

Celebrating Fifty Years of LGBTQ+ Scholarship: Kenneth Sherrill, An LGBTQ+ Leader Who Has No Trouble Finding Followers

QUEER J. THOMAS | UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN, OSHKOSH

I am among many people who call Ken Sherrill their mentor. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the first empirical LGBTQ+ politics paper presented at an annual meeting. In 1973, Kenneth Sherrill presented "Leaders in the Gay Activist Movement: The Problem of Finding the Followers." In part, he argued that it was time for political science to "start paying serious attention to the gay movement." We listened.

In 1973 Ken was faculty at Hunter College, City University of New York, where he is now professor emeritus. A year earlier, one of his students wanted to study the gay people who had been given a firehouse in NYC's Chinatown as a place for meetings and dances. Ken's response was "absolutely not" because it was not feasible to design a study and collect original data for a single term paper. His student was unrelenting. Ken finally agreed to design the study himself and have the student help him administer questionnaires and analyze the data. The student never finished the paper, but Ken did. This study of the attitudes of gay people who attended political meetings and dances at the firehouse (converted to a discotheque on Saturday nights) is Ken's 1973 paper.

Ken describes the study as personally transformational because he became a leader in the movement. In his original conference paper, he wrote:

Before designing the original questionnaire, I had only been to the firehouse once, and I had never been to a [Gay Activist Alliance] business meeting. I began to go to the firehouse with regularity after I first administered the questionnaire to the business meeting. I became friendly with many of the members, and we began to socialize. ... Many politicians came to view me as something of a leader in the gay movement.



Among other things, Ken became the first openly gay elected official in New York City in 1977, when voters in the Upper West Side chose him as District Leader in Manhattan's 69th Assembly District (Part A). In 1984, he was a delegate at the Democratic National Convention.

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Pictured above: "Ethics and Policy Making in New York State," 2015 episode of City University of New York's monthly television forum. From left to right: Dick Dadey, Michael A. Benjamin, Bob Liff, L. Joy Williams, and Ken Sherrill.

Despite Ken's paper having been well received on a social-movements panel at the APSA Annual Meeting, he was unable to publish it for twenty-five years. Writing about the gay movement remained controversial. As well, methods involving personal narratives and participant-observers were not widely accepted in political science.

When Ellen Riggle and Barry Tadlock approached Ken about contributing to their volume, *Gays and Lesbians in the Democratic Process* (1999), his attention was already on other things, among them, gays in the military and the first American government textbook that included gay issues and pictures of gay people. He told them about his unpublished conference paper, and they agreed to edit and publish it in the volume.

What struck Ellen (my dissertation advisor, by the way) as one of the most important aspects of the paper was that Ken was talking to gay people, not about gay people. Early queer scholarship focused on gay people as objects in the political process, but "Ken's paper," Ellen said, "talked to gay people about what was going on. It provided a much-needed narrative of the time, and historically. It gave gay people agency in telling their own stories. It is critical to think not only about how others look at gay people, but how gay people look at themselves." This marked a turn in LGBTQ+ scholarship in political science.

It is nothing short of amazing what Queer people have accomplished in the past 50 years, and political science has played an active role in these accomplishments. Playing off of Ken's 1973 paper title, we might say today, "Ken Sherrill is a Leader in the LGBTQ+ Activist Movement and Political Sci-

SPOTLIGHTS

ence: There Has Been No Problem Finding Followers.” Many empirical and theoretical papers on queer topics followed at APSA annual meetings as well as in the discipline. Legions of queer articles and books have been published with reputable peer-reviewed journals and presses, notably, *The Path to Gay Rights: How Activism and Coming Out Changed Public Opinion* (2018) by Jeremiah Garretson; a series of political psychology articles on LGB wellbeing by Ellen D. B. Riggle; a host of articles on LGBTQ attitudes and political behavior by scholars such as Don Haider-Markel, Gregory Lewis, Andrew Flores, Jami Taylor, and Barry Tadlock; and the two books sharing the Sexuality and Politics Section’s inaugural best book award—*Sex Is as Sex Does: Governing Transgender Identity* (2022) by Paisley Currah and *Before Bostock: The Accidental LGBTQ Precedent of Pricewaterhouse v. Hopkins* (2022) by Jason Pierceson. Studying LGBTQ+ movements is now legitimate.

Legitimizing LGBTQ+ studies in political science was facilitated through the content of and methods in pioneering works like Ken’s and many others, and pioneers also created an infrastructure in APSA to facilitate LGBTQ+ research, discourse, and publishing. The infrastructure includes the [APSA Committee on the Status of LGBT Individuals in the Profession](#) (1992)—of which Ken was a member of the original committee, the [LGBT Caucus](#) (1987-88), and a thriving [APSA Sexuality & Politics Organized Section](#) and annual meeting division (2007). Each year these three groups host scholarly panels, professional development roundtables and networking receptions. The status committee has published reports and offers a travel grant to support annual meeting participation.

As scholarly activities increased, APSA and its divisions cre-

ated awards honoring this work. Two awards bear Ken’s name. The APSA Kenneth Sherrill Prize is given for the best dissertation proposal for an empirical study of LGBTQ+ topics, and the Kenneth Sherrill Best Dissertation is a section award that honors a defended dissertation on a queer topic. These awards stand alongside others. The Robert Bailey Award honors the best paper on a queer topic presented at the previous year’s annual meeting. Just this year, the Sexuality and Politics division created two new awards: LGBTQ+ Best Book Award and the Lasting Contribution Award. The latter recognizes a paper, journal article, book, or body of work that has made a significant contribution to sexuality and politics and the political science discipline broadly.

Ken Sherrill will be presented with the section’s inaugural Lasting Contribution Award. A milestone celebration will take place at the 2024 Annual Meeting in Philadelphia.

It is a moment of pride for APSA to pause, now and in Philadelphia in 2024, to reflect on and celebrate LGBTQ+ achievements, especially those us he directly and indirectly influenced methodologically, professionally, and personally. But make no mistake. We pause only briefly to celebrate because our work remains urgent and is far from complete. We proceed ever conscious of LGBTQ+ scholarship’s critical role in contemporary politics, governance, and academic inquiry, especially when members of our communities continue to be targets of political and legal assaults limiting their liberties, equalities, autonomies, and dignities. Our communities continue to be targets of hate, violence, and murder. LGBTQ+ people have come a long way in political science and society since 1973, but 2023 realities make it clear that our work has never been more urgent. ■

Member Award Updates

Awarded the 2023 Hazeltine Citation by the Brown University graduating class for outstanding teacher of the year

James A Morone

Brown University

Photo credit: Jeff Woodward



Awarded the 2023 Emory Williams Distinguished Undergraduate Teaching Award for the Social Sciences for a record of excellence in undergraduate teaching

Michael Leo Owens

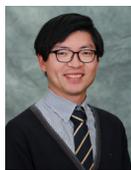
Emory University



Awarded the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) award for research on water sector cybersecurity

Jongeun You

Colorado School of Mines



Member Career Update

Named the Frank E. Duckwall Professor of Florida Studies at the University of South Florida

Judithanne McLauchlan

University of South Florida

