

Martin Shefter

December 2, 1943 – November 3, 2023

Martin Shefter '64, professor of government emeritus in the College of Arts and Sciences (A&S) who was noted for his research on American political parties, New York City politics, and the effect of changes in international systems on U.S. institutions, died on November 3 in Ithaca. He was 79.

Colleagues remember his curiosity, his impressive fund of knowledge, and his quiet sense of humor. “Marty was a specialist of American urban politics with strong historical and comparative instincts,” said Peter J. Katzenstein, the Walter S. Carpenter, Jr. Professor of International Studies (A&S). “He read broadly, cutting his teeth on the analysis of machine politics in late 19th and early 20th century America, and writing about its demise and what replaced it.”

Marty was no common-or-garden Americanist: From his days at Harvard, he engaged with the comparative “state and capitalism” field of scholarship and thus helped build bridges between American and comparative politics. Marty was affable, smart, and funny, with a wry sense of humor. “The thing I will best remember about him was his impressive fund of knowledge,” said Sidney Tarrow, the Emeritus Maxwell Upson Professor of Government (A&S). “He was a seeker after knowledge – more knowledge, deeper knowledge, intimate knowledge, distant knowledge. “I still recall the excitement in his voice and eyes when I told him, several years after 1989, that Germany was united,” Katzenstein recalled.

Shefter was born in 1943 in Brooklyn, New York. After his Cornell undergraduate education, he earned his Ph.D. in 1970 at Harvard and was an assistant professor there from 1969 to '73, then serving as an associate professor at Cornell from 1973 to '77 before his promotion to full professor. When Marty arrived in Ithaca, the department was short in required courses in American politics after a number of losses following the crisis of 1969. Despite a lack of research interest in the institution, he agreed to teach Congress and continued to teach the course for most of his years at Cornell. In addition to Congress, Martin taught urban and contemporary American politics and the domestic politics of America's wars.

At the height of his career, Martin suffered a catastrophic bicycle accident, as the result of which he lost much of his memory of American and urban politics. But he was determined to rebuild his stock of knowledge in his field. His colleagues would field occasional late-night phone calls as he rebuilt his understanding in his areas of expertise: “One of the most remarkable things about his recovery was that Martin managed to reconstruct his great reservoir of knowledge about American politics,” Tarrow noted.

“Martin was a warm and engaging person, an excellent teacher and a true intellectual,” said Benjamin Ginsberg, the David Bernstein Professor of Political Science at Johns Hopkins University, a close friend, colleague, and co-author with Shefter when both taught at Cornell in

the 1970s and '80s. "He was interested in politics, history, economics and, as a hobby, the stock market. I learned an enormous amount about politics and history during my conversations with Martin and I have always been grateful for his contribution to my own intellectual development."

In addition to his many professional papers and articles, Shefter's books include "Patronage and its Opponents: A Theory and Some European Cases" and "Political Crisis, Fiscal Crisis: The Collapse and Revival of New York City," which won the Best Book in Urban Policy award for 1988 from the American Political Science Association (APSA). With Ginsberg, Shefter co-authored "Politics by Other Means: Politicians, Prosecutors, and the Press from Watergate to Whitewater."

Shefter edited essay collections on New York City politics and political parties, as well as serving on the editorial boards of several journals. He was the co-editor, with Theda Skocpol and Ira Katznelson, of the Princeton University Press Series, "American Politics: Historical, International and Comparative Perspectives."

Starting in 1995, Shefter was a member of the executive committee of the Politics and History Section of the APSA and served as president of the section for 1996-97, remaining active with the organization.

In 2005, Shefter received the APSA Norton Long Career Achievement Award for distinguished contributions to the study of urban politics over the course of his career through publication, mentoring of students and public service.

Shefter was predeceased by his wife, Susan. He is survived by their daughter, Elizabeth Sagert Shefter, and by their granddaughter, Elsa Susan Sagert.

Written by Peter Katzenstein and Sidney Tarrow