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My research project was inspired by the stark gender imbalance that defines Ireland's political system, where women comprise 50% of the population but fewer than 25% of its elected officials. My research set out to investigate this persistent gender achievement gap in Irish politics by exploring gendered differences in political outlook, with a specific focus on identifying the less tangible, emotional, and rhetorical barriers that deter women's participation. Rather than focusing solely on structural factors or confidence gaps, this study probed the underlying perceptions, emotional responses, and discursive patterns that shape political ambition. To do this, I recruited a balanced sample of sixteen Irish social science students from Trinity College Dublin (eight men and eight women) and conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews averaging forty minutes each. These conversations were designed to investigate participants' perceptions of politics in detail, exploring not only how men and women view the political system, but also how they discuss it, which aspects evoke strong emotions, and where key differences in language and concern emerge. The interviews were transcribed and subjected to a micro-level analysis of rhetorical choices, emotional tone, and recurrent themes.

The findings confirm differences in barriers, emotional reactions, and rhetoric between male and female participants. Key themes included disparities in self-confidence, pronounced discomfort among women with self-promotion, and acute sensitivity to the heightened public and media scrutiny faced by women in politics. Female participants reported lower self-confidence and greater anxiety when considering political engagement, often rooted in a strong aversion to the performative demands of campaigning and a keen awareness of the critical—often gendered—media discourse targeting women in politics, both in Ireland and internationally. Ultimately, this research moves beyond established structural and confidence-based explanations for the achievement gap in politics by pinpointing specific patterns of emotional distress and identifying precise rhetorical mechanisms that hinder women's political involvement. It contributes to the existing literature on political ambition by demonstrating how emotional perceptions of the political

environment and internalised gendered narratives concretely impact career choices. Consequently, it argues for a deliberate shift in how political careers are framed and discussed with young adults, advocating for the development of recruitment frameworks and communicative strategies designed to reduce negative emotional barriers, specifically for women. These findings broaden the factors we consider to be behind the political achievement gap, creating a foundation for further research, reforming political recruitment, and developing targeted strategies to foster a more inclusive and representative political culture in Ireland.

While my final project remained closely aligned with my original proposal in terms of its structure and core objectives, some of my findings offered unexpected insights that prompted important personal reflection. One hypothesis in particular not only surprised me but led me to think more critically about the separation between my personal experiences and my academic investigation. Informed by existing literature, I had anticipated that female participants would express disproportionate concern regarding the burden of balancing political careers with family life when asked about the personal costs of sustaining a role in politics. However, the data revealed that both men and women placed strong and equal emphasis on the profound personal costs to family life, as well as shared apprehension around the loss of privacy and the negative impact on mental well-being. This finding challenged the standard narrative that work-life balance is a uniquely gendered concern.

As researchers, we strive to maintain objectivity and distance between our personal views and our work, yet my surprise at these results compelled me to reflect deeply on my own positionality and unconscious biases. Being a woman who is personally interested in political engagement, I realise that my own concerns about family responsibilities and societal expectations may have led me to overgeneralize these assumptions to all women. This experience highlighted the importance of reflexivity in research, the practice of continuously examining how one's identity, experiences, and preconceptions shape the research process, from design to interpretation. Although prior studies had reinforced my initial hypothesis, encountering contradictory evidence emphasised the necessity of remaining open to disconfirming data and avoiding the imposition of personal frameworks onto participants' voices. This reflexive process has not only made me a more critical and self-aware researcher but has also reinforced the importance of designing studies that leave

space for unanticipated responses, ensuring that the research remains ethically grounded and accurately represents the lived experiences of those being studied.

This research project not only prompted profound and unexpected self-reflection on my identity and biases as a researcher, but it also powerfully reinforced how deeply I value genuine human connection, a principle I intentionally strive to carry into all my leadership roles within the community. These interviews offered more than just qualitative data; they provided meaningful human interactions that underscored the importance of empathy and presence in both research and leadership. In my Personal Development Plan, I defined leadership at the beginning of the summer as “about action, bringing people together, and making change grounded in purpose and guided by shared values.” Now, having engaged so personally with participants’ stories and perspectives, I also see leadership as fundamentally rooted in intentional, meaningful engagement with others. Conducting these interviews highlighted how profoundly others’ experiences and insights can shape and refine my own views and perspectives, and how inspiring it can be to connect with new people over shared passions and values. Additionally, this project showed me how mutual influence and respectful dialogue build lasting trust, something that can help foster authentic community across differences. I now see clearly how connection and trust are two core aspects of inclusive and effective leadership. Going beyond this project, I look forward to continuing to lead with this core value of interpersonal connection at the forefront, integrating this empathetic approach into future academic, professional, and community-oriented endeavours.

Another goal I set in my Personal Development Plan was to strengthen my ability to actively listen and respond with empathy. Active listening is a skill I have significantly developed and now better understand through this research. I learned that active listening is a full-bodied practice; it’s not just about hearing words, but about consciously moderating my own body language and facial expressions to create a space of openness and trust. I became more aware of maintaining eye contact, nodding to show understanding, and leaning in attentively to signal engagement. Through these conversations, I learned to suspend my own agenda, ask deeper follow-up questions that built on the participant's own words, and sit comfortably with pauses, allowing deeper reflection to emerge. By the end of the sixteen interviews, I found myself practising this holistic form of active listening more naturally. This development was not only a crucial personal achievement but also directly

enriched the quality of my research, yielding more nuanced, reflective, and detailed responses from participants who felt genuinely heard.

As I reflect on both the successes and the struggles of this project, as well as my own personal and professional growth throughout the process, I feel a deep sense of pride in the value that my research contributes to ongoing conversations about women's involvement in the political sphere. Beyond the results it outlines, one of my research's primary values lies in providing in-depth, nuanced insights that form a crucial foundation for future research on barriers to political participation. The sample, comprised of a specific subset of the Irish population—high-achieving university students—and a small number of participants, means the findings are not intended to be broadly generalizable to the entire Irish public, or men and women as a whole. While the data points to and begins to outline gendered trends, the findings and analysis aim not to make sweeping generalisations, but to outline emergent patterns and record nuanced perceptions within this distinct group, offering a focused contribution to the broader discourse on political ambition. The value of this research lies in its depth and its ability to highlight potential areas for further investigation, ultimately aiming to encourage more aware discussions of political careers that can help reduce barriers to participation, particularly for women in Ireland.

A particularly compelling and underexplored finding that emerged from this research that I would strongly advocate for more dedicated research on is the gender difference in discomfort with self-promotion. Selling oneself is a critical skill not only for engaging with the political sphere but for navigating numerous professional landscapes. This aversion to self-advocacy emerged as a significant psychological barrier for the women in my study and reflects a broader, well-documented pattern in fields like business, where women also remain underrepresented in senior leadership and positions of power. Future research on this topic could be exceptionally worthwhile. It should continue to identify and understand the barrier, but also move beyond the barrier toward designing and testing practical interventions. For instance, studies could evaluate the efficacy of workshops and training modules specifically designed to help women reframe self-promotion as a neutral, professional necessity and build comfort with articulating their accomplishments. Perhaps even more critically, research must investigate how to transform the societal narrative itself. This involves a deliberate project of linguistic reframing: studying how to shift the public and media discourse surrounding women who advocate for themselves. The goal would be to

dismantle the pervasive characterisation of such women as “selfish” or “aggressive,” and instead, describe them with the same legitimising language often afforded to men, as “strategic,” “knowing how to play the game,” or simply “doing what is necessary” to succeed. This type of nuanced inquiry is fundamental to creating environments where women’s ambition is not penalised but empowered. This is just one example of how my research could inspire further research into the political achievement gap.

In conclusion, my research investigated the gender gap in Irish politics, where women hold fewer than 25% of elected positions despite comprising half the population. Moving beyond structural explanations, I explored emotional and rhetorical barriers through semi-structured interviews with sixteen politically engaged students from Trinity College Dublin. The findings revealed that women reported significantly higher discomfort with self-promotion and greater anxiety about media scrutiny compared to their male counterparts. These insights highlight how gendered perceptions and emotional responses—not just institutional barriers—contribute to the ambition gap. While the project initially focused on rhetorical differences between men and women, which were still recorded and reported on, I believe the key insights the research provides are centred on the continued emotional triggers that women experience in response to the current political environment in Ireland.

Along with insightful results, the project prompted personal growth, particularly in understanding my own biases as a woman researching gender issues. Unexpectedly, I found that concerns about work-life balance and mental well-being were shared equally across genders. This finding challenged my initial assumptions and emphasised the need for researcher reflexivity. Furthermore, conducting these interviews deepened my commitment to empathetic leadership and active listening, skills that proved essential both for gathering rich qualitative data and for fostering genuine human connection.

Ultimately, this six-week research project was an honour to conduct, and I extend my deepest gratitude to the Laidlaw Foundation for their generous support. I am also profoundly thankful to the sixteen students who shared their time and personal reflections so openly during interviews; this work would not exist without their voices. Special thanks must also go to my supervisor, Professor Gizem Arıkan, for her invaluable guidance, patience, and intellectual generosity throughout this process. While the barriers to gender equality in politics are real and complex, this research reinforces that they are not

insurmountable. By continuing to listen, reflect, and redesign our political culture with empathy and courage, we move closer to a system where talent—not gender—shapes leadership. Change is never immediate, but with sustained effort and compassion, a more inclusive and representative democracy is within reach.