Cycles of Spin

Strategic Communication in the U.S. Congress

How do politicians try to shape their news coverage? Patrick Sellers examines strategic communication campaigns in the U.S. Congress. He argues that these campaigns create cycles of spin: Leaders create messages, rank-and-file legislators decide whether to promote those messages, journalists decide whether to cover the messages, and any coverage feeds back to influence the policy process. These four stages are closely related; decisions at one stage influence those at another. Sellers uses diverse evidence, from participant observation and press secretary interviews to computerized content analysis and vector auto regression. The result is a comprehensive and unprecedented examination of politicians’ promotional campaigns and journalists’ coverage of those campaigns. Countering numerous critics of spin, Sellers offers the provocative argument that the promotional messages have their origins in the actual policy preferences of members of Congress. The campaigns to promote these messages thus can help the public learn about policy debates in Congress.

Patrick Sellers is currently a Professor of Political Science at Davidson College. He has also taught at Rice University and Indiana University and worked in the U.S. House and Senate in Washington, DC. He is coauthor (with Brian Schaffner) of the forthcoming book Winning with Words: The Origins and Impact of Framing. His research has appeared in the American Political Science Review, American Journal of Political Science, Journal of Politics, Legislative Studies Quarterly, Political Communication, and other leading journals.
Advance Praise for *Cycles of Spin*

“In this superb book, Patrick Sellers fills a major gap in the literatures about political communications, Congress, and representation. Sellers combines innovative statistical analysis, close personal observation of party message activities in Congress, and thoughtful case studies to provide the first comprehensive study of the strategic communications that occur between lawmakers, the media, and citizens. It is a major study that should be read by any serious scholar of American politics.

“First and foremost, *Cycles of Spin* is a book about how representation plays out on the ground. Teasing out the complex interrelations that exist between agenda setting and position taking in Congress, media coverage of lawmaking, and the policy attitudes of ordinary citizens is very difficult because the causal relations almost always are reciprocal. Sellers meets this challenge through innovative statistical tests of the ‘feedback’ that occurs between these actors. The work is very nuanced and rooted in an insider’s understanding of party strategizing and the news business. And the book is extremely well written. It belongs on graduate student reading lists, but also would work well in upper-level courses about Congress and political communications.”

– C. Lawrence Evans, College of William and Mary

“In *Cycles of Spin*, Sellers expertly constructs an elegant model describing how members of Congress create and promote their policy messages and predicting how successful those messages will be in gaining news coverage. *Cycles of Spin* fills a considerable gap in the study of strategic communication, illuminating the incentives and institutional constraints that shape how congressional leaders craft messages, why rank-and-file members either join the messaging effort or defect, and how news coverage feeds back into the policy debate.”

– Regina Lawrence, Louisiana State University

“This is the most extensive study of media and policy agenda setting and framing in the U.S. Congress to date. It draws on a wealth of evidence that includes notes from weekly meetings of the Senate Minority Leader with Democratic legislative directors, more than 22,000 public statements by members of Congress, more than one million news stories from 12 national outlets and local newspapers in 43 states, and interviews with press secretaries of 41 Democratic senators. Professor Sellers's thorough analysis of this evidence specifies more precisely the actual relationships among politicians and journalists – and the effect of these relationships on public debate and policy outcomes. Highly recommended for all interested in political agenda setting and framing.”

– David H. Weaver, Indiana University
COMMUNICATION, SOCIETY AND POLITICS

Editors
W. Lance Bennett, University of Washington
Robert M. Entman, The George Washington University

Editorial Advisory Board
Scott Althaus, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Larry M. Bartels, Princeton University
Jay G. Blumler, Emeritus, University of Leeds
Doris A. Graber, University of Illinois at Chicago
Regina Lawrence, Louisiana State University
Paolo Mancini, Universita di Perugia
Pippa Norris, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University
Barbara Pfetsch, Freie Universitaet, Berlin
Philip Schlesinger, University of Stirling
Gadi Wolfsfeld, Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Politics and relations among individuals in societies across the world are being transformed by new technologies for targeting individuals and sophisticated methods for shaping personalized messages. The new technologies challenge boundaries of many kinds – between news, information, entertainment, and advertising; between media, with the arrival of the World Wide Web; and even between nations. Communication, Society and Politics probes the political and social impacts of these new communication systems in national, comparative, and global perspective.

Titles in the Series:
C. Edwin Baker, Media, Markets, and Democracy
C. Edwin Baker, Media Concentration and Democracy: Why Ownership Matters
W. Lance Bennett and Robert M. Entman, eds., Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy

Continued after the Index
Cycles of Spin

*Strategic Communication in the U.S. Congress*

PATRICK SELLERS

*Davidson College*
Contents

Acknowledgments page ix
1 The Cycle 1
2 Building Blocks 18
3 Creation 29
4 Promotion 96
5 Coverage and Feedback 141
6 Completing the Cycle 205
References 225
Index 251
Acknowledgments

This project is built from the contributions of many individuals. My initial education about the interaction between congressional politics and news coverage came from the staff of then–Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle, particularly Randy DeValk, Joan Huffer, Joel Johnson, Laura Petrou, and Larry Stein. Staff members in the Senate and House Radio Television galleries also provided extensive insights and evidence. Rick Wilson, then at the National Science Foundation, provided valuable advice for exploring the unanswered questions that emerged from my experiences in the Senate.

My exploration of these questions has received funding from many sources, including the American Political Science Association (through its Congressional Fellowship and Small Research Grant programs), the National Science Foundation (SBR #9870841), the Dirksen Congressional Center and the Caterpillar Foundation, Indiana University, and Davidson College. Much of the data collection and analysis was possible only with the help of numerous research assistants, including Tiffany Allen, Emmanuel Amos-Abanyie, Patrick Brandt, Alana Calvin, Shelley Conroy, Jonathan Crooms, Dan Duggans, Sarah Hernley, David Holian, John Marion, Scott McClurg, Lauren Pierce, Brian Schaffner, and most recently, Taylor Ansley, Jarred Taylor, and Lydie White.

I received valuable feedback on the project from presentations at Indiana University, Davidson College, American University, Duke University, Vanderbilt University, and numerous conferences. A long list of individuals have provided useful suggestions for improving the project, including John Aldrich, Scott Althauser, Jeffrey Biggs, Patrick Brandt, David Canon,
x

Acknowledgments

Tim Cook, Chris Deering, Terry Firmin, Rich Forgette, Dan Lipinski, Bruce Oppenheimer, Dan Palazzolo, Phil Paolino, Laura Petrou, David Rohde, Barbara Sinclair, Tracy Sulkin, Elaine Willey, and three anonymous reviewers.

I should also mention the particularly valuable contributions of two individuals. As a graduate student, Brian Schaffner helped organize much of the initial data collection underlying this book. Since then, he has become a coauthor and colleague, while continuing to make helpful contributions to this project (including a last-minute but thorough reading of the full manuscript). Kathryn Firmin-Sellers read more drafts of chapters than I care to admit. She has always been willing to discuss vexing theoretical or empirical problems, as well as to help refine this project to reach its potential.

Finally, I dedicate this book to Kathryn, Maggie, and Ben, who help me explore the intricacies of persuasion and spin each day.