

I

The Cycle

Politicians talk a lot. But, they don't talk too much, and that talk is rarely cheap. Communication is central to politicians' work, particularly in the U.S. Congress. Our senators and representatives often talk with each other in the structured, policy-rich environment inside Congress (Aldrich and Rohde 1995, 1996, Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2004, Denzau et al. 1985). They debate the overall policy agenda as well as legislative details of that agenda. Senators and representatives also talk extensively with constituents, often in the public, unpredictable, and unstructured context of election campaigns (Franklin 1991, Herrnson 2004, Jacobson 2004, McCombs and Shaw 1972, 1993, Sellers 1998). This interaction involves fewer policy details, as the politicians aim to explain and advertise Washington activities, rather than continue the "legislative combat" of committee and floor debate (Fenno 1978, xiii).

With increasing frequency, the politicians' legislative and electoral worlds are blurring together in "the permanent campaign" (Blumenthal 2008, Lawrence 2000, Ornstein and Mann 2000).¹ Policy debates between elections are extending beyond the structured arena inside Congress to a broader, less-structured, and more-public arena. Examples of these public debates abound. In January of 1995, a new Republican congressional majority aggressively promoted a bold legislative

¹ Other labels include "PR wars" (Sinclair 2006), "media politics" (Evans and Oleszek 2001), "crafted talk" (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000), "information cycles" (Bennett and Mannheim 2001), "crafted coverage" (Cook 1996), "spiral of opportunity" (Miller and Riechert 2001), and "recursive governance" (Crozier 2007). Also, Sulkin (2005) links agenda setting in elections and legislatures on the level of individual legislators.

agenda and used that agenda to win news coverage. Eight years later, members of Congress publicly debated the merits of launching the Iraq War. Their intentionally public deliberations helped spark a national discussion about the conflict. A similarly contentious public debate took place in 2005, when Congress considered President George Bush's plan to reform Social Security. In their attempts to shape the debate's outcome, legislators from both parties pitched carefully chosen arguments to the news media. During the next Congress, a newly elected Democratic majority again sought news coverage aggressively in an attempt to pass a specific legislative agenda.

When considered together, these public debates raise important analytical questions. How do congressional leaders decide which issues to bring up for debate inside and outside Congress? How do internal party divisions impact the powers of congressional leaders to set the agenda? What strategies effectively help legislators win news coverage of issues and arguments outside Congress? Does such coverage ever feed back to shape the legislative process and policy outcomes inside Congress? Finally, why do legislators' promotional campaigns sometimes succeed and sometimes fail?

These questions suggest the central theme of this book: how members of Congress use strategic communication² to shape the news coverage and agendas of policy debates. Politicians' promotional campaigns play a growing role in contemporary policy debates, from abortion and foreign policy to Social Security reform and tax policy (Crigler 1996, Graber 1996, Mannheim 1991, 1994, 2008). Compared to deliberations inside Congress, debates in the public arena include many more participants, from interest group advocates to news journalists and members of the public (Kingdon 2003). The larger number of participants makes these broader debates less predictable than the structured deliberations of 535 legislators inside Congress.

² Mannheim defines "strategic political communication" as "the use of sophisticated knowledge of such attributes of human behavior as attitude and preference structures, cultural tendencies, and media use patterns – and such relevant organizational behaviors as how news organizations make decisions regarding news content and how congressional committees schedule and structure hearings – to shape and target messages to maximize their desired impact while minimizing undesired collateral effects" (2008, 106).

While all the participants may affect the broader policy debates, this book focuses on the role of the news media.³ In these debates politicians share the goal of “dominating the news agenda, entering the news cycle at the earliest possible time, and repeatedly re-entering it, with stories and initiatives so that subsequent news coverage is set on [their own] terms.” (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999, 214) As a result, the content of coverage “is really the imprint of power – it registers the identity of actors or interests that are competing to dominate the text” (Entman 1993, 53; see also Gamson 2001, Gans 2004, Pan and Kosicki 2001, Wolfsfeld and Sheaffer 2006).

As politicians compete to shape news coverage of policy debates, that coverage can affect the progression and outcome of those debates in many ways. If news stories devote more attention to one party’s arguments in a debate, the news audience may be more inclined to use those arguments when evaluating the parties’ proposals in the debate. The party dominating the news coverage thus receives more favorable evaluations of its proposals (Druckman 2001, Iyengar 1991, Iyengar and Kinder 1987, Wanta et al. 2004). In addition to shaping the dimensions of evaluation, the news coverage may highlight attractive attributes of a party on those dimensions. With their attention drawn to these attributes, the public may evaluate the party and its proposals even more favorably (Aday 2006, Chyi and McCombs 2004, Dalton et al. 1998, Kahn and Kenney 2002, McCombs and Ghanem 2001). In light of these potential advantages, politicians may deliberately attempt to shape news coverage (Cook 1998, Entman 2004, Jacobs and Shapiro 2000). I argue that contemporary politicians carefully choose their public statements in anticipation of how the news media will cover those statements (Andsager 2000, Cook 2006, Gamson and Modigliani 1989, Kernell 1997, Lakoff 2004). By proactively anticipating journalists’ needs, members of Congress in particular hope to shape their news coverage and thereby the agenda of policy debates outside and inside their chambers (Baumgartner and

³ Opinions of the public, as captured in polls, certainly play a central role in political elites’ strategic communication, both in the creation of messages and the assessment of their impact (Heath 1998, Jacobs and Shapiro 2000). In Congress rank-and-file legislators rely relatively little on polling, but congressional leaders make frequent use of surveys to “lead” both Congress and the public (Jacobs et al. 2002). The evidence in this book covers relatively short time periods (seven-month periods in two separate years), and the analysis focuses largely on four specific debates outlined in Chapter 2. It is unlikely to find substantial movement in public opinion about these debates during the short time periods. But, the evolution and outcome of the debates had the potential to shape longer-term perceptions of the two parties, thus providing a boost in the next election and beyond.

Jones 1993, Cobb and Elder 1983, Hilgartner and Bosk 1988, Lawrence and Birkland 2004).

These dynamics of strategic communication in congressional policy making are important for three reasons. First, greater internal unity gives congressional parties more influence over policy agendas and outcomes (Aldrich and Rohde 1995). We therefore need to understand how politicians use agenda setting inside and outside Congress to minimize division and thereby help themselves individually and collectively (Kingdon 2003). If we can understand the day-to-day mechanics of legislators' agenda setting, we can better explain how their efforts can lead to longer-term electoral success and realignment of political parties (Aldrich 1995, Carmines and Stimson 1986, Miller and Riechert 2001). In public policy debates, "the party which is able to make its definition of the issues prevail is likely to take over the government" (Schattschneider 1960, 73).

Second, if news coverage outside Congress is part of the agenda of legislative debates, we also need to understand the origins of that coverage (Dalton et al. 1998, Sigal 1973). Politicians' promotional and agenda-setting activities can act as one influence on news coverage (Cook 1989, 1998). Journalists themselves may be another influence on coverage, independent of what politicians say (Bennett 2007, Entman 2004). The journalists decide which politicians' messages to cover and how frequently to cover them. Because these decisions by journalists help determine whether the politicians' promotional efforts succeed, it is important to understand the interaction between politicians and journalists, particularly the type of coverage the journalists choose to provide (Graber 2006, Jasperson et al. 1998, Sheafer 2001, Shin and Cameron 2005).

Finally, we need to consider how the interaction among politicians and journalists affects the quality of the policy debates, and by extension, the information that the public receives about those debates. A functioning democracy requires citizens to be informed about their elected representatives, in order to hold those representatives accountable (Druckman 2005, Graber 2006, Lippmann 1920/2008, Page 1995). News coverage provides one source of that information (Baker 2007, Bennett 2007, Fox et al. 2005). As politicians and journalists continually exchange issues and arguments about public policies, their statements and stories could simplify and distort those debates, or make the debates more relevant and accessible to the public (Niven 2003). These sharply divergent outcomes underscore the importance of understanding how politicians use strategic communication, and how journalists respond to those efforts (Bennett and Entman 2001, Blumler and Kavanagh 1999).

This chapter lays a foundation for exploring strategic communication in the U.S. Congress. The next section explains why members of Congress increasingly rely on promotional campaigns. I then outline my core arguments about how politicians and journalists interact in cycles of spin. The final section describes the evidence used to evaluate my arguments.

1.1. THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF AGENDA SETTING IN CONGRESS

In recent decades members of Congress have grown increasingly independent in their pursuit of reelection and policy (Davidson and Oleszek 1998).⁴ The growth in congressional staff and resources has allowed legislators to become legislative entrepreneurs, introducing bills often to their constituents' benefit. The members also have built independent fundraising organizations, allowing them to run candidate-centered campaigns (Jacobson 2004). Despite this growth in individual resources and opportunities, contemporary members of Congress still face obstacles to winning reelection by themselves.

In order to claim that they are working for constituents' interests, legislators need to produce successful policy initiatives. Position taking and bill introductions alone may prove insufficient for winning constituent support (Arnold 2004); legislators must also pass legislation earning that support. But, pushing legislation through Congress is not easy, as members may not agree on the most desirable policy (Kingdon 2003). The sharp partisanship and polarization of recent congresses suggest that policy agreement is growing rarer than ever (Oppenheimer 2002, Sinclair 2006). And within a party, even widespread agreement on a policy position does not guarantee that party members will act together to pass legislation (Aldrich 1995, Kiewit and McCubbins 1991). Members' preferences may not be self-evident. Legislators may prefer not to publicize their positions on certain issues, particularly controversial ones. Furthermore, no legislator has an incentive to gather this information and coordinate passage of legislation. Every member may prefer instead to free ride on the efforts of her colleagues, letting them do the necessary work to pass legislation while still enjoying the benefits of their efforts (the approved legislation). This temptation to free ride could discourage all

⁴ A third individual goal, power, is also common (Fenno 1978). This book devotes little attention to pursuit of this goal, because those efforts usually take years, much longer than the seven-month periods of my analysis.

legislators from devoting effort to passing legislation, leading to the outcome of no bills passing Congress.

A legislative party may address this collective action problem by creating leadership positions and assigning valuable powers and resources to those positions. These benefits provide an incentive for individual members to work to become leaders, who must in turn advance the interests of their party members (Aldrich 1995, Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2004). The party leaders can assist rank-and-file members with tasks ranging from committee assignments to fundraising,⁵ but one of the most important leadership responsibilities concerns the legislative agenda. Specifically, a party leader can use his institutional powers and resources to encourage consideration of legislation addressing the members' concerns and to prevent debate of bills that threaten their interests (Bachrach and Baratz 1962, Cox and McCubbins 2004, Riker 1986). As one observer put it, "the definition of alternatives is the supreme instrument of power" (Schattschneider 1960, 66).

Party leaders possess varying degrees of influence over the legislative agenda inside Congress. In the House, the majority's control of the Rules Committee and majoritarian rules governing floor debate give the Speaker extensive control over the legislative agenda. Those same rules prevent the minority party from exercising much influence over that agenda. The powers of Senate leaders lie between these two extremes. The Senate Majority Leader enjoys the right of first recognition on the floor, which bestows considerable influence over the chamber's agenda. But, the supermajority requirement for ending debate often forces the Majority Leader to obtain unanimous consent from other senators before bringing a bill to the floor for debate. Conversely, that need for unanimous consent increases the Senate Minority Leader's influence over the legislative agenda; the two Senate leaders often negotiate which bills to bring to the floor. In the House, the Speaker has no need to negotiate with the Minority Leader, which substantially reduces the latter's influence over the floor agenda.⁶

In addition to using these internal rules to shape the legislative debate, congressional party leaders often propose an agenda of policy issues and messages favoring their party at the start of each congress (Bader 1996, Sinclair 1997). The leaders then work to move these issues and arguments

⁵ See Pearson (2005) and Sinclair (2006) for details on the leaders' nonpolicy assistance.

⁶ See Sinclair (2006) and Davidson and Oleszek (1998). Evans and Oleszek (2001) document how congressional parties use internal Senate rules to further their public relations campaigns aimed beyond Congress.

to the top of the legislative agenda for active consideration. A prominent example of this type of agenda setting came after the 1994 elections in which the GOP won a majority of House seats for the first time since 1952. The newly elected Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-GA6) subsequently led a chamber majority committed to action on a number of issues important to conservative Republicans. Gingrich aggressively focused the House legislative agenda on these issues, using the institutional powers of the House majority to vote on bills implementing the GOP's preferred positions on these issues (Gimpel 1996).

Observers of Congress have studied extensively these efforts to shape the legislative agenda inside Congress. We know much less, however, about congressional leaders' attempts to influence the policy agenda outside Congress, particularly as captured in the news media. Just as presidents "go public," congressional leaders can hold press conferences and impromptu interviews in order to shape the public policy agenda (Kernell 1997). Such agenda setting is arguably more difficult for congressional leaders outside Congress than inside; the leaders lack institutional powers outside Congress to promote or discourage messages. The final decision about news coverage rests with journalists, and congressional leaders face extensive competition when trying to insert their issues and arguments into a gradually shrinking news hole (Kernell 1997, Sellers and Schaffner 2007).

Despite these obstacles, party leaders in Congress still endeavor to shape the news agenda outside Congress via strategic communication (Mannheim 1991, 1994, 2008). News coverage of Congress often focuses narrowly on a small subset of all the issues and arguments that legislators consider. The coverage makes the subset of issues and arguments stand out to the general public, relative to other elements of the "policy primeval soup" inside Congress (Kingdon 2003, 200). If a party's leaders successfully shape this policy agenda reported in news coverage, that coverage can encourage the public to focus on the party's preferred issues and arguments (Dalton et al. 1998, Iyengar 1991, Iyengar and Kinder 1987, Kahn and Kenney 2002, Lacy 2001). The public agenda setting mobilizes individuals and groups concerned about those issues and arguments, which in turn pressure Congress to act. If one party more effectively broadens the conflict to include supporters, that party is more likely to win (Schattschneider 1960).

By making an issue more prominent on the external media agenda and more salient to the public, party leaders can also increase the pressure on Congress to address the issue (Arnold 1990). The leaders can use news coverage of the issue to increase the costs to individual members of not supporting the leaders' arguments and legislative proposal on the issue

(Cook 1998, 2001). Changing the public salience of an issue alters how members address it, even if the level of division inside Congress remains unchanged. Doing nothing on a newly salient issue is more costly and difficult to explain than taking action on that issue (Sigal 1973, Price 1978).⁷

In addition, congressional leaders use news coverage for communicating with each other and other political elites about the legislative agenda (Cook 2001, Sigal 1973). A congressional staffer explained the need for this communication:

Congressmen and senators read the mass media. The big problem on the Hill is the oversupply of information. They have no way of dealing with it. So they don't, mostly. We can write reports and papers and they don't read it. But if the *Times* or *Post* picks up our report and does a story on it, they do read that, and it gets their attention. (Quoted in Kingdon 2003, 60.)

The topics of this communication range from the composition of the legislative agenda to disagreements about individual issues. When liberal House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA8) shares a press conference podium with moderate Representative Gene Taylor (D-MS4),⁸ the two Democrats hope that news coverage of the event will signal both ideological wings of their party that both legislators consider their policy proposals and accompanying arguments acceptable and worthy of further action. In all these ways, news coverage of issues and arguments can raise their prominence on the legislative agenda inside Congress. Congressional leaders thus target the news media and its coverage in hopes of affecting the legislative agenda inside Congress.⁹ News making becomes a central part of policy making (Cook 1998).

⁷ President Bush began his second term as president by proposing fundamental reforms to Social Security. In his (ultimately unsuccessful) efforts to get these reforms through Congress, a central goal was to raise the American public's concern about the impending threats to Social Security. Republicans hoped that raising the public's concern would increase pressure on Congress to pass reforms to the program (Toner 2005). In March of 2005, 18% of the public viewed Social Security as the most important problem facing President Bush and Congress. Social Security was the most highly ranked individual issue (Lake et al. 2005). Chapter 4 discusses why Bush's reforms failed.

⁸ In 2004, Pelosi earned a vote rating of ninety five from the Americans for Democratic Action; Taylor's rating was sixty (<http://www.adaction.org/ADATodayVR2005.pdf>, last accessed December 1, 2006).

⁹ These efforts to add issues to the legislative agenda constitute positive agenda control (Cox and McCubbins 2004, Finocchiaro and Rohde 2002). Congressional leaders may also exert negative control over the policy agenda inside Congress, by preventing their chamber from considering a bill or issue. The leaders lack such negative control over the policy agenda outside Congress, because journalists, not politicians, hold the final say over the composition of this agenda.

To the extent that party leaders can shape the policy agenda in the news media, they thus exert greater influence over the legislative agenda and debates inside Congress. That influence further strengthens the leaders' ability to help their individual party members by pushing legislation addressing the members' policy interests and slowing bills threatening those interests. The leaders' efforts also help these legislators electorally. When communicating with constituents, the rank-and-file legislators can go beyond mere position taking to claim credit for any legislative accomplishments that favor their constituents.

The leaders' agenda-setting efforts provide additional benefits beyond those for individual party members. The leaders also help shape their party's collective reputation (Jacobs et al. 2002). Each time Republican leaders in Congress help muscle a tax cut through both chambers, their success encourages both elite and mass observers of Congress to view the GOP as more committed to reducing taxes (Evans and Oleszek 2001, Pope and Woon 2005). Constituent groups benefiting from tax cuts grow more likely to support the Republican Party, as well as to expect further tax cut proposals in the future. In this manner, multiple Republican tax cuts over the last three decades have helped the party develop ownership of the issue (Petrocik 1996). In a similar manner, Democrats have built a strong reputation on issues such as health care and the environment. A party's legislative accomplishments and reputation on issues combine into an overall "brand name" different from that of the opposing party (Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2004).

Each congressional party attempts to focus voters' attention on favorable issues making up its brand name. This "priming" encourages voters to evaluate the party on those issues, making it more likely that the voters will evaluate the party's members positively and vote for them (Iyengar and Kinder 1987, Krosnick and Kinder 1990). If a congressional minority party can focus enough attention on its favorable issues, that minority may win enough additional seats in the next election to control Congress. Chapter 3 describes how Gingrich and his fellow Republicans succeeded in this task in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Since winning control of both congressional chambers in the 1994 elections and winning the presidency in 2000, the Republicans have continued working to strengthen their party's collective reputation and to weaken that of the Democrats. The *New York Times* described the plans of a leading Republican strategist:

[RNC] Chairman [Ken] Mehlman talked big and thought big about the Republican Party: about how he and his allies could fundamentally redraw the political architecture of America, change the way Americans conceptualize the two parties and establish Republicans as the dominant party in America long after George Bush returned to Texas.... This was nothing short of a campaign to marginalize the Democratic Party and everything that Mehlman, reflecting Bush and Rove, said it stood for: big government, high taxes, liberal judges, a timorous foreign policy. (Nagourney 2006)¹⁰

Republican leaders have encouraged voters to focus on the strong points of the GOP's collective reputation, and to use these issues as the basis for evaluating all politicians.

Collective party labels may also benefit individual members of Congress in a more immediate, short-term manner. Legislators and journalists may give more serious consideration to a tax cut proposal from a Republican than one from a Democrat. The GOP has successfully passed more tax cuts than the Democrats have, and Republican constituents call more frequently for more tax cuts than their Democratic counterparts do. These differences encourage a public perception that the Republicans are more capable of passing tax cuts. This reputation and ownership of the issue (Petrocik 1996) suggests that a Republican tax proposal stands a greater chance of passage. In an electoral context, voters who believe taxes are too high will be more likely to support Republican candidates. The tendency exists even if the voter knows nothing about the candidates except partisan affiliation.

1.2. CYCLES OF SPIN

These diverse benefits thus create an incentive for members of Congress to employ strategic communication in legislative debates. This section outlines the main components of legislators' strategic communication campaigns, and how these promotional campaigns create cycles of spin. A central element is the message, which I define as the issue and arguments about the issue that a politician promotes. In launching a strategic communications campaign and promoting the message, the politician hopes to win a favorable outcome related to the issue. That issue often

¹⁰ See also Bumiller (2004), Edsall (2006), and Hamburger and Wallsten (2006).