

**MEMORIAL RESOLUTION OF THE FACULTY
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON
ON THE DEATH OF PROFESSOR EMERITUS LEON D. EPSTEIN**

Leon D. Epstein died on Tuesday, August 1, 2006, as the result of injuries suffered in a fall at home. He was a scholar of international repute in the realm of political parties, a central figure in the postwar re-creation of the Department of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin - Madison, as well as a former president of the American Political Science Association and a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. What he probably cared about most, however, was that he had a profound influence in shaping generations of undergraduates, grad students, and professional colleagues at the University of Wisconsin.

Leon was born on May 29, 1919, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, though he grew up in Beaver Dam, a town where, as he wryly noted, the great enemy of the locals in his youth was not the rising fascist or communist states of the wider world but the Wisconsin DNR, the Department of Natural Resources, known locally as “damned near Russian.” He came to Madison, to the University of Wisconsin, in 1936 to begin his undergraduate career, a career that would be closely entwined with that university ever after. He received a B.A. from UW-Madison in economics in 1940, an M.A. in economics in 1941, and then left for military service.

Stationed in Britain for two of those years, Leon used any spare time to immerse himself in the details of British politics, managing to cap his war-time service with a term at Oxford. Returning to the U.S., he enrolled for a Ph.D. in political science at the University of Chicago, obtained in 1948. After Chicago, he accepted a one-year teaching post at the University of Oregon for 1947–1948, returning to the Department of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin at Madison the following year. He remained on the Madison faculty until his retirement in 1988. While still at Chicago, he met and married Shirley (Galewitz) Epstein, who preceded him in death in 2001.

The official history of the Department of Political Science at UW-Madison (2006) notes that “the resurrection of comparative politics really began in 1948, with the recruitment of Leon Epstein and Henry Hart.” Oddly, in that context, his dissertation was a judicial biography of William O. Douglas—on grounds that this was the quickest route to a Ph.D.!—and he actually presented the sub-fields of political theory, public administration, and public law at his prelims. But the Department of Political Science at UW was flexible in its wishes and needs; Leon had acquired a substantial acquaintance with British politics; and Frederic Ogg, who had long taught the politics of both Britain and the Continent, was retiring. So comparative politics was where Leon began.

The Department of Political Science was in the process of reorienting itself to feature research and publication as central to promotion, and Leon produced articles on British politics for the *American Political Science Review*, *Political Science Quarterly*, and *Public Administration Review*. A year back in Britain on a grant from the Ford Foundation then generated his first book, *Britain—Uneasy Ally* (University of Chicago Press, 1954). Though it was already clear that, in Leon’s own words, “as a comparativist, I was an Americanist,” he was one of those scholars who found the sub-field distinction between American politics and comparative politics to be not just artificial, but intellectually harmful.

As if to underline this perception, Leon’s next book was *Politics in Wisconsin* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1958). Besides testifying to the breadth of his interests, it reaffirmed his general approach: close observation in person, striving toward theoretical generalization. He followed that by bouncing back across the Atlantic with *British Politics in the Suez Crisis* (University of Illinois Press, 1964), which confirmed his status as a leading American student of British politics.

Yet the notion of “comparativist as Americanist” was best affirmed in his hugely influential *Political Parties in Western Democracies* (Praeger, 1967). In this landmark in the comparative study of parties, Leon inserted the United States directly into the comparison with the major states of Europe, an approach for which he had always argued. In the process, he addressed the central themes of a leading alternative, Maurice Duverger’s *Political Parties* (Armand Colin, 1951), either modifying or dissenting from nearly all of it. For Leon, the world had become a different place from the one in which Duverger’s arguments arose, so that American political parties were less like backward outliers, more like modern incarnations of an evolving institution that was more attuned to contemporary society than the Duverger model could ever be.

(continued)

By then, Leon had long since become associate professor (1951), then full professor (1958), then chair of the department (1960–1963). By the time *Political Parties in Western Democracies* appeared, he was dean of the College of Letters and Sciences, one of the largest such enterprises in the country. Leon held that position during times of great turmoil on the Madison campus: 1965–1969. He is remembered as bringing the same personal qualities to that post as he had brought to the Department of Political Science and to his own work, namely, an unflinching thoughtfulness, a determination to treat everyone even-handedly, a willingness to listen, and, above all, a desire to see the university—and hence scholarly life—prosper.

By all accounts, Leon handled a difficult job with great skill, making him a logical candidate for provost or chancellor in the longer run. Yet as Bernard Cohen, a departmental colleague who later followed that route into the provostship, notes, Leon did his duty but found that he did not really enjoy it—“He had more than a few meetings drowned out by shouting protesters on the Hill”—and returned instead to the Department of Political Science. Characteristically, given his way of working and thinking, his next book was *Governing the University: The Campus and the Public Interest* (Jossey-Bass, 1974).

In the years after his return to the department, Leon became president first of the Midwest Political Science Association, 1971–1972, then of the American Political Science Association, 1978–1979. His presidential address of that year, “What Happened to the British Party Model?” (*American Political Science Review* 74 (1980): 9–22) returned to the British-American comparison, this time in the context of scholarly perspectives on it, and offered a gentle scolding to professional colleagues for their attachment to models that either appealed because they suited the prejudices of their proponents or that were already outdated in the face of the social change around them.

His final book, and the other one to have a lasting impact on the discipline, arrived in 1986 and continued his evolution toward thinking about American politics within the comparative framework. This was *Political Parties in the American Mold* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), and this time it sought a self-consciously American model with which other party systems could potentially be compared. Arguing that American politics, and especially the party system at its core, could not be understood either by way of some abstracted European model or in terms of a model derived from its own distant history, Leon developed the metaphor of political parties as “public utilities” to elucidate the American case. In this, a distinctive political culture, a distinctive constitutional structure, and, most particularly, the central place of primary elections as the key intermediary institution, came together to create an American resolution.

Leon retired in 1988, but his presence remained a major thread of continuity in the Department of Political Science. He continued to read—and argue—widely. He attended department and campus events, listened patiently, and always had a question, often one attempting to take the speaker back to basics. Most importantly, he continued that style of personal collegiality and positive intellectual tone that was so important in giving the department its reputation as an eclectic but supportive environment. Accordingly, writing about Leon’s passing is difficult in a diagnostic way: everyone has his or her own favorite “Leon story.” All, however, feature the same man: ever courteous and always thoughtful; committed to the application of intelligence to social life, whether it be British politics, university administration, American politics, or career pathways; reliably concerned that the central mission—of the Department of Political Science or the University of Wisconsin—remain front and center, guiding policy decisions.

Leon was in robust good health at the time of his death. He quit playing tennis competitively only three years ago, having decided (again characteristically) that his game no longer measured up to his standards. Nevertheless, he had thought carefully about his own eventual demise, leaving instructions that there be no funeral and no memorial event. He himself recognized the support of graduate students in his will, however, and his colleagues have decided that creation of a Leon D. Epstein Graduate Fellowship would have struck him as an acceptable memorial.

MEMORIAL COMMITTEE

Byron E. Shafer
Charles O. Jones
John Witte

Bernard Cohen
Frank Sorauf
Crawford Young