

# In Memoriam

## Walter Dean Burnham

Walter Dean Burnham, one of the giants of the study of American politics in the twentieth century, died on October 4, 2022, at the age of 92 years (<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/11/us/politics/walter-dean-burnham-dead.html>).

Dean Burnham's principal intellectual legacy is his account of large-scale political change in the United States. He discovered a regular and recurrent pattern of disruptive elections that periodically upend the entire political order. At the same time, he uncovered a long-term trend of declining voter participation, what he referred to as "the party of non-voters." The arguments for and implications of these two phenomena are detailed in two pathbreaking publications that have become classics in political science: "The Changing Shape of the American Political Universe" in the *American Political Science Review* (1965), and his book, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (1970). He expanded on these and related themes in other influential works, including *American Party Systems: Stages of Political Development*, co-edited with William Nisbet Chambers (1967), *The Current Crisis in American Politics* (1983), and *Democracy in the Making* (1983, 1986), along with numerous articles and book chapters.

Burnham's significant honors include the Ruth and Arthur Sloan Professorship in Political Science at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Frank C. Erwin, Jr, Centennial Chair in State Government at the University of Texas at Austin; an SSRC fellowship in 1963-64, to help establish the ICPCR archive of voting data at the University of Michigan; a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1974-75, which he spent in Great Britain; and a fellowship at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford in 1979-80. Burnham was also a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar in 1995-96. He served as president of the Politics and History section of the American Political Science Association. The Walter Dean Burnham Award for the Best Dissertation in Politics and History is named in his honor. In 1978, at the age of 48, he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Burnham was born in Columbus, Ohio and grew up in Pittsburgh, the son of Alfred Burnham, an engineer for General Electric, and Gertrude, a homemaker. He received his BA from Johns Hopkins in 1951 and then joined the US Army during the Korean War as a translator of Russian. After military service, Burnham entered graduate school at Harvard, where he studied under V.O. Key. Burnham received his PhD from Harvard in 1963. He then taught at Boston College, Kenyon, Haverford, and Washington University in St. Louis before joining the MIT faculty in 1971. He joined the University of Texas faculty in 1988 and his presence soon elevated the department among the nation's top programs in political science and propelled his subfield of American political development to one of the best in the world. He became Professor Emeritus at UT in 2004.

One of the most influential political analysts of political

parties in American democracy, Burnham's work highlighted the critical role that elections, wars, and depressions have played throughout American history in determining the balance of power in the country's two-party system. His work on the evolution of America's party system marked a sharp departure from prevailing institutional and behavioral approaches to the study of parties, voters, and elections. Presaging the emergence of the field of American political development, Burnham perceived the fundamental importance of structural shifts in the composition and alignment of the electorate, especially at a time when many or most "Americanists" had concluded that minor shifts and deviations in the American electorate simply vacillated around a stable core equilibrium. Burnham thus altered the terms of debate in the field.

Dean's sweeping reconceptualization of structure and change in American politics made him a magnet for PhD students and others who were drawn to the power of his wide-angle approach to studying politics and history. It is striking how many of his graduate students extended his substantive work in their own dissertations and subsequent careers to questions of politics both within and outside of the US, ranging from the study of foreign policy to Congress, to political parties, to political economy, to regulatory politics, to race and social movements. What all learned from Dean was that the most important political phenomena are those that have to do with the long-term trajectory and health of a nation's polity as a whole.

One of Burnham's greatest contributions as a teacher was his exceptional ability to put America in a broad comparative perspective. Former students will remember Dean, an expert on comparative electoral systems, lecturing in front of classroom blackboards, "puffing" on a piece of chalk, tracing the electoral rise of the Republican Party in the United States or the rise of fascism in Germany in the inter-war years. The message of the comparative lessons from Germany was not lost on any of the many students who attended Burnham's popular courses on electoral politics. It was that the electoral dynamics that led Germany astray could, if America's elites were not careful, repeat themselves in the United States and other Western democracies. That same healthy irreverence toward received wisdom left Burnham deeply skeptical of those who blamed the "governability crisis" of the 1970s on mass democracy rather than on the political class and the many intellectuals who mismanaged American power and markets.

Shortly before he retired in 2003, Jesús Velasco, one of Burnham's former PhD students at the University of Texas at Austin, convened an international conference entitled "American Politics in a New Millennium," fittingly set in Mexico City, where Burnham's comparative approach to party politics and electoral systems inspired scholars like Velasco working on American and comparative party politics (see also "Walter Dean Burnham: An American Clockmaker"). In 2010, a group of Burnham's former graduate students organized a symposium to highlight Burnham's many contributions and post-retirement book: *Voting in American Elections: The Shaping of the American Political Uni-*

verse *Since 1788* (Academica Press 2010). As Thomas Ferguson, longtime collaborator and co-editor of the volume, put it, “Among the thousands of political scientists who are now active, those whose work is likely to be widely consulted a hundred years from now can be counted on the fingers of one hand. I am sure that Walter Dean Burnham will be among them” (12).

We close with reflections by three of Dean’s former students on him as a scholar and mentor:

Burnham taught us to be diligent, unquenchable, and omnivorous. Searing childhood reflections on political identity in the early 1940s could segue into a lecture on plate tectonics. Dense hand-drawn charts and tables of hand-collected county-level voting data revealed soulful joy in physical archive research. Graduate students were awed by WDB’s academic lineage and stature. We also delighted in his quirks. Seminar anticipation was palpable right after the 1994 midterm elections—my first semester at UT-Austin. Did the dramatic result signal the start of a realignment? Before getting to the substance, Burnham implied Newt Gingrich pronounced his own name incorrectly.

— *Jasmine Farrier, University of Louisville*

Being Dean’s student was like wandering through an enchanted forest: discovering hidden glens of insight

and inspiration, time-traveling through centuries, following unanticipated but deeply compelling connections. Dean was such a remarkable combination of attributes—sharply analytical, wildly creative, awe-inspiring, and yet deeply encouraging—and I miss him every day.

— *Cathie Jo Martin, Boston University*

Before today’s professionalization and methodological sophistication, there was Walter Dean Burnham, a giant of the discipline, with his broad and formidable intellect and a disciplined and deep commitment to improving the world with research. His encyclopedic grasp of data and ability to observe and contextualize patterns in that data illuminated the macro-historical currents of American politics. To be a student of his was to be on a roller coaster ride zigzagging across place and time as well as data and theory from seemingly every discipline. It was exhilarating and at times disorienting. But his tireless inquiry and his commitment to his students yielded so many of us who continue to ponder and thrive on his ideas about socio-political tensions, disruption, and transformation. ■

— *Nicole Mellow, Williams College*

— *Jeffrey K. Tulis, University of Texas, Austin;*  
*Peter Trubowitz, London School of Economics;*  
*and Bartholomew Sparrow, University of Texas, Austin*

## Francisco Cantú

Francisco Cantú was born in Puebla, Mexico, in 1982. Throughout his life, he displayed a deep love of learning and discovery. He graduated with a bachelor’s degree in political science with highest honors from the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM). He earned one of the highest GPAs in the institution’s history and to this day is remembered as one of its brightest alumni. He then pursued and received a PhD in political science from the University of California San Diego (UCSD). As a doctoral student, he made significant contributions to the study of electoral integrity, particularly in his dissertation, parts of which were subsequently published in top academic journals. Francisco sought to explain the conditions under which electoral irregularities take place. Exploiting the random assignment of voters to different polling stations in Mexico (based on their last names’ alphabetical order), he identified those places where unusual turnout rates were recorded. He then focused on these polling stations and examined which party stood to gain from those anomalous patterns. His results demonstrated that, despite the efforts to remove electoral fraud after the fall of the PRI in 2000, the liberalization of the political system in Mexico did not fully eliminate the fraudulent behavior of political machines. His scholarly work, in addition to its academic rigor and novelty, was very committed with real-world problems and became a critical resource for journalists, activists, and politicians in Mexico. At UCSD, he was more than just an exceptional graduate student; he was a beloved colleague, a true friend, and an inspiration to all.

After completing his PhD, Francisco became a faculty member in the Department of Political Science at the University of Houston (UH). Over the course of a decade, his tenure at the

institution was exemplary. Francisco provided inspiration and mentorship to the diverse student body at UH, a significant portion of whom are first-generation college attendees. His courses were very popular, leaving an enduring impression on the fortunate students who had the privilege of being taught by him. Francisco also devoted numerous hours to his students, providing them with valuable guidance for their academic and professional aspirations, and he was always ready to lend them a compassionate ear. From the outset, Francisco proved to be an invaluable asset to the department and a generous colleague. In recognition of his exceptional research contributions, outstanding caliber of his work, and his excellence in teaching, he earned tenure in 2019 and was awarded the Senator Don Henderson Chair in 2021. In addition to his contributions to the department of political science Francisco had a prominent role in the University of Houston: he co-directed the Hobby School’s Survey Research Institute, served as instructor for the Empirical Implications of Theoretical Problems (EITM) Summer Institute, co-hosted of the University of Houston’s Political Economy Speaker Series, convened major academic conferences, and contributed to joint research activities of the Center for Public Policy and UH Energy. His intellectual prowess, cooperative spirit, and benevolence made him a cherished and respected figure among his peers at the University of Houston.

During his academic career, much of his intellectual attention was devoted to research on electoral integrity, legislative politics, and Latin American politics. He addressed these different topics using a wide range of methods, including formal models, statistical methods for large and complex data, machine learning, image analytics, Bayesian inference, spatial modeling, item-response models, and time-series analysis. In his research Francisco combined some of the best qualities of