

At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on March 2, 2021, the following tribute to the life and service of the late Sidney Verba was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.

SIDNEY VERBA

BORN: May 26, 1932

DIED: March 4, 2019

Sidney Verba was born on May 26, 1932, in East Flatbush, NY, and was raised in a first-generation immigrant family. He was unaware of Harvard until his public high school guidance counselor suggested he apply and he looked up “Harvard University” in the Brooklyn Public Library branch near his house. As he would later explain about fitting in at Harvard, “It took me six months to realize that perhaps I did not belong there, by which time I felt I belonged.” By the time he died on March 4, 2019, Sid had not only profoundly changed the academic discipline of Political Science and had a major impact on the world of university libraries but had also made major contributions to the wellbeing of Harvard and its capacity to meet repeated crises. Long after his retirement, university leaders facing tough challenges would regularly say “We need a Sid Verba,” a reminder of his unparalleled combination of wisdom, judgment, and moral stature.

Sid’s scholarly (and personal) lodestar was the equality of people—all people—his family, friends, colleagues, collaborators, and students; everyone at Harvard; and all human beings. A passion for equality motivated his scholarly questions, his accessible writing style, and—since he was writing for everyone—his feeling of responsibility for ensuring that his scientific claims were correct. Sid’s key scholarly contribution—bringing modern representative survey research to cross-national scholarship for the first time—was rooted in his belief in the equality of the populations from which he drew probability samples.

Across 20 influential books, Sid and his collaborators brought new evidence and a scientific perspective to the study of equality, citizen engagement, activism, government stability, and political culture. As he repeatedly demonstrated, formal equal voting rights do not guarantee equal impact on the political system when economic or political resources are unequally distributed. Verba’s 1963 book, *The Civic Culture*, written with Gabriel Almond, helped launch the field of comparative political behavior by showing how citizen behavior and culture contribute to democratic stability. In another landmark book, *Voice and Equality*, Kay Lehman Schlozman, Henry Brady, and Sid demonstrated that many nonpolitical factors, such as educational attainment and family circumstances, have important consequences for citizen

participation in government and civic life. In *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*, Gary King, Robert Keohane, and Sid proposed a widely discussed resolution to the schism in the field between quantitative and qualitative approaches to inference.

Sid also led a generation of scholars to expand the discipline of political science from its insular and sometimes self-obsessed focus on its own country—the United States—to the study of people everywhere and to the important differences among politics in different places.

One scholarly honor after another came Sid's way. He was named University Professor; elected president of the American Political Science Association; and elected to memberships in the National Academy of Sciences, the American Philosophical Society, and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He won the Skytte Prize, the Warren Miller Prize, the James Madison Award, the Woodrow Wilson Award, and a long list of other recognitions. Most recently, he was Chair of the Human Rights Committee of the National Academy of Sciences.

Sid not only studied politics; he was a natural politician, and one of Harvard's most influential academic administrators. He was not merely the adult in the room; many play that role. What Sid could do was use humor, respect, and careful attention to turn the rest of his colleagues into adults. It did not matter if someone was brusque, argumentative, paranoid, offensive, thoughtless, passive-aggressive, or combative. No matter what happened, nobody could provoke Sid to take offense. Acting out in Sid's presence just did not accomplish anything. He would always defuse the situation, usually with a self-deprecating story or joke from his famous huge collection introduced at just the right strategic moment.

After *M Magazine* officially named him one of the nation's "Tweediest Professors," the *Harvard Crimson* reported, "The Pforzheimer University Professor said he didn't think he 'really earned the title' because he never 'really worked at being tweedy.' But he was quick to add that he could think of no other Harvard professor who was more deserving of the honor."

It is no wonder that the university asked Sid to take on some of the most difficult challenges dividing members of the university community: assessing the role of ROTC on campus, producing a unified Harvard calendar, addressing long-ignored issues of sexual harassment, and consolidating Harvard's 99 libraries. Sid led efforts to define and address all these fraught issues, in addition to being associate dean for undergraduate education, associate provost, and chair of the Department of Government. Sid made us more productive. He made us better people.

President Derek Bok explained that he dreaded asking Sid in 1984 to take on the role of director of the University Library because Sid had already done so much for Harvard. Characteristically, however, Sid responded that Harvard was responsible for almost

everything good that had happened to him [Sid] in his life, so he would never turn down a request to serve. Sid went on to hold the position for over two decades, digitizing the Library's collection to provide wider access and bringing the largest private library in the world into the modern community of libraries worldwide.

Sid leaves his wife, Cynthia Verba, a distinguished musicologist and long-time GSAS Director of Fellowships; their daughters, Margaret, Ericka, and Martina; four grandchildren; three great-grandchildren; and numerous adoring former students and colleagues. Sid was also the founder and host of the Brookline Political Science Association, a non-existent organization that nevertheless allowed him to bring together political scientists from many universities, and their families, for dinner every year for decades.

Sid was a mensch, a distinguished scholar with a unique sense of humor, a kind heart, and an unsurpassed sense of what was important.

Respectfully submitted,

Jeffry Frieden
Robert D. Putnam
Kenneth A. Shepsle
Theda R. Skocpol
Gary King, Chair