

■ FOR SUBSCRIBERS

# 'Giant in the field,' emeritus UR political scientist Richard 'Dick' Fenno dies at 93

Gary Craig, Rochester Democrat and Chronicle

Published 4:49 a.m. ET April 28, 2020 | Updated 11:43 a.m. ET April 28, 2020



- University of Rochester professor of Political Science, Richard Fenno Jr. (handout photo) (Photo: No-GRN)

Richard "Dick" Fenno Jr., the former University of Rochester political scientist considered to be one of the nation's preeminent scholars on Congress, died on April 21 at the age of 93.

Mr. Fenno last held the title Distinguished University Professor Emeritus at the University of Rochester. According to his son, Craig Fenno, he died from complications associated with COVID-19; he was in a Westchester County nursing home.

"I think he always enjoyed learning new things," Craig Fenno said Monday of the motivation that drove his father, who published his last book at the age of 88. "He was always very inquisitive, anxious to test his new ideas.

"I also think that he enjoyed traveling around the country and seeing different parts of the country through the eyes of various members of Congress, both House members and Senate members. ... He always encouraged — through his writing and his teaching and his lecturing — people to get out of Washington."



Richard Fenno (Photo: University of Rochester/Brandon Vick)

Mr. Fenno was known for his immersive approach to congressional studies, in which he would shadow the figures he was studying — a group that included former Vice President Dan Quayle, while he was a senator, and Sen. John Glenn of Ohio.

Mr. Fenno once described his approach to research as "soaking and poking" — a term that became widely known in political science circles for its recognition that a researcher could tackle the broad contours of congressional studies while also "poking" at and scrutinizing the minutiae.

Wendy Schiller, who was a UR graduate student under Mr. Fenno and now heads the Brown University political science department, said Mr. Fenno was able to focus on individual congresspeople while constructing a compelling tutorial about congressional workings.

"His talent was to bring individual people to the page but in the context of explaining general (congressional) patterns of behavior over time," said Schiller, who likened Mr. Fenno's writing flair with his research and books about Congress to the works of a novelist.

"He was really a wonderful writer," said Schiller, who remembered his meticulous line-by-line editing of his students' research papers. "Every Dick Fenno student is a good writer because he understood way back when that scholarship was about selling it. ... If you couldn't write, people would stop reading you."

## Giant in the political science field

### Get the **Coronavirus Watch** newsletter in your inbox.

Updates on how the coronavirus is affecting your community and the nation

Delivery: Varies

Your Email

MSMEAD1@GMAIL.COM



Many of Mr. Fenno's former graduate students and hires at UR have become leaders in the studies of political science, and they point to him as an inspirational figure who laid the groundwork for their success.

"Dick was a giant in the field of American politics, the most important political scientist studying the U.S. Congress in the latter half of the twentieth century," Fredrick Harris, a political science professor and dean of faculty in social sciences at Columbia University, [told the University of Rochester Newscenter \(https://www.rochester.edu/newscenter/remembering-pioneering-rochester-political-scientist-richard-fenno-427532/\)](https://www.rochester.edu/newscenter/remembering-pioneering-rochester-political-scientist-richard-fenno-427532/) last week.



Fredrick Harris

Harris was the first African-American tenure-track hire in the UR political science department, the UR Newscenter reported.

"He is the reason I decided to take the job at Rochester even though I had verbally agreed to take another job in my hometown," Harris told the Newscenter.

Instead, he went to UR. "Dick saw the value of my scholarship more than other mainstream political scientists and what I had dedicated my life to studying — black politics."

Mr. Fenno wrote Harris a simple note in 1993, urging him to come to UR. The note said, "We need you."

Mr. Fenno "was the first to lead the charge to Washington to watch it work," Kenneth Shepsle, the former chairman of the Department of Government at Harvard University, told the *Democrat and Chronicle* in 1997. "An army of graduate students and professors followed him."

"While we were in Washington, he snuck out and showed us how important it was to see politicians in their home districts," said Shepsle, who earned his doctorate under Mr. Fenno in 1970.

## Politics a mystery

Though a political researcher, Mr. Fenno kept his politics to himself.

"Richard Fenno was a warm and unfailing gentleman, but he didn't like to be quoted in the local press as he thought it might undermine his credibility as an impartial observer," former RochesterTimes-Union political reporter Patrice Mitchell wrote in an email. "As the Times-Union's political reporter in the 1980s that pained me no end because I was so familiar with Fenno's genius."

Through a fellowship, Mitchell worked in the office of Sen. Pete Domenici.

"While on Capitol Hill I worked for Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., who Mr. Fenno happened to be researching for his 1991 book, "The Emergence of a Senate Leader: Pete Domenici and the Reagan Budget."



Sen. Pete Domenici, who died in 2017. (Photo: Mandel Ngan, AFP/Getty Images)

"Before its publication I was back at the Times-Union," Mitchell said. "Mr. Fenno sent me a draft asking whether I had any input, a flattering and no doubt unnecessary request. Yet he still kindly but firmly declined my pleas for comments on stories about Congress. You have to admire his resolve."

A common congressional conundrum — the question of why individual representatives are popular and the institution as a whole is not — was a research point for Mr. Fenno decades ago, so much so that in the political science arena the question is known as "Fenno's paradox."

Mr. Fenno wrote of the paradox in his 1978 book, *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts*.

That book "would go on to win the Woodrow Wilson Foundation Award for best book in political science," the UR Newscenter reported in its remembrance of Mr. Fenno. "Setting the gold standard for congressional scholarship, the American Political Science Association eventually named an award after him — the Richard F. Fenno, Jr. Prize for the best book in legislative studies."

Mr. Fenno continued researching and writing into his late 80s. He and his wife of 71 years, Nancy Fenno, owned a house on Cape Cod where they would spend time.

"He had a little desk in a spare bedroom," his son, Craig, said. "He would go down there every morning and write. Even if he only wrote a sentence he would still spend time at the desk working."

A Massachusetts native and avid Boston sports fan, Mr. Fenno served in the Navy during World War II. He earned a doctorate in political science from Harvard University in 1956. About a year later, he joined the University of Rochester political science department, where he would spend nearly a half century.

Mr. Fenno is survived by his wife, Nancy of Rye; his son, Craig Fenno of Armonk; his daughter-in-law, Sharon Fenno, of Albany; his sister, Elizabeth Blucke of Hingham, Massachusetts; and grandchildren Zachary Fenno of New York City and Sarah Fenno, of Armonk. Mark Fenno, the couple's oldest child, and Amy Fenno, their daughter-in-law and Craig Fenno's wife, predeceased him.

Contact Gary Craig at [gcraig@gannett.com](mailto:gcraig@gannett.com) or at 585-258-2479. Follow him on Twitter at [gcraig1](https://twitter.com/gcraig1) (<https://twitter.com/gcraig1>). This coverage is only possible with support from readers. Sign up today for a digital subscription. ([https://cm.democratandchronicle.com/specialoffer?gps-source=CPNEWS&utm\\_medium=onsite&utm\\_source=news&utm\\_campaign=NEWSROOM&utm\\_content=GARYCRAIG](https://cm.democratandchronicle.com/specialoffer?gps-source=CPNEWS&utm_medium=onsite&utm_source=news&utm_campaign=NEWSROOM&utm_content=GARYCRAIG)).

Read or Share this story: <https://www.democratandchronicle.com/story/news/2020/04/28/richard-dick-fenno-dies-ur-political-scientist-preeminent-congressional-scholar-covid-19/3033029001/>