

Demystifying Astroturfing and Economic Narratives in Policymaking: A Review of Related Cases

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Abstract: This paper aims to clarify the concept of astroturfing and explore its possibilities to influence policymaking through economic narratives. In the absence of a single verified definition, "astroturfing" implies a deceiving grassroots action staged by corporates and political groups to influence and shape public opinions on specific policies. By using the economy as a defense, interest groups inundate the public with narratives about the advantages and disadvantages of implementing specific policies. The study analyzes two case studies—fossil fuel lobbyists' efforts to weaken climate policies and the telecommunications industry's arguments against net neutrality regulations. The findings will explore the relationship between astroturfing and aided economic control over policymaking processes. Further, the paper contributes to sensitizing the stakeholders about the astroturfing practices employed and emphasizes greater transparency and countermeasures to safeguard democracy in policymaking.

Keywords: Astroturfing, Grassroots, Narrative, Policymaking, Democracy.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Policymaking is a significant step that directly affect the lives of public at large. A minor lapse of any kind will erode public trust in governments. Along the process of policymaking, opinions from stakeholders are gathered to serve the shared interests at large. Data is the king today, advancements in Technology and Communications pose greater challenges and threat to deceitful mechanisms employed by untrusted sources to manipulate genuine interests. It all began in 1985, where Astroturfing referred as fake grassroot campaigns to mobilize the support of vested interests deploying the tactic of funding the impersonated groups to influence the policymaking processes. Adding to this is the formation of economic narratives—fabrication of facts to frame policy issues through economic viewpoint, such as employment opportunities, cost efficient, or market competences—to convince stakeholders and shape outcomes.

This paper demystifies these concepts by synthesizing related literature, focusing on their intersection in policymaking. This underscores the need to study the astroturfing effects on the integrity of democracy in policymaking. Studies on policy processes show that narratives and framing techniques can influence public opinions and decision-making. When employed alongside astroturfing, they can make it look like everybody agrees, which can lead to policies that fare well for businesses than

for the public. This study reviews specific cases, explores their interconnections to reveal how economic narratives, supplemented by astroturfing practices, shaped policy decisions. The approach employs resources from Political Science, Public Policy, Public Administration, Communication Studies, and Economics, aiming to deliver a concise yet comprehensive narrative for academic community. This research employs a qualitative case study methodology to examine astroturfing activities and their policy implications, enabling an in-depth exploration of complex phenomena in real-world contexts.

II. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF ASTROTURFING IN POLICYMAKING

Astroturfing refers to deceptive campaigns that mimic genuine grassroots movements but are orchestrated top-down by corporations, governments, or interest groups. Unlike authentic activism, astroturf efforts conceal funding sources and use paid actors, bots, or front organizations to generate artificial support. Literature highlights its evolution from traditional forms, such as hired protesters, to digital variants leveraging social media for rapid dissemination.

In policymaking, astroturfing influences by creating bandwagon effects and eroding trust in legitimate discourse. Studies identify coordination patterns, such as synchronized messaging across platforms, as hallmarks of astroturf

operations. For instance, emphasis framing analysis detects astroturf by comparing frames (e.g., economic vs. environmental) used by groups, revealing outliers that align with sponsor interests rather than grassroots concerns. This method, applied to U.S. shale gas debates, identified 12 astroturf groups emphasizing economic benefits to lobby for deregulation.

Corporate strategies often involve astroturf to counter regulations, as seen in telecom mergers where front groups seek "rents" through policy favors. EU cases, like the Responsible Energy Citizen Coalition, show astroturfing used to influence energy policies by simulating citizen opposition. Overall, literature warns that undetected astroturfing undermines policy legitimacy by distorting public input.

Astroturfing is when companies, governments, or interest groups run fake grassroots movements that seem like real ones. Astroturf campaigns, on the other hand, hide their financial sources and reward actors, bots, or front groups to mimic it as a genuine support. Literature underscores its transformation from conservative methods, such as hired campaigners, to digital arrangements exploiting social media for rapid dispersal. Consequently, this affects policy-making by making larger masses path towards the orchestrated agenda driven debates.

Research detects communication patterns, including coordinated messages across digital platforms, as defining characteristics of astroturfing actions. For example, focus framing analysis finds astroturf by looking at the frames (such economic vs. environmental) that groups use and finding outliers that fit with the objectives of the sponsor instead of the concerns of the grassroots.

This technique, used in debates around U.S. shale gas, found 12 astroturf groups that lobbied for deregulation by focusing on the economic benefits. Companies regularly use astroturf to get around rules, like when telecom companies merge and front groups try to get "rents" by getting favors from policymakers. The Responsible Energy Citizen Coalition is an illustration of astroturfing that attempted to delay and alter the energy regulations. Overall, studies indicates that concealed astroturfing actions makes policies unacceptable by shifting the public opinions.

III. ECONOMIC NARRATIVES IN POLICYMAKING

Economic narratives plant stories to defend economics, which impacts how public and policymakers perceive problems. They come up in social situations and suggest things like deregulation to encourage growth or subsidies to keep things stable. In making policies, stories are often used to convince people, and they often work better than data-driven evidence. Research shows that stories shape policies about health, the environment, and the economy by framing problems and solutions.

For instance, in U.S. rulemaking, lay narratives give agencies information about costs and unintended effects that go against their assumptions. The Laffer curve story that

pushed for tax cuts and the idea that "housing prices never fall" both played a role in the 2008 crisis. Multiple studies reveal that narratives modify policies to propagate political agenda. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, planned administration made the government work better. But when they are altered, they can make prejudices strengthen, like in individual stories like the "Great American Pioneer," which discourages government assistance. The Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) highlights the use of cognitive biases in tactical storytelling to acquire what the people actually want.

IV. ASTROTURFING AS A TOOL FOR AMPLIFYING ECONOMIC NARRATIVES

Astroturfing and economic narratives come together when fake movements spread stories that are framed in terms of the economy to change policy. Astroturf groups often use economic frames (like job losses from regulation) to hide the real reasons behind their sponsors, which is different from real grassroots environmental or social frames. This magnifies the artificial support to distort public opinions and affect the policymakers.

Astroturf finds its spot as an agenda-driven tool in multiple studies, where dramatized economic literature favors specific policy. This extends to Digital Amplification using bots, fake social media accounts, resulting in easy target to standstill the policymaking processes.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

➤ Case 1: Tobacco Industry and Health Regulations

The Tobacco industry is a classic case of astroturfing economic patterns to control policy. For many years, businesses paid for front groups like "Get Government Off Our Back" to make people doubt the health risks of smoking and frame rules as bad for business. Stories focused on job losses and government overreach, making it seem like there was grassroots opposition to laws like Duluth's Clean Indoor Air policy. This exempts U.S. of smoking bans affecting the global treaties, overlooking public health for industry profits.

➤ Case 2: Fossil Fuel Lobbyists and Climate Policies

Through the Western States Petroleum Association, fossil fuel groups set up fake groups like the California Drivers Alliance to fight California's climate laws. Economic stories painted carbon caps as price hikes that hurt consumers, and ads and petitions were used to create opposition. As a result, Democrats put off policies in 2014 and got rid of oil reduction targets in 2015, which pushed back emissions cuts. Bigger efforts, like the 1998 Global Climate Science Communications Plan, planted stories of uncertainty to divert people from following the Kyoto Protocol.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper reveals how astroturfing and economic narratives crisscross to manipulate policymaking, as proved by tobacco and climate cases. Future research should focus on detection tools and encourage narrative mastery among

policymakers. Enhancing transparency could lessen their impact, fostering fair policies. While present research highlights astroturfing mechanisms and impacts, gaps remain in understanding long-term effects and developing optimal countermeasures. Future research should focus on global perspectives and innovative solutions to safeguard democracy.

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