

Leading or Leaving? Uncovering the Emotional Perceptions Preventing Politically Interested Irish Women from Running for Office

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INTRODUCTION

A stark gender imbalance defines Ireland's political system: women comprise 50% of the population but fewer than 25% of its elected officials.¹ This research investigates this gap by exploring gendered differences in political outlook, emotional perceptions and rhetoric. Through an analysis of the differing language used, emotional responses and concerns of high-achieving, politically engaged students, this study moves beyond established structural and confidence-based explanations to pinpoint patterns of emotional distress and precise rhetorical mechanisms that hinder women's political involvement. These findings redefine the factors behind the achievement gap, creating a foundation for further research, reforming political recruitment, and developing new strategies to include women.

METHODOLOGY

Design: Qualitative study using in-depth semi-structured interviews.

Sample: 16 Irish Trinity College Social Science students (8 women, 8 men), balanced equally across year groups.

Approach:

- 40-minute interviews with questions on political career demands, self-promotion, scrutiny, etc., noting differing concerns, emotional responses and rhetorical usage by gender

Analysis:

- Thematic analysis of interview transcripts
- Key quote extractions paired with data visualisations to elucidate gendered patterns

Note on Generalizability: Findings from this specific sample are not generalizable to all Irish men or women. While the study identifies emergent gendered patterns, its generalizability is limited by sample diversity and size. The primary value lies in providing nuanced insights that form a crucial foundation for future research on barriers to political participation.

RESULTS

Rhetoric Differences:

Questions - Please describe Irish politics today in 3 words.

Men:



Women:

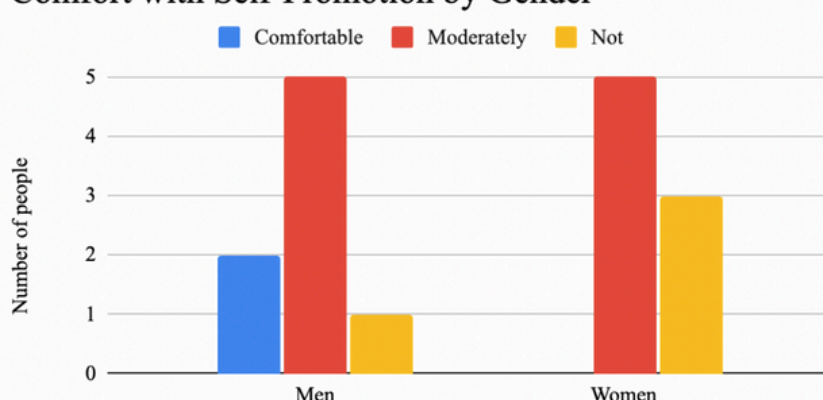


Both men and women predominantly used negative descriptors, expressing shared discontent with Irish politics. However, a key divergence emerged: men criticised the conflict-driven and unfair **nature** of politics (e.g., “polarised,” “hostile”), while women focused their criticism on inefficiency and dysfunction within the **system** (e.g., “wasteful,” “messy”). Surprisingly, women were the sole group to associate positive, forward-looking terms like “calm” and “progressive” with the political environment.

Self-Promotion Gap:

Questions - How comfortable are you selling yourself?

Comfort with Self-Promotion by Gender



A clear confidence gap emerged regarding self-promotion, a fundamental requirement for electoral success:

- Men reported being overwhelmingly “comfortable” and “moderately” with selling themselves.
- Women clustered in the “moderately” and “not” comfortable categories.

This divergence indicates a critical barrier is not just perceiving the political environment, but a fundamental discomfort with the core act of self-promotion required to enter it.

Voices Highlighting the Self-Promotion Gap:

“The idea of begging people to support me... I'd feel a sense of shame in doing that.” - Woman

“I think when you've a really good team around you, and a strong sense of self...then nothing can stop you.” - Man

“It's hard because people pinpoint women who sell themselves and say ‘oh my god, she's obsessed with herself.’” -Woman

Gendered Experiences in Irish Politics:

Questions - Do you think men and women experience political careers differently in Ireland, and if so, in what ways?

Participants overwhelmingly (all but 1 man) agreed that men and women experience political careers differently in Ireland, citing heightened scrutiny and systemic barriers for women. Here is what participants articulated:

Public Scrutiny: Women face more personal attacks on appearance and demeanour, while men are judged more on policy and individual performance.

- “Men can throw on a suit, women get criticised for whatever they are wearing.” - Men
- “Comments on women often are around making fun of how they look, it's a lot more personal.” - Woman
- “No one is calling male politicians ugly.” - Men

Media Bias: Criticism of women is often personally directed (“she is useless”), whereas for men it is often systemic (“his party is useless”).

Structural Barriers: Men are often presumed competent by default and feel entitled to political space, while women are expected to be more careful and “digestible” in their presentation.

- “If there is a man and woman in the same role, they will presume the man is in charge and will ask him the question.” - Man

Emotional Double Standard: Women's passion is often framed as “emotional” or “unstable,” while men's emotion is seen as commendable traits or a testament to their dedication.

- “My passion for things would be used against me, I would be told I was too emotional, or that I was ‘unstable.’” - Woman

ANALYSIS

This study reveals that emotional and perceptual barriers—specifically a gendered discomfort with self-promotion and the anticipation of biased media scrutiny—deter political ambition among high-achieving women. It is essential to understand and address the articulated feelings of self-doubt, pressure, and shame among women, which originate from historical suppression and gendered norms privileging male-coded leadership, and are perpetuated by intense scrutiny and unequal expectations. While the eradication of deeply embedded gender biases is a profound challenge, meaningful progress can be made. We must:

1. **Refrain valued traits in political leadership** to include competencies like collaboration and empathy—and then leverage society's ingrained association of these traits with women—deliberately uplifting and promoting women's leadership in politics
2. **Implementing systemic reforms**, particularly in media standards and political mentorship, to reduce gendered scrutiny and build confidence.

By addressing these interconnected barriers, Ireland can begin to dismantle the deterrents that limit women's political participation.

CONCLUSION

This research suggests that Ireland's political ambition gap is not merely the result of a lack of structural support or confidence in women, but a rational response to a system that applies a different, more punishing set of standards on women, triggering emotional barriers like anxiety and self-doubt. Therefore, achieving equitable participation demands a fundamental restructuring of the political environment itself with an understanding of these underlying emotional triggers. By reframing leadership to value diverse traits, reforming hyper-critical media discourse, critically examining the rhetoric used to discuss politics, and installing robust support systems, we can begin to dismantle these structural barriers. Ultimately, a representative Irish democracy requires a political environment that actively supports women by addressing and understanding the systemic and internal barriers which deter their participation.

References:

[1] 2024, “Results for Women Candidates”, *Women for Election*. <https://www.womenforelection.ie/>

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More:

For further details and a comprehensive analysis, please scan the QR code to access the full research report.



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