and uncertainty of this year, I found myself immersed in a job that was as meaningful and consequential as any ever could be. Government in 2020 taught me how to work hard, and be successful, when the roof is on fire. Three qualities are most crucial: You must know what you're doing; you must not stop doing it; and you must trust that if you know what you're doing and you don't stop doing it, progress will occur.

Everyone knows that in the sciences, knowledge IS currency. Conversely, many may look at the government today, recognizing how many policies exist that are incongruous with the current best-available science, and conclude, reasonably, that knowledge is seemingly without a place in our democracy. From my experience, I've seen knowledge as a still-relevant player in policy making, at least at the small scale. The job of Congress is to legislate on every single topic in existence. "Everything" is a fairly big ask for congressional offices, which average about nine people plus interns. Thus, in most cases, offices rely as much on the word of experts they trust, and those experts carry with them substantial knowledge. I was lucky enough to draft three bills and three amendments while working in Congressman Paul Tonko's office. Each of those legislative products has the endorsement of ten organizations considered thought leaders in their area of expertise. Those endorsements are often the hardest-earned agreements to be made, because each group has, in addition to an agenda, an extremely nuanced understanding of the issue being legislated. It was up to me, as the legislative staffer, to garner enough knowledge about a problem to put together bills that representatives of outside organizations could agree would be necessary.

One example from my year is very clear: I was asked in January to write a bill that would improve the recycling of lithium-ion batteries in America. I had to determine what the primary barriers were to recycling these batteries today, so that when I sent a bill to the Energy Storage Association or the Electric Drive Coalition for their support, they would agree. Based on my outreach and research, the BATTERY Act ended up becoming a bill to improve the infrastructure surrounding lithium-ion recycling (collection, sorting, transportation, etc.), rather than the recycling process itself. Because I was able to highlight a true issue in the industry, I was able to acquire a dozen groups and the ultimate support of a Republican cosponsor (Rep. John Curtis, UT-3). On a small scale (US$22 million annual appropriation over five years), knowledge won.

The BATTERY Act provides a perfect segue to the second pandemic-crucial quality: persistence. We hear at our fellowship orientation that "you should never hear a 'no' when there isn't one." Particularly now, people are more sporadic, burdened, and difficult to get ahold of. I learned through workshopping these pieces of legislation that non-response does not mean they are not interested. I emailed more than forty groups for support and more than thirty members of Congress for cosponsorship of the legislation I was working on. Fewer than ten percent responded to my first email, and less than half responded to my second. Most of the groups, and many of those members, are now supporting these bills. A formal training in science is not the ideal environment to learn persistence; however, in my experience this year, it proved crucial.

Finally, this year required us to have so much trust. As the walls of society crumbled around us, and our settings and livelihoods were upended, it was our responsibility as professionals to continue to work. To continue to have meetings. To continue to have deadlines. To continue to connect with colleagues, even on a bizarre and new platform—to trust that it was still worth it to put in the work. I have watched a slew of good legislation arise during this pandemic, both related to COVID-19 and apart from it, because people were able to put aside the uncertainty and the fear and just do the work. The comprehensive energy package being addressed in the House and Senate, which includes substantial climate provisions and now seems likely to become law, is one clear example of this.

2020 has not been easy, but I am lucky that it has been quite rewarding. I am so thankful to the thousands of members of GSA who, collectively, have made this fellowship happen, and I hope that the work I've done this year, and the many transferable skills acquired, will help promote the geosciences in the future. I am thankful to my host office, that of Congressman Paul Tonko, for