



New Member Spotlight: Nancy Aguilera Discusses Her Political Science Journey

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SSN is excited to highlight Nancy Aguilera, a Ph.D. candidate in political science at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, for this new member spotlight. As her SSN membership contribution, Nancy recently wrote a [policy brief](#) on democracy and the importance of voting. As the child of immigrants who was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa, a degenerative disease of the retina, Aguilera has had to overcome many challenges in her academic journey. The following is a conversation about her personal story and her research into the global decline of democratic governance. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Q&A with Nancy Aguilera

Can you share your background and what drew you to study political science?

My family immigrated to the U.S. in the 1980s, partly due to the civil war in El Salvador and partly for economic reasons. Growing up, war and conflict were always in the background. I wasn't initially drawn to political science; I chose it as a major to challenge myself. I had planned to go into psychology. However, during my last semester at the University of California, Merced, a political science class solidified my interest. I realized the best way I could help people understand issues was through helping them understand politics.

My dissertation focuses on remittance outflows and democratic backsliding. The one unintended consequence is encountering a significant amount of research on immigration. Although I'm not specifically studying immigration, remittances and immigration are intertwined. Remittances are small amounts of money that immigrants send back to family or friends in their home countries. These exchanges go beyond just financial transactions; they also carry social, economic, and political ideas. However, we don't know much about the political repercussions of regime stability and remittance outflows in destination countries. I aim to understand and provide further context to this social phenomenon.

What did you hope to gain from being an SSN member and what inspired you to write this policy brief?

I was looking for guidance on public-facing research. I've always felt academia can be isolating, with journal articles reaching only a limited audience. SSN seemed like a place where I could learn to better engage the public and make my research accessible to more people.

After the 2016 election, I became increasingly concerned about the direction of the U.S., especially the level of political polarization. My graduate work has since focused on democratic backsliding. I'm particularly interested in how divisiveness impacts democracy, not just in the U.S. but globally.

The most alarming thing I noticed is the rise in negative rhetoric and the demonization of others. While political disagreement is normal, the complete lack of consensus-building is deeply concerning. It's essential for both sides to work together, but we're seeing less willingness to do so.

How does the U.S. experience of democratic backsliding fit into a global trend?

Many countries are seeing democratic backsliding or attempts to restrict freedoms, which is concerning, especially when free speech is under threat. The U.S. experience reflects this global trend. While there was some improvement globally in 2022, 2023 hasn't shown the best results. Democracy is always a work in progress.

Several factors have contributed to this democratic backsliding; some people think it's social media. It allows people to tailor their news feeds, creating echo chambers where they only hear opinions that align with their own. This reinforces divisions and makes it harder to engage with differing viewpoints.

What can we do to combat democratic backsliding?

The key is citizen participation. Voting is critical, but people also need to stay informed and open-minded. Making friends across the ideological spectrum and understanding their perspectives helps. We also need elites to change their rhetoric, but I'm hopeful that the public, more than politicians, can bridge these divides.

We need to bring back civics courses in schools. Teaching students how to engage with their government, understand political cycles, and access information is crucial. Social media and the internet can be powerful tools if used properly to foster informed participation.

Where do you see your own advocacy and public engagement leading you?

My goal is to help people become better citizens, including myself. I want to make a greater impact through political science than I could have in psychology, which is why I pursued this path.

Identifying social phenomena and providing potential solutions is the most satisfying aspect of my work. I aim to help people and improve our society. I realize that it is a collective effort and that we should aim to improve our society bit by bit.

You mentioned both of your parents are from El Salvador. What do they think about you studying political science?

My mom is proud of me but doesn't fully understand what I do. She's not very educated, so she's supportive but may not grasp the details. For her, it's more about me being far away rather than my career choice. I was born and raised in Los Angeles and now I live across the country in St. Louis, Missouri.

My family thinks the U.S. is the best place to be. My mom even sold her house in El Salvador and said she's never going back. She's grateful for the opportunities here, especially given the poverty she grew up in. She's very grateful that we were born in the U.S. given the disability culture in El Salvador. My education in El Salvador would've cost a lot of money, and I would've been separated from my family as a child.

Are you comfortable sharing more about your disability and how this has impacted your academic career?

I have retinitis pigmentosa, a degenerative eye disease. I've been blind all my life, and it's not easy, especially being the only blind person in the room professionally. I haven't met another blind person in political science, though I know they exist. Despite that, I try to advocate for people with disabilities, especially through my work with the National Federation of the Blind.

While I don't focus on disability in my research, I advocate for it, and I volunteer my time to promote causes that support the blind community. I've been to the Missouri state capitol in Jefferson City several times to speak with politicians, as I might be the only blind person they interact with. I think it's important to advance the cause of accessibility, even though I don't have specific research in that area yet.

I'm the beneficiary of other people putting themselves on the line. I'm grateful to have so many rights and to have an easier time. It doesn't mean that everything is as accessible, but there's greater accessibility.

What have been the most challenging aspects of your academic journey, and how did you overcome them?

I actually began my higher education journey in 2000 attending California State University, Dominguez Hills, and I stopped in December 2002. I thought that I was going to take a brief break to plan my wedding and then I extended my break to have my daughter. Unfortunately, my ex-spouse wasn't supportive and I tried several times unsuccessfully to continue my education. I finally managed to enroll in June 2015 at Los Angeles City College after separating and filing for divorce. Going back and completing my education was the biggest challenge. I think it is never too late to pursue your goals. I expect to complete my Ph.D. in December 2026.

Also, being a single mother while pursuing my education was another challenge. I overcame this by learning to organize myself. I learned to prioritize what was important, such as spending time with my children. I aimed to do the best I could for every class assignment I turned in and learned to enjoy all the small victories along the

way.

My visual impairment also presented me with various challenges. I overcame them by being willing to find workarounds for assignments that weren't necessarily accessible to me, being open to discussing potential accommodation options, and not giving up. Of course, this is easier said than done. Determination!

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Aguilera's research focuses on public policy, international relations, and comparative politics. Overarching themes in Aguilera's writing include elections, regime transitions, democratization, and downturns from democracy. Aguilera serves as the vice president of the Political Science Graduate Students Association at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.