MONKEY CAGE

Barbara Sinclair left a lasting legacy in political science

By Gregory Koger

March 17, 2016 at 3:33 p.m. EDT

Last week, eminent political scientist Barbara Sinclair passed away. She was a renowned congressional expert who contributed as both a researcher and a public intellectual. Over the course of a renowned career, she explained the inner workings of congressional party leaders, the evolution of the Senate, and the ability of Congress to enact major legislation.

The Rochester experiment

Dr. Sinclair was an early entrant in the University of Rochester's innovative new Ph.D. program. She studied with renowned political economist William H. Riker and congressional scholar Richard Fenno. As Nathaniel Beck notes, she was interested in the study of Congress from early on: "Many of us were more Riker and she was more Fenno, though everyone at Rochester then combined both." She graduated in 1970 and took a job at the University of California at Riverside, where she would work for the next 25 years.

Early work

Like many assistant professors, Dr. Sinclair worked to develop well-organized classes while converting her dissertation into published research. Her teaching led to the development of a classroom-friendly book on the women's movement while her dissertation led to several articles and a book analyzing patterns of party support in congressional voting. Her efforts contributed to a relatively new body of empirical research on Congress and established her as a respected scholar.

Into the halls of Congress

Her career took a profound turn, however, soon after this first book. She accepted a congressional fellowship from the American Political Science Association which paid for her to work on Capitol Hill for a year so she could observe the inner workings of Congress while working in a legislator's office. She obtained a prize placement in the office of Jim Wright, who hailed from her native Texas and was then House majority leader. Using her own experiences and interviews with congressional staff and members, she provided an inside account of the majority party of the House of Representatives, just as it was becoming a dominant organization in the legislative branch. This research led to the publication of "Majority Leadership in the U.S. House" in 1983, which paved the way for dozens of scholars doing research on congressional parties and agenda-setting. Beginning with this book, she adopted the elite interviewing methods used so effectively by Fenno, her mentor, and would continue to do so for the rest of her career.

In 1989, Dr. Sinclair published another seminal work, "The Transformation of the U.S. Senate." This book updated Donald Matthews's classic 1960 study, "U.S. Senators and Their World." In it, she uses a combination of interviews and statistics to explain how the tightly-knit, socially constrained Senate of the 1950s became the freewheeling, individualistic Senate of the 1980s. Fittingly, her book won the APSA award for the best book on legislative politics, which was named in honor of Fenno. Soon afterwards, she was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

When Wright became House Speaker, he asked Dr. Sinclair to return, so she was present for the extraordinary 100th Congress (1987-88), when Wright led his party in passing a set of bills that demonstrated the priorities of the Democratic Party. She combined this experience with ever-more interviews and a new dataset of major congressional legislation to write an updated account of House parties, "Legislators, Leaders, and Lawmaking."

By the 1990s, the study of Congress had become a "hot" topic in political science, with scholars applying ever-more-sophisticated theoretical models and statistical methods to explain legislative behavior. Dr. Sinclair, both in her research and her personal efforts, helped to bridge the gap between scholars and practitioners. As a well-established scholar, she was frequently interviewed by reporters, wrote numerous book chapters and short essays for broad audiences, and testified before Congress on its rules and practice. She continued to be a very active scholar while returning again and again to Capitol Hill to keep a finger on the pulse of the first branch by interviewing members and staff.

She applied her talents to writing a book about how Congress had changed immensely since the first textbooks on the institution were written. "Unorthodox Lawmaking" educated both scholars and students on the ever-evolving political and legislative environment of Congress. As Bruce Oppenheimer explains:

> I have used the book since the first edition was published. To say it's first rate would be an understatement. Not only does Barbara provide an understanding of the intricacies of rules and procedures as they work in the contemporary Congress, but through her case studies she also demonstrates the policy impact that they have had in a range of critical areas. Finally, Barbara takes time to discuss the normative implications of unorthodox lawmaking.

UCLA and retirement

In 1996, Dr. Sinclair moved to UCLA to accept an endowed chair. This is where I met her in the Spring of 1997 as I visited UCLA. I had applied to UCLA's graduate program in political science so I could study international relations, but after meeting her, I began to think more seriously about studying Congress. That summer, she came to Capitol Hill and we met for an interview as scholar and staffer. In the fall, I arrived in Los Angeles to begin years of training and the first of many meetings as Ph.D. student and advisor.

As a mentor, she was extraordinarily generous with her time, support and patience. As a teaching assistant for her Congress class, I observed her knack for making legislative politics interesting with a combination of data, war stories, pictures, and policy. Every student had to write a paper tracing the path of a bill in Congress, and in doing so learned how Congress deals with important issues in the modern age.

Before formally retiring in 2007, she published "Party Wars," which traced and explained the emergence of the hyperpartisan Congress of today. In truth, though, she only retired from teaching while maintaining an active travel and research life for many years.

Legacy

In 2000, I received a small grant to go to Congress and spend a week interviewing legislators to understand why they put their names on each other's bills. Naturally, I asked her for advice, and we talked about the fine points of getting interviews and taking notes. Then we turned to the critical question of questioning: What should I ask to get real answers? "I always start with, 'What are you working on?'" she said. "That is what their minds are focused on and it gets people talking about their jobs in ways that you cannot predict."

Throughout her career, "What are you working on?" was a question she was always ready to answer. From her early days at Riverside to (literally) the last weeks of her life, she was a model of tireless energy because she found joy in her work.

Clearly, though, she also had an answer to the question, "What are working *for*?" Throughout her career, Dr. Sinclair worked to promote the systematic study of legislative politics. But, like many such scholars, she also cared passionately about the Congress itself: celebrating its purpose, lamenting its deficiencies and encouraging its progress.

She also worked to promote gender equality. As her contemporary Larry Dodd noted, "She pushed forward the boundaries of women as scholars and teachers within political science and was a pioneer during the 1970s, in particular, in fostering the systematic study of the role of women in American Politics." As Lynn Vavreck explains, she has provided an exemplar for women in the field of political science:

> Barbara first became special to me as a fellow Ph.D. student of Dick Fenno's at the University of Rochester…At UCLA, I watched Barbara…as she listened actively in department seminars, asked productive but not pedantic questions, and always tied politics to political science. She was elegant — and smart — and she showed me and many other women in the academy how to be confident, how to be heard, and how to take a seat at the table and do the job.

UCLA colleague Kathleen Bawn noted that,

> Her lesson to me was to demonstrate the value of being an oddball — a qualitative scholar making an important impact in a field dominated by formal models and statistical evidence; a polite and moderate presence in a profession with bravado to spare. Her calm, clear-headed self-confidence makes her a lasting model to all of us who knew her.

The scholar is gone, but the legacy lives.