



Todd Anthony Bianco

A Full Experience

One of the more interesting aspects of the early part of my fellowship year has been to be here during a presidential election, which was also an election cycle for my boss, Senator Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island. Ethics rules prohibit staff from working on the campaign in the office, so I certainly wasn't involved in any conversations about Senator Whitehouse's campaign. However, this is "The Hill," and I learned a lot about the different operations of the Senate and House through conversations about what the election cycle could mean for legislative plans and staff positions. After the election, I was lucky enough to get tickets to the inauguration. The day was tiring, the lines were long, and my group didn't see much—but we were all happy to have been there.

Then the Senate was back in session, and things sped up quickly. Congress and President Obama were confronted with a number of deadlines that added up to the fiscal cliff. This continued to build until March, when Congress had to pass a continuing resolution to keep funding the government, followed by a budget resolution passed in the Senate the next week.

People like to say that the budget resolution is a messaging document. The Senate and the House both pass budget resolutions that lay out each chamber's blueprint for the federal budget (spending and taxes) for the next ten years, but the president will never sign them, and they will not become law. Appropriations bills, passed later, are what actually determines how much is spent on particular functions, like funding the National Science Foundation. But in determining the total spending and dividing that spending up between committees sends a strong signal about where lawmakers' priorities are, and that is why this is a messaging document. The budget resolution can do a lot more messaging beyond the basic spending blueprint. A number of amendments are offered that have the effect of stating a general point of view on a topic but that may never result in action, and some are not intended to cause any definite action. For example, an amendment might prohibit entering into a treaty, or might affirm support for the Second Amendment. More than 500 amendments were offered, and many received a vote, in an all-night event the media dubbed "Vote-a-Rama." During Vote-a-Rama, Senate staff was reading the growing amendment list, preparing talking points and

amendments of their own, and watching the Senate floor to help our bosses keep the budget-messaging in line with their politics. This was a late and fun night, and I had my second chance to draft an amendment that was later offered by Senator Whitehouse.

I have supported Sen. Whitehouse's other efforts on a number of energy and environmental policy issues that interest me, such as nuclear power and waste, home energy use, and the renewable fuel standard. I have had the opportunity to work on multiple state issues and meet with constituents and stakeholders from all over the country to discuss energy and environment policy. I have also had the opportunity to staff my boss for more than a few interesting events and meetings, like the Forward on Climate rally that attracted tens of thousands of people to Washington in February; a meeting with Dr. Ernest Moniz, President Obama's nominee for Energy Secretary; and the hearing on the nomination of Assistant Administrator Gina McCarthy to become administrator of the EPA.

I have also been able to help with Senator Whitehouse's discussion draft of a carbon fee bill, on which he was joined by Representative Waxman, Representative Blumenauer, and Senator Schatz. This bill would establish a "polluters pay" fee on emissions for large sources of greenhouse gases, and 100% of the revenue would be returned to the American people. The discussion draft asks what level the fee should be, at what rate it should increase, and the best way to return the revenue to Americans. These questions are prompting us to decide what policy will significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions while protecting middle- and low-income Americans and American businesses. While the fate of this discussion draft is unclear, it has been rewarding to be part of the research and discussion that goes into policy that may have such an important and wide effect.

I would again like to close by encouraging anyone interested in the fellowship to contact me. While my fellowship reports have reflected a perfect placement and a full experience, the other fellows I know through the AAAS fellowship umbrella are also happy with their time here on the hill, and so I once again recommend all interested scientists to consider applying.

This manuscript is submitted for publication by Todd Anthony Bianco, 2012–2013 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. G12AP20120TDD. 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. Todd is working in the office of Senator Whitehouse (D-Rhode Island) and can be reached at Todd_Bianco@whitehouse.senate.gov.