There are a lot of ways students of Congress can divide up our research on the institution. For me, the natural way has been to divide congressional studies into two broad activities and two general research venues--legislative activity which takes place mostly in Washington and representational activity which takes place mostly in constituencies outside Washington. And I think of my own research as having moved from one to the other--from legislative politics inside Congress to representational politics outside--from the study of politicians in committees to the study of politicians in constituencies.

I have always thought that students of Congress, as a group, have quite naturally spent much more time and effort studying what goes on in Washington than what goes on outside of Washington--more time studying legislative activity than representational activity--and, therefore, that a little more representation-centered research would be helpful. Today, I want to push that argument a little. Not, however, by taking off from the work of political scientists, but by stepping aside, avoiding that punch (!) and taking off from...
the work of another group—Washington journalists.

I do this because Washington journalists are the one group whose members are as interested in our national politicians as we are. And they write about them a lot more than we do. Indeed, most of what we know about our House members and Senators as individual politicians comes to us from Washington journalists. They are our default option. But my view is that they cannot and will not do all we need to have done—especially all that we need to have done beyond Washington. My experience in places beyond Washington tells me that. And my experience comes from years of traveling with politicians—127 trips with 30 Representatives and 16 Senators. Much to my wife’s satisfaction, I might add, I have finally stopped. (I think!)

I want to begin with the journalists. And I want to begin by characterizing them—and by “them” I mean print journalists—with a broad brush. As my benchmark, I take the perspective and the broad brush of a consummate Washingtonian, and a major arbiter of Washington opinion, Meg Greenfield. She was the long-time editorial page editor of the Washington Post, and she was for years the every-other-week back page columnist for Newsweek. She wrote a valedictory book entitled Washington. In it, she writes, “The hardest part of a Washington journalist’s job is to discover and

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comprehend what these men and women are doing and why." And she focuses on the uniqueness of Washington and its effects on the people who come to work there. "The professional value system of political Washington," she writes, "entices those who come to it from elsewhere; (and) most adopt Washington-centered behavior patterns." "The inhabitants of Washington become wrapped up in the peculiar life of this place, and can no longer imagine caring so much about any other." "It is as if everyone who came to the place were put into a witness protection program, furnished with a complete new public identity... a fake persona."

Greenfield is not alone in her viewpoint. Veteran Washington Post media observer and critic, Howard Kurtz, in one of his profiles of a United States Senator writes,

In political Washington where past lives are shed like so much excess skin, anything is possible... Washington is a city built upon the politics of expediency. Yesterday's campaign promise is today's lily-livered compromise. Positions shift with the ebb and flow of pundits and polls... intellectual consistency means nothing... The capital is, in short, a landscape perfectly suited for public figures... who are constantly reinventing themselves... Yes, anything is possible in

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this city of chameleons.

The editor of the Atlantic, Michael Kelly, makes the same observation in the New York Times Magazine,

In the culture of Washington, what sort of person a politician actually is and what he actually does are not important. What is important is the perceived image of what he is and what he does. Politics is not about objective reality, but virtual reality. What happens in the political world is divorced from the real world... Washington has become a strange and debased place, the true heart of a national culture in which the distinction between reality and fantasy has been lost.

From journalists who ask the question: "what are Washington politicians like," we are very likely to get the answer that Washington is a world unto itself and that the people who come from other places to work there adapt to Washington by becoming, above all, Washington people and Washington players. They play according to Washington rules and expectations, and behave, we are told, like "chameleons;" with "fake personas;" who "reinvent themselves.

Newsweek columnist Jonathan Alter goes one step further. "For
today’s congressmen,” he writes, “their world--Congress world--is a fortress of unreality, its drawbridges only barely connected to life beyond the moat.” His idea that a recognizable, describable “Congress world” exists is, of course, accurate. But his companion idea—that members of Congress are “barely connected” to their constituents beyond “the moat” exemplifies the self-absorption of Washington.

So, too, does Meg Greenfield’s view of Washington politicians (that), “Their daily lives and personal dealings (in Washington) seem more real and important than the distant abstraction they have taken to calling ‘the American people’ which is spread throughout the great shapeless wilderness (and which) has been designated as ‘out there.’” Every year or so, she writes “the traveling Washington-based press corps goes lyrical about... good old ‘out there’ as they fly together over the country.” The idea is that it makes press people “feel good” to fly over America every now and again, but you wouldn’t want to actually land there.

She never entertains the idea of a politician with a constituency. The country is all just undifferentiated “out there.” “Out there,” she writes, members of Congress can be found “gassing off in podunk.” “Podunk” is defined by Webster as “a place of placid dullness and lack of contact with the progress of the world.”
is popular Washington shorthand for the world beyond the beltway. The editor of the Capitol Hill newspaper Roll Call recently described a leading Senator's visits to his home state: "He motors himself around without staff and drops in on constituents in various podunks."

That world of "podunks," "out there," "beyond the moat" is, of course, the very world from which all our House and Senate members have come, in which all of them spend a good part of their working lives and to which all of them must return for citizen judgment. Those facts can be easily overlooked by Washington journalists who never actually go "out there" and talk only to each other. Even David Broder, my favorite Washington journalist—and one who really does "go out there"—worries that, "The Washington journalists, politicians and bureaucrats with whom I spend my time... look with suspicion, if not contempt, on lesser breeds outside the beltway."

Prominent journalism analyst, Tom Rosenstiel, once the media critic for the LA Times worries about this Washington-centeredness.

The (national) press is now disconnected from the communities it serves... we don't know nearly as much about the neighborhoods... as the people that we are writing for do. There are a lot of people in the

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Washington bureau of the Los Angeles Times who have never really spent any time in Los Angeles, including the two people who run the Washington Bureau of the Los Angeles Times.

In the same vein, when Adam Clymer retired after twenty years covering national politics for the New York Times, he had, he said, "some simple advice for Washington reporters, 'Get out into the country as much as you can.'"

Unfortunately, I have no good, reliable data on how often Washington reporters follow that advice and leave town in order to talk with politicians "out there" in their "podunk" constituencies. I have only one small scrap. When I first became interested in constituency activity in the 70's and 80's, I began very unsystematically collecting, i.e., see one, throw it in the drawer, articles about individual Representatives and Senators. They were articles written by journalists based in Washington, articles that were not written by a local reporter or articles about an ongoing election campaign. I read each one asking, "Is there any evidence in this article that the reporter actually went to the district (or state) of the politician being written about?"

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The result was that in 45 out of 251 articles—or in 23% of the cases—the author left Washington to do some part of the story. Or, on the other hand, three-quarters of the articles were written in Washington. I then read the 45 qualifying articles again to see whether there was any evidence at all that the author was interested in the idea of representation. By the most generous appraisal, seven—or two percent of the 251 articles—qualified on that score. Obviouly, you cannot take these numbers to the bank. But you can use ‘em to stimulate a discussion. To sum up, there were some journalistic visits with politicians back home. But there were also three times as many articles written only in Washington. Further, there would seem to be little if any interest among Washington journalists in our central idea of representation.

I said, nothing despositive here, but still interesting.

There are, of course, several disincentives operating here. Going to a district coverage does take extra time. Newspapers may be reducing staffs, editors may not favor home-centered stories. And reporters may not be interested. "Why do you have to go out and talk to people, including Senators and Presidential candidates," asks journalist Richard Reeves, "when it’s all on Cspan and the internet?" And, finally, there is perhaps, a less obvious comfort calculus among Washington journalists. At media commentator Kurtz says, "Washington is an incredibly inbred and incestuous
community in which everybody talks to the same seventeen people and arrives at the same conventional wisdom. We were once society's outsiders, but today (we) would rather be going to a Georgetown party with senator so and so and business leader so and so... We now, many of us, are part of the game. Rather than identifying more with the plumbers out there, we identify with the policymakers and the politicians.” The enticing reward for operating inside the beltway, he says, is “celebrityhood.” If you’re a celebrity where you are, why go to some podunk where you won’t be. (My delicious Dick Clark experience!)

Now, of course, Washington journalists do venture into the constituency world. Most often, however, they do so at campaign time. So, by leaving campaign-time articles out of my compilation, I stacked the deck. But I ruled out stories of campaign-time visits to districts because I believe that when reporters visit at election time, they are interested only in who is likely to win. “Who’s winning” is the question that draws journalists out of Washington at campaign-time—not some question about constituency connections. Washington journalists would be interested in who’s winning, I believe, because who wins—which individuals of which party—will have an effect what happens afterward in Washington.

For example, when Washington media people do venture “out there,” to

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write about members of the House and Senate, they carry their Washington-centric perspective with them. That is, they remain interested in the central political activity of Washington, which is legislation. And, by contrast, they are not much interested in the main political activity out in the country, which is representation. Again, it’s a matter of place. Their place, Washington, controls their interest and their subject matter.

For me, a defining example came in the late 1970's when I was traveling in Iowa with Senator John Culver. In the year before I went there, one of Washington’s topmost journalists, Elizabeth Drew—Washington correspondent for the New Yorker, Washington editor of Atlantic Monthly, Washington talk show regular and a first-rate interviewer of Washington’s politicians—had written an excellent book about Culver. It was entitled Senator, and it was about his legislative prowess, “getting in there doing the hard work and making the thing go” and about “his reputation as one of the most effective members of the Senate.” She was a Washington journalist interested in the main political activity of Capitol Hill—legislation. To her great credit, she went with Culver to Iowa and she watched while he met with his constituents. What was most striking to me, however, was that while she watched and reported on these home relationships, she showed absolutely no interest in the central political activity of that place--
representation.

She was totally interested in his message to them, and she was not at all interested in their message to him. “He is teaching these people,” she explains, “as well as trying to help them.” “He wants to demonstrate to each group he meets that he is knowledgeable about what he is doing and is interested in their problems.” When constituents are quoted, they, too, speak of his “passion about the issues and his intellect.” She simply assumes away any connection problem he might have.

When I traveled around with him the following year, I had little interest in his legislative prowess in Washington or his reputation there. I was interested in his connection patterns and his connection problems in Iowa—that is to say, in the business of representation. The content of my key conversations with the Senator could not be imagined in Drew’s study. Consider these comments of his during our travels. “One thing I have not done since I have been in the Senate is to become well known in Iowa.” Or, “In five years, I haven’t become much of an established personality in the state. There isn’t much warmth of identification with me.” Or, “I know I have a long way to go (here) in the state. I have no illusions about that.” There was not a whiff of these constituency connection problems in Drew’s

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One small comparison is illustrative. During Drew’s visit to Iowa, Culver held a meeting with some cattlemen. In three pages of commentary, she emphasizes the Senator’s preparation for the meeting; and she reports parts of their conversation back and forth, on the effect of beef imports on prices. “Culver reasons with them,” she writes (and) “shows them he understands their problem and is trying to help them.” She concludes by quoting one of the cattlemen: “I think it’s good for you to come out. There’s problems out here, except when we have an election.” It is a vague comment about Culver’s representational relationships. And it hints at a possible connection problem. But it draws zero interest or comment from the author. In her very next sentence, she is riding on the plane with Culver, listening to him discourse—for several pages in the book—about single-issue politics, John Gardner’s recent book, and leadership in Washington. Not a syllable from either one about the cattlemen or any other constituents.

When I traveled with Senator Culver a year later, we also had contact with some of Iowa’s cattlemen. He participated in the 1979 National Cattle Congress Parade, and we toured the agricultural exhibits at the fairgrounds afterwards. Because I was then a

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visitor at the University of Iowa, I picked him up early and drove him around all day in my car. In my notes, I wrote,

It struck me as odd that he would let himself be taken to the National Cattle Congress parade in my car with its New York license plates. As we left the Waterloo fairgrounds, having parked prominently near the entrance gate and having said goodbye to the parade organizers, he parodied their likely reaction. “He’s not from Iowa, they say.” Where’d they ever get that idea? “He’s arrogant, insensitive, out of touch.” What makes them think that? Huh? “He votes more with the East than the Midwest.” Where’d that idea come from? Huh? “All I’m doing is riding around with New York plates on my car!”

“He was sensitive to his weakness,” I noted, “but was not treating it seriously.” He was not connecting; he knew it; he knew it was a problem, and he mockingly chose to make light of it. It was no surprise to me when he was defeated for reelection with only 46% of the vote. I do not know what Liz Drew’s reaction was. But the Senator promptly left Iowa and settled in Washington, DC, where he could take advantage of his policy-making strengths (which had interested Drew) and could ignore his representational weaknesses (which had interested me).

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There was no wrong or right of our two analyses. We each had half an answer to the “what is he like” question--hers was a legislative answer, mine was a representational answer. She was interested in the judgment of his colleagues and others in Washington. “Was he an effective legislator?” I was interested in the judgment of his constituents in Iowa. “Was he an effective representative?” I cite the case because, for me, it was an important eye-opening contrast--between a Washington-centered and a constituency-centered set of questions and answers.

A more recent example of contrasting Washington-centered and constituency-centered pictures of a politician came during my 1999 constituency travels with South Carolina Representative Lindsey Graham. Graham (now a U.S. Senator), you may recall, was one of the House managers of their indictment of President Clinton in the Senate impeachment trial. In that role, he gained considerable Washington media attention. Two weeks after Clinton’s acquittal in the Senate, I made my fifth visit to South Carolina. I accompanied Graham to two town meetings--in Greenwood and in Laurens--two counties which had supported him at the 51-52% level. I can best convey my impressions, and their very unusual impact on me, by reading from my notebook.

About the Greenwood and Laurens town meetings, it’s hard
to describe them. I had never (italics in original) seen anything like it in all my years of traveling. There were 325 people at Greenwood (275 in chairs--not one empty one) and another 50 standing or sitting on tables around the room (I sat on the stage and taped it). It reminded me of a gymnasium at (high school) graduation time. When he walked in the back door, they got up and started clapping, which they did as he walked down the aisle and got up on the stage. Then they kept clapping. It was a two minute standing ovation, hard clapping for the most part, warm, appreciative, a salute, a thank you--all of that. He called it a "welcome home." But it was a phenomenon--in a country of presumed cynics, skeptics, anti-politics people. Here, on a week night, not in his home town, on a raw evening, this huge crowd had come out to see him, hear him, thank him for something he had done as a politician.

It was a working people, small business crowd, more than any elite kind of crowd--lots of couples, very few if any suit-and-tie people. Elderly to middle age with a sprinkling of young people (in each meeting, at least one teenager asked a question). When we drove up, there were hundreds, a sea of cars in front of the building and all

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around it. LG was stunned. "I can’t believe it." (To the crowd, he said, “This is unbelievable! I thought they were giving away a truck or something.”)

I’ve seen major political rallies with that many people, but never a town meeting or any other kind of (constituency) meeting like it. And no political rally could have the emotional wallop that this one did. It wasn’t about politics. It wasn’t about promises. It was about someone who had stood up for something—something these people wanted very much to have said on their behalf—however “popular” it might have been. In a sense, too, they were thanking a loser. He had lost! So it wasn’t a victory celebration. It was as if they had discovered a champion. And in their midst—“one of them”—they never knew they had. In a time of apathy, here was emotional commitment. It was an American Legion Hall, and when we came in the door, a friend said to Lindsey, “There’s a lot of emotion in there.” There were lots of good policy questions of the normal town meeting sort, but the ambience was very different.

His reception later, in Laurens, was identical. When Graham talked afterwards about those events, he talked about his constituency...
connections and about constituent trust. “They see that I’m consistent in what I say at home and in Congress. People saw a side of me during impeachment—a tough prosecutor with serious views—that was not unknown to them when they sent me to Washington. They know me as aggressive (and) engaging, that I tell jokes and talk plain; and they got reenforcement when they saw those positive traits during impeachment. They have pride that I’m not just ‘one of 435,’ that I’m carrying the ball in a major event. They know I’m credible and they trust me. I told them I was going to vote against Article Two (of the impeachment charges) and I did.

“My politics is defined by what I do in Washington, but the trust I have is defined by what I do at home,” he explained. “My activity in Washington is dominant because of the media. What I do there gets home in twenty minutes... But home is still the underfooting, the floor. When I talk about ‘my district’ in Washington... I’m talking about people I was talking to at home the day before.” “People think of me as the home town boy. I’m just Lindsey. I’ve been adopted in all ten counties. I’ve grown into being their home town boy.” He was talking about a long-term process of connecting at home—to which his Washington activity contributes—but which is an autonomous home-centered process worthy of study all its own.
Four days before I had arrived in the district, a top level *New York Times* Washington reporter, Katherine Seelye, had come to Graham’s district to cover his town meeting in the town of Anderson. Her curiosity and her visit were admirable and unusual; and it provided added testimony to Graham’s new found visibility. She saw the same activity I saw--another overflow crowd “out the door and down the hall to the back of the building,” according to a staffer. But her write-up of that town meeting was hugely different from my own; and it again exemplifies the gulf between a constituency-oriented view and a Washington-oriented view of members of Congress.

Seelye begins her article with a Washington-generated question: “Didn’t Lindsey Graham see the memo?” The “memo,” she explains, was the plan of the Republicans in Washington “to shuck the scandal and delve into the real issues that affect real people.” And she found that “the folksy southerner is not inclined to do that just yet.” Even though, she writes, Republican party orthodoxy in Washington “holds that no good can come of reliving impeachment wars.”

She had come, therefore, from Washington, posing a legislative question formulated in Washington. To which she gets a South Carolina answer. Her question has no relation to what is going on
there. Graham tells her that he wants "to tell them what I did and why" during impeachment. He is, quite simply, doing his job as their Representative. She calls it a "kind of victory lap for the hometown boy, even though Republicans lost the case and the Senate acquitted Mr. Clinton." But the win/lose outcome of the Washington saga had no relevance for what she was observing. Representation is not a win/lose legislative idea.

She observes further than "an overflow audience cheered and yelled and gave him a standing ovation." Then she remarks that his rhetoric was designed "to prompt the collective memory of his audience." If she had any idea how rare that size of audience and that kind of audience reception was, she would have put a different interpretation on what she was seeing. And she would know that this audience surely needed no "prompting." They knew what they came for. As Graham put it, "they came to say thanks." When Graham says, "My God, I can't believe this," she treats it as nothing extraordinary. She has nothing to compare it with--does not know that his year-in/year-out normal town meetings attract "25 or 30" people. It's all new to her.

She describes Graham's presentational skills in familiar language. But she does so by invoking standards established in Washington, not in Anderson. The town meeting, she writes, "was a chance to

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demonstrate a down-home folksiness that stood in sharp contrast to the dour scowls and legal mumbo jumbo of many of his fellow managers.” Her comparison to the “other Republican managers” in Washington has no relation to what she is witnessing or what the audience is thinking. In short, she sees Lindsey as Washington sees Lindsey; she compares him to other Washington players; and she judges him by Washington standards.

She has no interest in—and no perspective on—how or why the people of Anderson perceive, or judge, their Representative. She even deems it worth reporting when a Graham supporter assures her, “it was entirely appropriate that Mr. Graham devote so much time to impeachment.” As if it were a serious question; and as if she needed confirmation.

In a fine Washington reporter has come to report on a representational activity without any interest in representational relationships or connective questions. She has, to her credit, come to the district to observe. But she has come with a Washington perspective. The connections between politician and constituency—and the town meeting as a common connecting medium—are of no interest to her. As with the Liz Drew example, a Washington mind-set and a constituency mind-set are very different. No better or worse, just different.

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The day after Seelye’s visit, another Washington public affairs analyst, CNN's Jeff Greenfield, brought his Washington mind-set to a Graham constituency setting—when he caught Graham live during his constituency visit to the small town of Walhalla. Again, the fact of a Washington journalist’s interest is a result of Graham’s raised Washington profile. I had not arrived yet, but I read the transcript. And, again, the journalist has no interest in the phenomenon of representation. As he connects with Graham, Greenfield acknowledges the constituency context as he preps his audience. “People talk all the time of going beyond the beltway.” (So) “We’ll try Walhalla, South Carolina, a town in the western part of the state, population about 4,000.” “Glad to be here in Walhalla,” says Graham. “I have a hunch that’s right,” parries Greenfield. And then, “You’ve been out talking to some of your constituents earlier this evening. And I assume they’re as anxious to talk about the future as we are and as you are. What, specifically, are they telling you about how politics is to be conducted in the future or where they want Congress to go?”

It is question from Washington about legislative activity in Washington. And it draws a South Carolina answer about a representational activity in South Carolina. “Well,” says the Representative, “the first reaction was (that) about 700 people stood and clapped for about 20 minutes. So it was a very good

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welcome home for me and I’ll remember it for the rest of my life. I told them why I voted the way I did. They wanted to talk about the case... Then we got into where we’re going to go as a nation. We talked about social security, surpluses, control over some of your money, health care, taxes. But we still, at the end of the evening, came back to this case. And I think (for) people in my district, the take home message is…” Greenfield stops him: “Well, congressman, I’m sure you were delighted to find that the people you talked to were pleased with the job you did. Our challenge tonight is to try look beyond the case... In your own sense, do you look forward to a political atmosphere when you go back to Washington, assuming you look forward to going back to Washington and leaving Walhalla…”

There is throughout this interview the tone of a Washingtonian’s impatience with the local story along with a patronizing attitude toward the locality itself, Walhallah--otherwise known as Podunk. As Greenfield sees it, Washington is finished with impeachment. And that, of course, settles that for everyone else. The implication is that representatives who are touching base with, talking with, reporting to and connecting with--and thereby establishing or reenforcing a representational relationship of some trust with their constituents at home--are not sufficiently engaged in the nation’s business. The tone is “get over it” or, forget.
these representational connections and get back to your real job. For Greenfield in a Washington studio imagining the home scene, as for Seelye the Washington reporter at the home scene, the politician's representational connections at home are neither intrinsically interesting nor much appreciated. Drew, Seelye and Greenfield, I should add, are among our very best.

My conclusion from these stories is this: Washington journalists are not interested in the phenomenon of representation. Representation is ours! We own it! It is our subject. And the constituency is our place. Going to that place, meeting and traveling with politicians as they connect with constituents there provides both a more complete, a more textured and a more reliable picture of a politician than Meg Greenfield, Howard Kurtz, Kelly and Jonathan Alter can provide from their Washington press.

When a politician is at home among old friends, family and familiar locals—an observer gets a more casual, more relaxed, more spontaneous, more varied, more informal, more detailed, more repetitive and altogether more rewarding and definitive look at a politician. There is a level of exchange and a variety of observation in that place—in the constituency—that cannot be duplicated in Washington. In the constituencies, I have found there is more spontaneity, more contextual variety, more time, more

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informality, more stories that illuminate, than a Washington observer can get. And I have tried both extensively.

So what are we looking for in that place--our place? We are looking for the connections between politician and constituents. And what do we want to know about those connections? As best as I can answer, the broadest citizen questions focus on the authenticity of the politician. Who is this guy? What is she really like? Is he the genuine article? Is she comfortable in her own skin? Is she real? Is he a phony? And so forth. These are the questions that constituents ask and representatives answer wherever they connect with one another. Authenticity increases constituent trust; and constituent trust is the key to strong representational connections. Questions about a politician's authenticity, I would argue, are best answered by observing, by going to the place where the contacts between them occurs. Washington-centered journalists are prone, as I noted earlier, to see our politicians inauthentic--as "chameleons," "shedding their identity," "adopting fake personas."

By way of conclusion, I want to underline the importance of the authenticity question--in politician/citizen relationships--with a glance at the 2004 presidential campaign. After the 2002 midterm, Mark Shields and David Brooks began chewing over prospective

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Democratic candidates on the Lehrer show. “Authenticity will be the question,” said Shields. And “Howard Dean will be the candidate of authenticity,” said Brooks. Fast forward to the Iowa Caucuses. Iowa Senator Tom Harkin announces his early support for Dean with this opening sentence: “There is a powerful authenticity to Howard Dean.” Rival candidate John Kerry counters by describing himself as “the real deal.” And he buses around New Hampshire in his “Real Deal Express.” “I believe you have to be real,” says Kerry. “And people know it if you’re not.” A campaign analyst writes, “This fall, many will be looking especially hard at John Kerry, searching for some kind of authenticity. They will want to know if he seems genuine enough to be President.” And a noted Massachusetts supporter echoes that, “spontaneity often means genuineness and authenticity to people, and being genuine is so essential in this race.” Finally, the Gannett reporter who had been assigned to the Kerry campaign wrote, “The questions most asked of a reporter go something like this: ‘OK, what’s the real story? What is he really like?’” When it was over, a Newsweek analyst opined that “chief among (Kerry’s weaknesses) was his inability—or refusal—to convey who he was.” The authenticity question was an important one in the campaign. I could be very wrong, but I never saw an article about John Kerry written by anyone who had ever traveled around with him in Massachusetts, and asked the authenticity question of him in his home territory.

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I have tried to say
he connected so successfully with his constituents in Massachusetts remains a nice question.