
A New Focus on Climate: Interview with IEEE-USA Congressional Fellow Daniel Becerra

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Daniel Becerra

Daniel Becerra was a 2018-2019 Congressional fellow sponsored by the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE). The fellowship program links science, technology and engineering professionals with government, and provides a mechanism for IEEE's U.S. members to learn firsthand about the public policy process while imparting their knowledge and experience to policymakers. Dan worked in Senator Jeff Merkley's office and supported policy on energy and climate issues, developed several pieces of legislation, met with constituents, and supported science and R&D appropriations.

The placement process can be a particularly stressful time for congressional fellows because of the sheer number of interviews. What was your experience like?

The placement process was stressful but also was informative and enjoyable. After the AAAS

orientation, the first contact incoming congressional fellows have with potential host offices is a reception/mixer. As an introverted scientist where networking and meeting new people can be taxing, the idea of a mixer being the start of my congressional career filled me with dread. It turned out that staffers from congressional offices already had our bios in advance, and there were more interested-offices than congressional fellows. Staffers make the effort to seek you out at that event and that makes the process easier. I had a series of short, interesting conversations with many offices, and within a day or two had set up 14 interviews for the next week. It was an experience that really communicated to me that there are still offices in Congress that value scientific expertise and critical thinking skills.

How did you end up choosing Senator Merkley's office?

Let me frame this in the mold of advice I would give to a future fellow and tie it into how I made my decision to work for Senator Merkley. As an incoming fellow, one of the most important things for me to do was to try to work for an office that has experience hosting fellows, especially Congressional Science & Engineering Fellows. If you go to an office that hasn't had a fellow, be prepared to do more work in defining a role for yourself. Senator Merkley has hosted one every year for the past few years, and so they know how to use a fellow. When you interview, make sure to ask about their expectations and make sure that those align with what you want to do or are open to doing.

Talk to as many former fellows as you can to get their perspective. Ask them about their office and offices they work with to get a feel for how different offices function. There are major differences between offices in terms of management and working styles, so it's important to find a good fit. I heard from prior fellows that Senator Merkley's office was a great place to focus on energy and climate change mitigation policy and that it was a very collaborative place, which I found to be true. Senator Merkley will get into the weeds of climate policy and it was a really enjoyable experience to discuss issues, including things I worked on during my Ph.D. (like energy-efficient photonics materials) with the Senator and staff and help explain their importance.

Interviewer note: Check out our previous post on [navigating the Congressional interview process \(https://www.aaaspolicyfellowships.org/blog/finding-right-fit-how-survive-stpf-legislative-placement-interviews\)](https://www.aaaspolicyfellowships.org/blog/finding-right-fit-how-survive-stpf-legislative-placement-interviews).

What was it like to work on the Senate version of the Green New Deal?

So that term has obviously become a real hot topic in policy circles over the year I was in the fellowship- it went from being something barely talked about to something every major candidate for president has been weighing in on. For people who aren't familiar, I'd recommend an article by [David Roberts at Vox \(https://www.vox.com/energy-and-environment/2018/12/21/18144138/green-new-deal-alexandria-ocasio-cortez\)](https://www.vox.com/energy-and-environment/2018/12/21/18144138/green-new-deal-alexandria-ocasio-cortez) who gets into a lot of the details as to what the vision of a Green New Deal might be. From my perspective, it calls for a large mobilization of government and private resources towards decarbonizing the economy, while ensuring a fair and equitable transition for impacted workers and all other Americans in the process. It's great to see this focus on the need to address climate change, and to frame it as an investment in our future.

My work on this topic mostly involved joining my mentor in Senator Merkley's office in meetings with a variety of stakeholders including labor unions, think-tanks, environmental groups, and other Senate and House offices. I also supported the development of climate and energy bills along those lines, including the [Good Jobs for 21st Century Energy Act \(https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/2185\)](https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/2185) which would help clean energy jobs have higher labor standards. I think

this work, in particular, has helped me with my professional development by giving me a much broader perspective on environmental and climate regulations and the many stakeholders impacted, as well as helping me build my network.

What was it like to take an idea and turn it into legislation?

That was one of the things which I was most excited about, and I got the opportunity to draft and introduce a bill. The bill creates a low-interest financing program for energy efficiency improvements. My mentor and I worked for months to craft the right language, gather endorsements, and then find co-sponsors. Our bill idea is based on Senator Merkley's successful bipartisan Rural Energy Savings Program which helps families and businesses in rural communities receive loans to make energy efficiency improvements. They can pay back those loans through their monthly electric bill. Our new legislation would create a parallel program in the Department of Energy that would use this model but provide money to states to finance similar on-bill financing programs for their local utilities (electricity, water, etc.) or local governments to run. I worked with a variety of energy efficiency groups, utilities, and state energy offices to fine-tune this proposal. We talked with offices on both sides of the aisle and were able to sign-on three Democratic co-sponsors. Discussions with other offices are ongoing and we are hopeful that Republican offices will join as well. The bill, S. 2382, the [Community Energy Savings Program Act of 2019 \(https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/2382\)](https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/2382), was finally introduced on July 31, 2019. My office is working to get a fall hearing on the bill in the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee.

Now that the fellowship is over, you will be starting a position as a senior engineer at Pratt and Whitney. How has the fellowship prepared you for your new career path?

Although my materials science experience was an important component to getting my new position, my work in the Senate was instrumental in separating me from other early-career engineers. From talking with my new managers, they were impressed by my decision to leave academia and go to DC as an IEEE Congressional fellow. My experience in the Senate showed them that I was experienced in handling quick deadlines and that I had the organizational and communication skills needed to deal with a large bureaucracy. Pausing my engineering career to do the fellowship was a risk but one that really paid off. It was vindicating to hear that the skills I gained through the fellowship are valued in the private sector. I am so happy to have done it and am going to continue to stay involved with science policy.

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