

Dr. Leon Epstein
2007 Outstanding Alumnus

Dr. Leon Epstein graduated from Beaver Dam High School in 1936. He attended the University of Wisconsin at Madison where he studied economics and received his Bachelor's degree and Phi Beta Kappa membership in 1940 and went on to earn his Master's Degree in economics in 1941. He served in the United States Army from 1942 – 1946, mainly in Europe. While in the service, he studied politics at Oxford University, England. In 1948, Dr. Epstein earned his Ph.D. in political science from the University of Chicago. He was also awarded an Honorary Degree from the University of Warwick (England).

The majority of Dr. Epstein's career was spent at the University of Wisconsin – Madison where he served as an assistant professor, associate professor, and a full professor teaching political science at all levels, from introductory courses through doctoral dissertation supervision. His remarkable skills in academic leadership won him the deanship of the College Letters & Science, by far the largest academic unit of the campus. Dr. Epstein is remembered as bringing the same personal qualities to that post as he had brought to the Political Science Department and to his own work. He had an unfailing thoughtfulness, a determination to treat everyone even-handedly, a willingness to listen, and above all a desire to see the university, and scholarly life, prosper.

He was one of the pioneers in America of the field of comparative political parties. His study of the United States was enhanced by his knowledge of other countries, particularly Britain, a country he wrote much about and came to admire. He was an influential figure in the political science department. Dr. Epstein wrote books on governing the university and on Wisconsin politics. His book "Political Parties in Western Democracies" was one of the first and eventually one of the most influential comparative studies of political parties, and became the standard reference point for all scholarship on the subject.

Dr. Epstein was critically important in developing the American government and politics program at the University of Wisconsin - Madison. His comparative studies of political parties are standard works in the field and have been influential in work on American politics. 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. Few, if any, faculty have contributed more to the development of the department and the collegial relationships characterizing it than Dr. Epstein. He had a profound influence in shaping generations of undergraduates, grad students, and professional colleagues at the University of Wisconsin. He was always a source of wisdom and counsel.

Throughout his career, he received numerous accolades and recognitions for his professional achievements. Among them were his election as Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and as President of the American Political Science Association, perhaps the highest post in the profession. The American Political Science Association gives an annual award in his name for outstanding scholarship on political parties. He was most proud to receive from the Madison chapter of Phi Beta Kappa its award in 1978 for Teaching and Scholarship.

Dr. Epstein always held fond memories of Beaver Dam. He had great interest in what was happening in Beaver Dam. He had high regard for the influence of the community on his life and career and held high esteem for the Beaver Dam School system. He said, "the quality of the public school system was not a question" and that the elementary and secondary faculty were of "high quality."

Upon Dr. Epstein's passing, Senator Russ Feingold wrote, "Leon Epstein contributed so much to the Department of Political Science and to the study of political science, it is clear how much the Department and the faculty have meant to so many students over the years. The UW political science department has had a profound impact on my life in public services. The debates and conversations I had in class more than 30 years ago still come back to me, and they still help guide my decisions as the Senate deliberates both domestic issues and foreign policy."