



IN MEMORIAM

Nelson W. Polsby
Professor of Political Science
UC Berkeley
1934 – 2007

Nelson W. Polsby, a leading expert on American politics and the U.S. Congress died of complications associated with heart disease at his home in Berkeley on February 6, 2007. He was 72.

Polsby was recognized nationally and internationally for his knowledge of and intellectual expertise on the American political system. Colleagues credit him for having reshaped both academic thinking about the system and the public's understanding of it. He helped make the University of California, Berkeley's Institute of Governmental Studies a national center for the scholarly investigation of U.S. politics. Colleague Pradeep Chhibber called him "an icon in the study of American politics."

Polsby built an extraordinary global network of students, friends, and colleagues during his career, serving as a visiting scholar at many of the world's most prestigious universities, including Yale, Harvard, Oxford, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and the London School of Economics and Political Science, and building an extraordinary global network of students, friends, and colleagues. A widely admired mentor, adviser, and colleague, Polsby inspired generations of students and colleagues and charmed them with his wit. Polsby and his wife of 48 years, Linda O. Polsby, were renowned for opening their home to international political figures, journalists, students, and colleagues alike.

Polsby was born October 25, 1934, in Norwich, Connecticut. His family members were farmers whose interest in public affairs and politics dated back to the turn of the twentieth century. A great uncle of Polsby's ran for mayor of New Haven as a socialist. Living in Washington, D.C., as a teenager further stimulated Polsby's interest in politics. "When I was a teenager and my family moved to Washington, I used to get out and hang around Congress," Polsby said in a 2002 interview with Harry Kreisler of the Institute of International Studies. "In those days, no guard, no nothing, and you could just hang out and see what they were doing ... Sometimes I'd talk to people, but mostly I'd just watch."

Polsby went on to study political science formally, earning a bachelor's degree in that discipline from Johns Hopkins University in 1956, a master's degree in sociology from Brown University a year later, and a master's degree and Ph.D. in political science from Yale University in 1958 and 1961, respectively.

Nelson Polsby, the Heller Professor of Political Science, joined the Berkeley faculty in 1967 and never left, teaching courses on American politics, Congress, and presidential elections, and serving as an adviser to numerous graduate students who went on to become prominent scholars. From 1988 to 1999, he served as director of the campus Institute of Governmental Studies (IGS), which colleagues say he built into an institution that nurtured some of America's leading scholars and policy practitioners. Through his work Polsby made immense contributions to the study of American politics, having an impact few of his peers could match with his books on Congress, presidential elections, political innovation, and party reform.

Polsby's most recent book, *How Congress Evolves* (Oxford University Press, 2004), draws on data from his several decades of interviews and personal observations of Capitol Hill. In it, Polsby traces the decline of conservative southern Democrats in the House of Representatives and their replacement by a new generation

of even more conservative Republicans. He also made remarkable contributions to the public's understanding of British politics with a seminal book, *British Government and its Discontents*, written with Geoffrey Smith (Basic Books, 1981).

Polsby not only wrote and edited scores of articles for scholarly publications — the best known of which, “The Institutionalization of the U.S. House of Representatives” (1968), was recently celebrated as one of the 20 most influential articles published in the *American Political Science Review* since its inception in 1906 — but wrote commentary pieces on politics for leading newspapers and news magazines across the country. He often was quoted in daily news stories about Congress and the presidency.

Polsby served as managing editor of his discipline's leading journal, the *American Political Science Review*; he held two Guggenheim Fellowships as well as fellowships from the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences and the Brookings Institution; and he was a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and the National Academy of Public Administration. He also received the Yale Medal, an award for outstanding service by alumni that is the highest honor given by the university's alumni association.

He won numerous awards and honors in the discipline of political science. In 2002, the American Political Science Association (APSA) honored Polsby with the Frank Goodnow Award for distinguished service to the profession. During the 2005 APSA annual meeting, there was a special panel entitled “Nelson Polsby's Congress.”

In addition to his wife, Polsby is survived by his three children, Lisa Polsby of Naperville, Illinois, Emily Polsby of Berkeley, and Daniel Polsby of Mountain View, California; his mother, Edythe Woolf Polsby Salzberger of Washington, D.C.; his brothers, Daniel Polsby of Fairfax, Virginia, and Allen Polsby of Bethesda, Maryland; and two grandchildren.

The Office of Public Affairs contributed to this memorial.