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.
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:**
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