

## PERSONAL STATEMENT

As the first member of my family to earn a college degree, I have ardently pursued graduate-level research at the Pennsylvania State University. Before I earned my bachelor's degree in Global Politics at Clemson University, I attended a technical school and worked full-time. My transition to higher education followed several years of service in the U.S. Air Force. Initially, the decision to join the military was driven by financial need; an obligation to support my family after high school prevented me from going to college. In hindsight, I realize that my interest in comparative political institutions resulted from my military service. I participated in missions in over 25 countries, which covered a wide range of government types and stability. My combat experiences also drew my attention to the determinants of war and peace in those countries. My family has generally criticized academic research as irrelevant to the "real world," which I have worked hard to reverse. I have sought to demonstrate to them that research rests upon important questions, the answers to which generate benefits for all members of society.

As a result of my experiences, I encourage first-generation students and veterans to pursue higher education. I also have a personal interest in elevating the status of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) researchers. During my undergraduate career I served as an executive in the Clemson University Gay-Straight Alliance. I tutored LGBT high school students through an outreach program in upstate South Carolina. As a graduate student, I mentor the sole gay-friendly fraternity on the Penn State campus. I represent the only member of our department who is registered with the LGBT Support Network. As advertised, my office represents a safe space for all students. It is important to recognize the role of sexual orientation and gender identity in the profession—a 2007 survey prepared for the American Political Science Association (APSA) revealed that there remain within the discipline highly negative attitudes about LGBT political scientists and their place in the field (Novkov and Barclay 2010).

Clemson University offered ample opportunities for me to train for a future as a leader and academic. Through my research assistantship with Dr. Zeynep Taydas I studied politics in Turkey and India, patterns of human rights abuse, and the academic writing process. I earned teaching experience by leading a weekly discussion group as part of an International Relations class taught by Dr. Michael Morris. In particular, I learned how to relate lessons to current events and engage students in discussion. The department also employed me during the summer to organize conferences for the Clemson Model United Nations, which encourages student learning through debate and discussion on international issues. Outside of the department I was a Calculus tutor in a program which targets students in subjects that have a high failure rate. Through the program I learned how to tailor the material and my teaching methods to suit student's strengths and help them learn.

As a member of the Clemson Honors College, I dedicated myself to understanding the macro-level foundations of international migration and civil conflict processes. I collaborated with Dr. Zeynep Taydas in a review paper of the literature on the causes of civil war onset, in which I was the primary author. Our review identified a departure in the literature from controversial topics and onto new issues, which left earlier debates unresolved. Our manuscript is currently under review for publication at *Civil Wars*. I also wrote an honors thesis on the role of ethnicity in determining legal international migration patterns in highland Ecuador. The project, which involved an original survey of over 400 households, won the 2009 *Award for Most Outstanding Undergraduate Research* from the College of Business and Behavioral Science at Clemson University. I presented the findings at the 2009 meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association and recently submitted the manuscript for review at the *Journal of Ethnicity and Migration*.

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My undergraduate career also prepared me to make significant contributions at the graduate level. I am currently involved in several projects that focus on institutional constraints on leader behavior. With Dr. Glenn Palmer and another student, we apply the selectorate theory to goods provision in democracies using a new measure of the selectorate and winning coalition based on Vanhanen's *Polyarchy* dataset. As a result of my graduate coursework on conflict and democratization, I have taken a special interest in examining the link between authoritarianism and their involvement in domestic and international conflicts. My latest research on the subject, for which I am requesting financial support through an NSF graduate fellowship, evaluates regime behavior using an event-data methodological approach.

Although I have left Clemson in pursuit of higher education, I hope to play a supportive role in the department of Political Science at Clemson University. It currently does not have a Ph.D. program in political science and would benefit from greater input from its doctoral alumni. An immediate way that I hope to involve faculty and students there is to collaborate with the department on a comparative case-study database and data coding. I want to encourage undergraduates to pursue graduate-level research and provide them with educational materials and methods that stem from my projects and the work of others. In the long-term, I aim to secure a university-level position involving a mix of teaching and research. Through instructing students on the subjects of quantitative methods, conflict studies, and political systems, I hope to have a particularly strong presence among veterans, LGBT, and first-generation students.

Funding from the NSF Graduate Fellowship is an integral part of the progress that I hope to achieve as a student and future academic. Firstly, it will enable me develop a badly needed (and much underexplored) measure. Some of the funds will be used to pay for undergraduate assistants to help write code and collect data. Their assistance in my proposed project will provide encouragement for students to undertake research of their own and will enable them to present at conferences, much in the way that my mentors encouraged me. It will expose them to graduate-level research and set them apart as applicants to graduate school. NSF funding will also allow me to take my research *outside* of the university, in several capacities: it will enable me to present my work at a wider range of venues and it will fast-track the development of a public comparative case-study database during the event-data collection phase of my proposed project. More importantly, the project that I propose will rely on high-speed computing during the filtering phase of the project, for which access to the TeraGrid infrastructure provided by the National Science Foundation is an invaluable resource. As an NSF graduate fellow, I also hope to take advantage of the Nordic Research Opportunity and extend the project to assist work on civil war at PRIO and Uppsala University in Norway and Sweden. Some of the NSF Graduate Fellowship will be used to fund field work in Latin America during the dissertation phase of my graduate research, in connection with my proposed project.

From my firsthand experience with discrimination and financial setbacks in the educational setting, I realize the following: scientists who have diverse backgrounds and unique histories provide perspectives and insights which directly contribute to scientific progress. My background as a former soldier, an LGBT activist, and as a first-generation academic will continue to influence my scholarship and teaching/mentoring. A desire to augment my own situation prepared me to undertake advanced study in political science and to make a difference in the lives of others. Additionally, my research experiences have given me the skills to be a strong academic. Support from the NSF graduate fellowship would greatly enhance my realized impact in an academic environment.

**References:** Novkov, Julie, and Scott Barclay. 2010. "Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, and the Transgendered in Political Science: Report on a Discipline-Wide Survey." *Political Science & Politics*, 43 (1): 95-106.