November 17, 2017

Gill Family Foundation Scholarship Selection Committee
School of Public Affairs
American University

Dear Selection Committee,

I am writing to express my interest in the Gill Family Foundation Scholarship. I am a fourth-year student completing a dissertation in Comparative Politics. My dissertation utilizes mixed-methods, but the quantitative component is really the crux of my analysis and the main evidence upon which much of my argument will hinge.

The statistics and methods courses I have taken pushed me to move in the direction of writing a dissertation which relies largely on a quantitative approach. During my time at AU, I completed the full conduct sequence, receiving an A- in each course. Previously, I had taken a quantitative methods course in my Master's program, as well as a statistics course for political analysis as an undergraduate. What was both challenging and rewarding about the conduct sequence is that I gained a much greater understanding of the underlying logic of statistical models. My coursework prior to the PhD program mainly emphasized working with data and running analysis using statistical software: very much a plug-and-chug approach. After taking the conduct sequence, I have a much greater knowledge of the proper usage and assumptions of a wide variety of modeling strategies, which helps me to take a measured approach to analyzing my own data, and makes me much more cognizant of the methodology of the research I consume. Additionally, through these courses and my own self-teaching thereafter, I am very capable and confident in working with a variety of statistical software packages.

My dissertation builds from what I learned in the conduct series, incorporating time-series cross-national data and survey data analysis. The project aims to "quantify" feminist theories about the construction of gender to determine to what degree these cultural understandings about the roles for men and women affect the descriptive and the symbolic representation of women in politics. I focus primarily on the construction of the public-private dichotomy, as women's entry into politics is a highly visible disruption of the historical division of the social world in which women are associated with the private sphere of the home and the family while men are associated with public life. To "measure" the public-private dichotomy over time, I am working to create a time-series cross-national database of policies which affect the chances for womens full and equal participation in the public sphere. I then assess 1) how the construction of and changes in the public-private dichotomy affect opportunities for women to enter the political sphere (descriptive representation) and 2) how shifts in the public-private dichotomy, combined with increasing female representation, affect attitudes toward female politicians, understandings of the appropriate role for women in the public sphere and acceptance of female authority (symbolic representation).

In the enclosed dissertation prospectus, the focus is largely on the latter question (symbolic representation). However, I recently presented my project to faculty and students in the Government department, and as a result of their feedback, I have decided to expand the scope of the dissertation to take descriptive representation more seriously. The methodology section which describes the data and the models begins on page 36; however, full explanations of the right-hand side variables and hypotheses are outlined in the theoretical sections (4-6). There are two methodological contributions of my dissertation: 1) it is perhaps the first attempt to quantify these particular theories about the effect of the construction of public-private dichotomy on womens participation in public life, cross-nationally and over time and 2) I intend to make the database public to facilitate access to information about the laws and policies which affect womens participation in public life.

I thank you for taking the time to consider my application.

Sincerely,

Danielle Higgins

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