

## 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

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*Continued after the Index*

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PATRICK SELLERS

*Davidson College*



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Contents

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

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