From the Trenches: BPS Congressional Fellow Reports

It is hard to believe that I have been working on Capitol Hill for over three months. I was an inside-the-Beltway witness to one of the most historical elections in US history, in which Donald Trump was elected President while losing the popular vote. His election has already had profound impacts on Congress’s modus operandi, largely in ways that many people did not anticipate.

I have the good fortune of working in the office of Senator Elizabeth Warren, the Democratic Senator from Massachusetts. I have already experienced the three main phases of an election-year fellowship, the pre-election phase, the lame-duck, and the new Congress. The month of October was very quiet, which provided an opportune time to develop good work habits and get my bearings on how the office operates, as well as get to know my co-workers. Senator Warren’s office is unsurprisingly academic, given that she is a former Harvard law professor, and several staff members hold doctorate degrees. It is great to work in an environment where science and education are so highly valued, and where people appreciate the transferrable skills scientists gain through their training. I am also happy to be part of a team that cares deeply about its work on behalf of people in Massachusetts and across the United States.

The lame-duck session, which began after the election and concluded in mid-December, was busy due to consideration of the 21st Century Cures Act. The Cures bill authorized funding for the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), as well as funding to combat the opioid crisis. It also included hundreds of policy provisions related to drug and medical device development and regulation, mental health, biomedical workforce, etc. As part of Senator Warren’s health team, I was responsible for analysis of the bill, which involved summarizing provisions relevant to our office and the other stakeholders. In this respect, my PhD training was particularly useful, as I could analyze new information quickly, discern what pieces of information were relevant and reliable, and communicate that information concisely. My biomedical research background was immensely helpful in my work on, as I was familiar with some of the challenges the NIH, FDA, and drug companies face in developing new drugs and therapeutics. However, I also learned a great deal about the regulatory process and the challenges and concerns patients face.

Policy is always more complicated than people anticipate. It is nuanced and detailed, and, more often than not confusing and convoluted. Much like science, there is frequently no clear solution, and progress can be slow, if it happens at all. Importantly, policy is not the only factor taken into account in the decision-making process. The science and the policy matter, but so does the political environment, constituent concerns, consumer group perspectives, party leadership recommendations, and timing.

The 115th Congress has now been in session for about three weeks, and I have already helped our team navigate the Fiscal Year 2017 budget vote-a-rama, in which Senators filed and voted on dozens of amendments to a budget skeleton bill. The passage of the budget served as the first step in repealing the Affordable Care Act, one of the Republican party’s top priorities. Further, the President’s nominee for Secretary of Health and Human Services, Congressman Tom Price, has already testified before the Senate Committees on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) and Finance. I helped write questions for the record and draft memos and letters in preparation for the Price hearing before the HELP Committee, and I look forward to assisting in the thorough and extensive vetting of the President’s future nominees.

Regardless of your political views and opinions, it is safe to say that 2017 will be an exciting, intriguing year, and I’m grateful to have the opportunity to bear witness from my cubicle in the Hart Senate Office Building.

—Stephanie DeLuca, Biophysical Society Congressional Fellow