Personal Statement

Ignacio Urbina
Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile — School of Government

I began my doctoral studies at Stony Brook University focused on state violence, political trust, and democratic attitudes in Latin America. That work continues: a paper on how police violence erodes democratic satisfaction won the Best Poster Award at the 2023 Latin American Political Methodology Meeting. But in November 2022, something shifted. I received early access to ChatGPT and spent a month testing it obsessively: Kahneman-style behavioral experiments, mathematical puzzles, coding challenges, prose generation. I realized immediately that this was far more than a text generator. It was a technology that would reshape how citizens understand politics, how governments make decisions, and how democracies function. I pivoted my research agenda. My core conviction is that AI can provide tools to improve democracy, if done well. My work asks how.

Academic Trajectory. My path to this question has been interdisciplinary by design. I trained first in economics (MSc, Adolfo Ibáñez University) and public policy (MPP, Adolfo Ibáñez), then worked for three years as an Economic Analyst at Chile's Ministry of Finance. That experience shaped how I think about research. Government action is messy: coordination failures, communication breakdowns, institutional knowledge carried by committed public officials working under constraints. Then came October 2019. Chile's social uprising revealed a disconnect between citizens and the state I had been serving. I left DIPRES convinced that understanding public opinion and democratic legitimacy required training beyond economics. That conviction led me to doctoral study in political science. The AI pivot came later, as I described above, but it builds on the same foundation: how can democratic institutions respond to forces that reshape citizens' lives?

My dissertation, "Three Essays on the Political Implications of AI," examines how citizens form preferences about emerging technologies and how AI might enhance democratic deliberation. The first chapter tests how information about automation risk affects policy preferences, using a pre-registered experiment with approximately 1,000 U.S. workers. The second develops an agent-based model of AI-augmented citizen councils. The third (with Oleg Smirnov) uses factor analysis to map the structure of AI attitudes in mass publics. Beyond the dissertation, I have one article published in the *Journal of Environmental Psychology* and one in-principle accepted at *Politics and the Life Sciences*. I have secured approximately $11,000 in competitive research grants and presented at over fifteen conferences, including APSA, MPSA, and Oxford's "Talking to Machines" workshop. In 2024, I received the Milton Lodge Graduate Research Award, named for one of the founders of political psychology.

My teaching spans ten years, three institutions, and two countries. At Stony Brook, I have taught Introduction to Statistical Methods (undergraduate and graduate levels) and Math Camp for incoming PhD students. At Finis Terrae University in Chile, I taught Behavioral Economics and Microeconomics. Across all these courses, my goal has been the same: helping students who did not expect to succeed at quantitative methods discover that they can. This requires meeting students where they are, which means teaching is fundamentally about human connection, not content transmission. To support that connection, I have built over twenty interactive learning tools (using JavaScript and AI-assisted coding) that help students visualize statistical concepts at their own pace. I use AI in my teaching, but with a rule: do not prompt what you cannot independently check.

Motivation to Join PUC. I am at heart a multidisciplinary scholar. My research spans political science, economics, and computational modeling; my training includes degrees in economics and public policy; my professional experience includes government service. The School of Government's interdisciplinary structure is rare, and it matches how I work. I see an opportunity to position PUC as a global hub for research on

AI, politics, society, and public policy, and to contribute to Public Administration students an emerging field that will shape their careers.

Chile is at a critical moment for AI governance. The National AI Policy establishes a roadmap through 2031. CENIA provides technical AI research capacity. What is missing is a social science perspective: how citizens perceive AI, how democratic institutions should govern it, how automation affects political behavior. I can contribute that perspective. I know Rodrigo Durán (CENIA's CEO) from student government at Adolfo Ibáñez, and Carolina Calvo (now at CENIA and Microsoft) from my time as her teaching assistant. I maintain links with former colleagues at DIPRES. These connections are not why I am applying, but they suggest I can contribute immediately rather than building networks from scratch.

Contributions to the UC Community. The university's mission emphasizes service to society and integral formation: developing people who combine intellectual rigor with ethical commitment and a vocation for public service. These resonate with my values. Kindness, empathy, and compassion are what I cherish most. A personal life mission is to serve others and increase human dignity in whatever way I can, however small. I do not have grandiose expectations. I want to contribute a grain of salt to making others' lives better. I love helping others grow.

One example captures my approach to formation. Akhil Ponda was a high school senior at Bronx High School of Science when he joined our project on human-AI cooperation. Over two years, I trained him to program behavioral experiments in oTree, assigned progressively complex tasks (from survey demographics to complete game applications for eight experimental conditions), and met periodically to troubleshoot code and discuss research design. When we launched the beta version, I told him: "We really couldn't have done it without your help, and I mean that." He replied that he "kind of like[d] the problem-solving aspect of coding." That was exactly the spark I hoped to ignite. He earned co-authorship on a paper presented at APSA and Oxford, submitted the project to the Regeneron Science Talent Search, and is now a first-year at Brown studying Behavioral Decision Sciences. A significant component of his application was the research we did together. This is what formation means to me: meeting students where they are, giving them real responsibility, and watching them grow.

The university's vision calls for a "frontier university that imagines new realities." The realities I imagine are these: democracies that can govern AI before it governs them; citizens who understand technology well enough to demand accountability; AI systems that enhance rather than replace human deliberation; Chile as a leader in democratic AI governance. At PUC, I will pursue collaborations with Engineering on algorithmic systems, with Law on regulatory frameworks, with Sociology on distributional consequences, with Economics on labor markets, and with CENIA on translating research into practice. In the longer term, I will seek to build a research cluster on AI and democratic governance, a potential nucleus for a future Instituto Milenio.

I bring rigorous training, a clear research agenda, and a commitment to service. I am ready to contribute from day one.