

Member Actions in the Public Sphere

If a legislature is set down in a constitutional environment, what sorts of actions will its members engage in that win public notice? For reasons elaborated below, I believe this is a useful question to ask, and I rely on it as an underpinning for this book about the U.S. Congress. By “public notice,” I mean notice by at least a politically aware stratum of the population. For a sense of what I mean by “sorts of actions,” consider the following account of congressional politics during Clinton’s first two controversy-laden years in 1993–94. I wrote this stylized sketch for the occasion of this book, but probably any of several million witnesses of U.S. politics during those years composing a brief narrative of widely noticed events involving Congress or its members would have written something like it.

Exhilarated by their party’s 1992 election victory, President Clinton and Democratic House and Senate leaders Tom Foley (D-Wash.)¹ and George Mitchell (D-Maine) set out to build Capitol Hill coalitions “from the left in”—that is, the Republican minority party would be largely ignored. Joining the new cabinet were

1. The first time the name of a member of Congress appears, here and throughout text, it is followed by a party-state designation such as “D-Wash.”