

# In Memoriam: Steven Ames Peterson

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In academia, true pioneers are often unheralded, if not outright ignored; they take chances with their careers and livelihoods that most would not consider. These pioneers are rarely found in the elite institutions under the bright shining light of renown; more often, they are found far from the fame, systematically plying their craft.

Steven A. Peterson was just such a pioneer. As one of the founders of the Association for Politics and the Life Sciences (APLS) in the early 1980s, he was a key part of the original steering committee composed of Carol Barner-Barry, Lynton Caldwell, Peter Corning, Fred Kort, Roger Masters, Steven Peterson, Glendon Schubert, Albert Somit, and Thomas Weigle (Stewart & Bucy, 2011). Forty years ago, this group organized its first program for the 1982 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association and published its first issue of this journal, *Politics and the Life Sciences*, that same year. In subsequent years, Steve was a constant presence, first in building APLS as an organization and biopolitics as a field, and then as a steadying hand transitioning the organization and this journal to the next generation.

He was, perhaps most impressively, among the first generation of biopolitical specialists to organize their graduate education around combining biology and politics. Steve's undergraduate education at Bradley University led to a senior honors paper on biology and politics. He subsequently attended SUNY Buffalo's graduate program, creating his own special subfield within the political science program based upon mammalian ethology, primate behavior, genetics, and classic works in biology. His dissertation, which focused on the biological basis of student protest—then a constant and roiling part of American political life—reflected a pragmatic approach to dealing with pressing public policy problems (Peterson, 2011).

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It was there, at SUNY Buffalo, that Steve met and developed a fruitful research collaboration with his long-time friend, colleague, and fellow APLS founder Al Somit. Among many other notable achievements and initiatives, Steve and Al were the series editors of the long-running *Research in Biopolitics* edited collections, first for JAI and then for Emerald Press, and they were the stalwart leaders of the similarly focused International Political Science Association Research Committee #12. Together, they gave the field of biopolitics renewed visibility with the 560-page edited volume, the *Handbook of Biology and Politics* (Peterson & Somit, 2017).

Beyond these accomplishments in building the field of biopolitics, Steve's collaborations extended outward to multiple fields and across a diverse array of individuals, as he took on the mentoring role of a highly productive academic. As author or editor of more than 25 books and 125 articles, including the pathbreaking *Darwinism, Dominance, and Democracy: The Biological Bases of Authoritarianism* (Somit & Peterson, 1997), his influence can be seen in the more than 3,272 citations he amassed in a career that spanned over four decades.

While many, if not most, academics with such research creativity and productivity would express frustration at not receiving greater credit, Steve was humble and thoughtful throughout his career, recognizing that his first job at Alfred University in upstate New York—a teaching institution where few faculty published—provided an opportunity. Indeed, he stated, “I had the freedom to publish and research in biopolitics without any pressure to shy away. Publishing was enjoyable because I shared ideas within a like-minded network of political scientists... I was even rewarded for involvement in the slowly growing biopolitical community” (Peterson, 2011, pp. 92–93). In many ways, Steve embodied the Midwestern rural American virtues of the town of Kewanee, Illinois, where he grew up. His trademark qualities of being hardworking, humble, and pragmatic are a testament to his service to the field.

## Obituary: Steven Ames Peterson

Patrick A. Stewart: I certainly benefited from Steve's kindness and insights throughout the course of my career. My very first "proper" biopolitics publication was a chapter in a volume that he and Al Somit coedited, which came as a result of a conference he hosted one placid summer in mountainous rural upstate New York at Alfred University. As a fledgling PhD student, I was able to meet and interact with first- and second-generation biopolitics scholars and was rewarded not only with new friends but with insights that would shape my career. Steve was among the most influential, as his groundbreaking work applying decision heuristics—mainly prospect theory (Peterson & Lawson, 1989)—helped form my understanding of how emotions influence decisions. Throughout the quarter century that followed, Steve remained a thoughtful and generous mentor whose insights on research, administration, and all things biopolitics would guide me through difficult and good times alike. As I moved into leadership roles within APLS, Steve was a steadfast guide who provided not only the historical background and insights, but also the support to bring about change in the organization. I will miss having that beer that we had promised each other when APLS could meet face-to-face again; I will miss the hard-earned wisdom he shared; more than anything, I will miss Steve's friendship.

Amy Fletcher: Steve's generosity and acumen extended to many younger colleagues over the years, as he championed new voices in biopolitics. He brought a generous but judicious eye to developments within the field, and this intellectual pluralism, combined with both his great good sense and rigor, enriched the field immeasurably.

Robert H. Blank: I knew Steve for almost 40 years and worked with him on numerous projects over that time. I also served on the Executive Council with him during the formative 1980s and 1990s. Steve was a most unassuming, competent, and trustworthy colleague, and one highly dedicated to the furtherance of biopolitics. Although many individuals contributed to the APLS and to biopolitics as a field over the years, no one other than Steve did so consistently for more than two generations. Although policy was not his own professional

interest, he was a strong proponent of making biopolitics as inclusive as possible, and he was supportive of including policy research when some early members were less so. With his passing, the APLS has lost an enthusiastic advocate, and I have lost a longtime loyal friend.

Erik P. Bucy: Over the 20-plus years I encountered Steve at conferences and meetings, at every APLS meeting in which we encountered each other (and there were many over the years), Steve was upbeat and optimistic. The year, the season, the city, even the venue—they did not matter. Nothing could dampen his sunny demeanor. Even in conveying frustrations, he was irrepressibly positive. It was impossible not to smile around him because he would always end our time on a reassuring note. He was always a pleasure to talk to, always a positive influence on others, ever willing to lend his perspective and advice without any expectation of something in return. Even my most recent memory of Steve underscores his hospitable disposition. I asked if I could buy an author's copy of his book with Al Somit, *Darwinism, Dominance, and Democracy: The Biological Bases of Authoritarianism*. Almost immediately, he mailed a gratis copy to me without hesitation. In sum, Steve was a class act and an island of optimism. He will be sorely missed as a mentor, as an APLS and IPSA (International Political Science Association) stalwart, and as a trusted colleague and friend.

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