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Advances in Research Using the C-SPAN Archives

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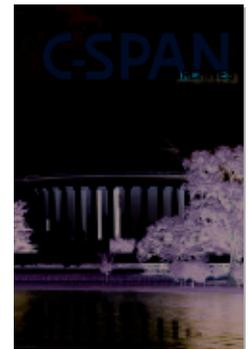
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CHAPTER 4

WHAT CAN THE PUBLIC LEARN BY WATCHING CONGRESS?

Tim Groeling

When I was a student in graduate school, I remember arguing with a professor about how scholars and the public should go about studying Congress. My professor (who shall remain nameless here) firmly believed that studying anything other than actual votes in Congress was a waste of time, while I believed that there was value in studying both the deeds *and* the words of members of Congress.

The preceding chapters of the book help validate that more expansive view, as they provide a variety of ways in which scholars and the public can use the coverage provided by C-SPAN to learn about Congress and American politics in general. In other words, all three studies presented here examine the reasoning that underlies public discourse, using C-SPAN as their key tool for analysis, employing strikingly diverse empirical and theoretical approaches:

- In the first chapter, Jonathan Morris and Michael Joy examine how that the congressional deliberative process shapes the public's perceptions of Congress.
- Next, Theresa Castor analyzes congressional discourse to examine how politicians can understand and address policy concerns before they become a crisis.
- Finally, Robert Kerr uses C-SPAN to examine how political actors work to shape their brands and representations in the media.

CONGRESSIONAL DELIBERATIONS

Otto von Bismarck is often credited with the observation that “laws, like sausages, cease to inspire respect in proportion as we know how they are made.” While this observation is apparently apocryphal (Shapiro, 2008), it does link our first two chapters here, in that they are trying to help us better understand whether the public decreases their respect for Congress when shown congressional deliberations (Chapter 1) and how policy is made in Congress in a particular case (Chapter 2).

In Chapter 1, Morris and Joy empirically test whether viewing the legislative process actually alienates viewers, and experimentally test whether such alienation might stem from partisan bickering, or from the complexity and tedium of the legislative process (or both). Their findings indicate that legislators wishing to manage their image with the public face a trade-off wherein the same partisan rhetoric that cements their bond with fellow partisans can engage the public, but also angers and frustrates citizens.

In Chapter 2, Castor's analysis of congressional discourse related to the passage of the Great Lakes–St. Lawrence River Basin Water Resources Compact (or, the Great Lakes Compact) is an interesting study of a somewhat puzzling occurrence: Congress anticipating and addressing a potential problem *before* it became a crisis. In conducting her analysis, Castor also identifies a secondary puzzle: the relatively limited amount of congressional discussion

and debate that occurred prior to the law's passage. Indeed, although her research found a substantial amount of policy effort preceded congressional involvement, it is surprising—and potentially worrisome for democratic theory—that such a major change in policy could be enacted with so little public debate. Of course, minimal public debate might be a sensible reaction for members of Congress if the public reacts negatively to their “sausage-making” deliberations.

CONSERVATIVE AND LIBERAL BRAND MANAGEMENT

Members of parties face numerous challenges when they try to define themselves and communicate their brand to the public (Cox & McCubbins, 1993; Green, 2015; Groeling, 2010; Sellers, 2010)—particularly when other actors convey their messages to the public. In Chapter 3, Robert Kerr examines how political actors work to shape their brands and representations in the media. In so doing, Kerr identifies two interesting paradoxes in how they work to define their ideological labels to the public:

- First, he argues that conservatives apparently work to define and add value to the conservative brand, but liberals apparently concede the playing field and let conservatives negatively define liberal labeling.
- Second, he concludes that both the public and media still use the liberal and conservative labeling for the major blocs in American politics, even though conservatives apparently define both brands in this study.

The preceding three studies thus illuminate how the public reacts when it observes Congress, how Congress deliberates, and how political actors of opposite ideological persuasions are pitted against one another. Each shows how the C-SPAN Video Library can be used to advance research in these areas. They provide a starting point on which other scholars can build further research.

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