

Canvassing for Actions Through American History

The opening sketch of Chapter 1 grew from the following assignment I gave myself in 1995: Write a sketch of U.S. national politics and policymaking during 1993–94, centering on particularly conspicuous actions by members of the House and Senate. I wrote from memory as a close observer of public affairs during those years. If several close observers had each been asked to write a sketch like that, probably no two of them would have identified exactly the same events or participants. Unanimous mention of, for example, Senator Dole’s opposition to the Clinton health-care plan would fade into spottier coverage of Senator Riegle’s Whitewater hearings or Congressman Cooper’s alternative health-care plan. Yet the results would be recognizable as a “family” of related accounts.

Now imagine a series of such sketches (or families of them) for each Congress from 1789 through the present, all written by contemporary observers. It would add up to a very long story. Looked at one way, the result would be a two-centuries-long extract from the U.S. collective political consciousness. As a story, such a series might dissatisfy us in at least one respect. It might cry out for “weighting.” If the hundred-odd sketches each turned out to contain roughly the same number of conspicuous MC actions, which might happen