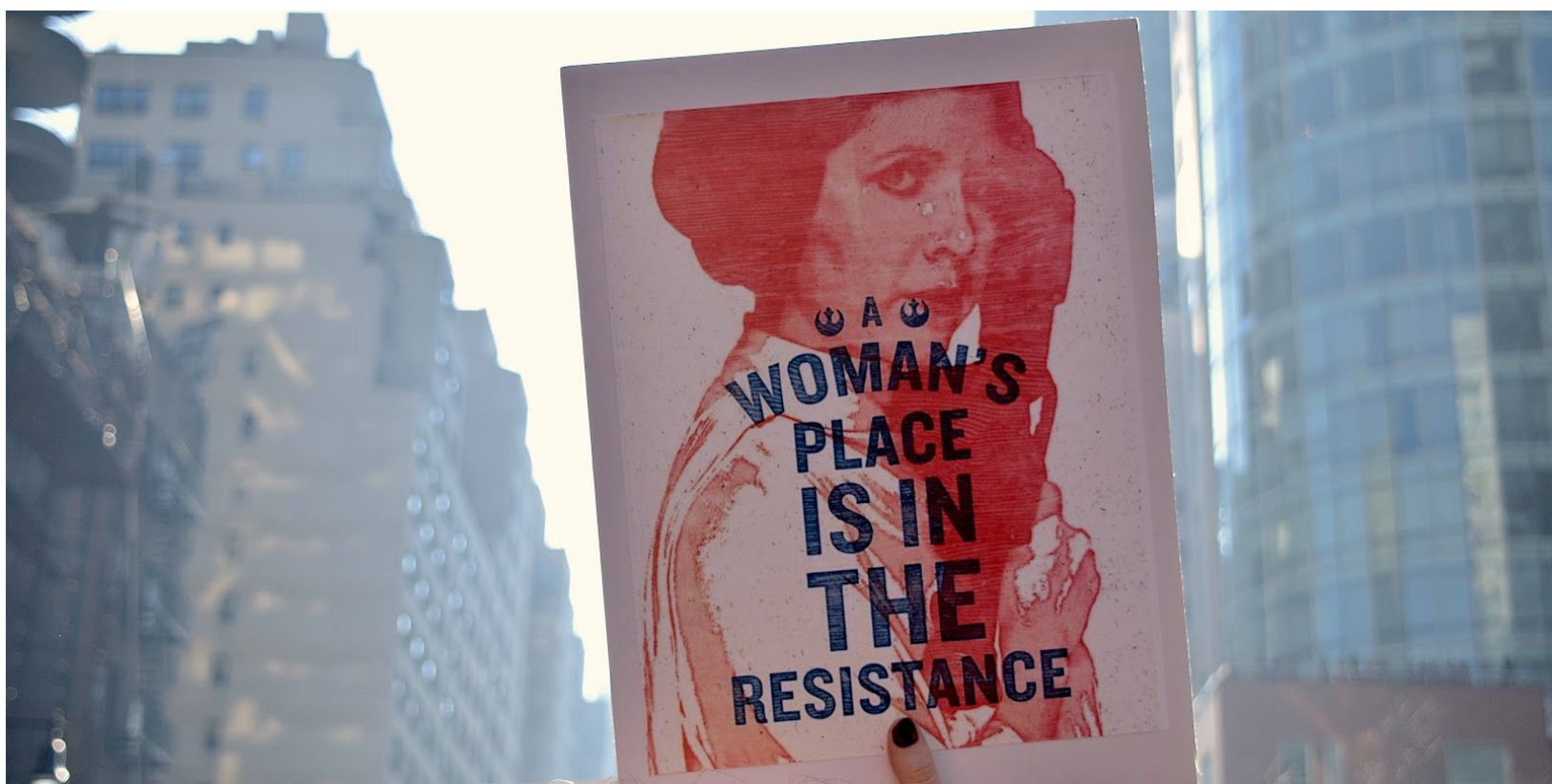




# CHALLENGES FOR YOUNG WOMEN IN UK POLITICS

**What factors are deterring young women from entering politics in the United Kingdom?**



International Press Foundation  
[www.the-ipf.com](http://www.the-ipf.com)

Published on:  
8 March 2017

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## International Press Foundation

The International Press Foundation (IPF) empowers the next generation of journalists to report on the biggest social issues of our time.

With contributors from all around the world, we provide a platform for young people to shine a light on the stories that they think should make it onto the news agenda. We work with those aged 16-30 to train them to effectively tell stories from their countries by giving them the tools they need to flourish as journalists.

Through the IPF, young people are given the chance to practice real-world journalism, as well as highlight important stories from around the world that may have been overlooked by mainstream media. In a world where the media is run by a select group of people, the IPF is here to put the power back in young people's hands.

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**Every piece of good journalism can make an impact in the real world. That is the message we intend to give our young contributors through their work with us - their journalism can make a difference.**

- Priyanka Mogul, Editor-in-Chief

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## Introduction

To explore the challenges experienced by young women in politics, the IPF created a survey that was open to everyone living in the UK. People of all ages, genders and professions were encouraged to respond to the survey and more than 140 responses were received in a period of two weeks during February 2017.

By opening up the survey to everyone living in the UK, the IPF hoped to gain a better understanding into how different groups of people perceive the challenges for women in UK politics. The research analysed views across a range of age groups, as well as the difference between male respondents and female respondents - determining how the issue was perceived differently by gender.

The majority of responses received were from those aged 18 to 30, which is the IPF's core target audience. In addition, 85% of our respondents were female, allowing us to explore this issue primarily from the perspective of young women in the UK.

Some interesting results are revealed through this research:

- 91% of respondents said that they voted in the last general election or would have voted had they been eligible to do so, indicating responses from those who are politically active.
  - Only 8% of female respondents said they were an aspiring politician, despite 65% of them saying they are interested in politics.
  - As much as 18% of female respondents said they were not interested in politics, compared to only 7% of male respondents.
  - Nearly 70% of male and female respondents said social media trolling is one of the leading challenges for women in UK politics.
  - 88% of respondents, male and female, agreed that it is more challenging for women to enter a career in politics than for men.
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## Background/What we already know

In February 2017, Labour MP Diane Abbott said that misogyny and abuse suffered by female MPs is putting young women off entering politics. However, she isn't the first British politician to point this out. Jess Phillips, Yvette Cooper and Maria Miller have all spoken out about the issue.

Despite now having a female Prime Minister, there are only [195 female MPs out of a total of 650](#) - this means women make up less than a third of MPs. According to [a briefing paper](#) produced by the House of Commons in February 2017, 191 female MPs were elected during the 2015 General Election, accounting for 29% of all MPs and only 26% of House of Lords members. This puts the UK 36th in the world for female representation, with [the Guardian pointing out](#) that this lies behind several countries in Latin America and Africa.

In November 2015, the House of Commons Administration Committee [published a study](#) with interviews with MPs on women's experience in Parliament. [Welcoming the research](#), David Natzler, Clerk of the House, said that the report had highlighted "practical issues which have the potential to affect gender representation in Parliament". He noted that the House Service takes the challenges female MPs face "very seriously" and that they would continue to explore how best to address these to "make Parliament a more gender-sensitive institution".

Writing about the effect these numbers could have on young women, [Abbott said](#): "Suppose that someone had told me back then that 30 years on I would be receiving stuff like this: 'Pathetic useless fat black piece of shit Abbott. Just a piece of pig shit pond slime who should be fucking hung (if they could find a tree big enough to take the fat bitch's weight)'. I think that even the young, fearless Diane Abbott might have paused for thought.

"This is an issue for all women in the public space, and it is particularly an issue for those of us who would like to see more young women involved in political activity and debate in the wider society."

In 2014, Jacqui Briggs, Head of Political Sciences at the University of Lincoln, noted that young women (aged 18-24) are less likely to take part in elections than their male counterparts. Her article for [the Democratic Audit](#) argued that politicians must address issues that affect women's lives, including the gender pay gap and domestic violence, in order to prove to young women that politics is relevant to them.

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## Methodology & limits in research

The survey was conducted through the digital platform SurveyMonkey. The IPF team identified a number of limitations with this research when analysing the data obtained.

### 1. Limits on SurveyMonkey

A “Basic” account on SurveyMonkey allows users to collect an unlimited number of responses, however, only 100 responses can be viewed. In order to view all responses to the survey, the IPF would have to upgrade its SurveyMonkey account to a “Pro” plan. Due to financial restrictions of being a voluntary platform, the IPF was unable to do so and, therefore unable to analyse responses after the 100 mark.

Based on this cap, the IPF stopped advertising the survey after 100 responses had been collected. Had there not been a financial restriction, more responses could have been collected and analysed for this research. Due to this limitation, it can be concluded that the research is a generalisation of challenges faced by young women in UK politics. However, it does hope to inform people on certain reasons why some young women decide not to pursue a political career.

A “Basic” account on SurveyMonkey also limits the number of survey questions to ten. This prevented us from digging deeper into other issues relating to challenges for women in UK politics.

### 2. Target respondents

It has already been noted that the majority of respondents were female (85%). An explanation for this could be that most men who came across the research question (‘What are the challenges for women in UK politics?’) did not perceive it as a problem that concerned them. This could have resulted in some men choosing not to participate in the survey.

An additional explanation for the lack of male participants could also lie in the fact that 99% of the IPF team are female and, consequently, the survey reached a majority of female peers. The “conceptual tools”, as Denscombe (1998) puts it, used for the purpose of this research were not “neutral or passive instruments of discovery” (Denscombe, 1998).

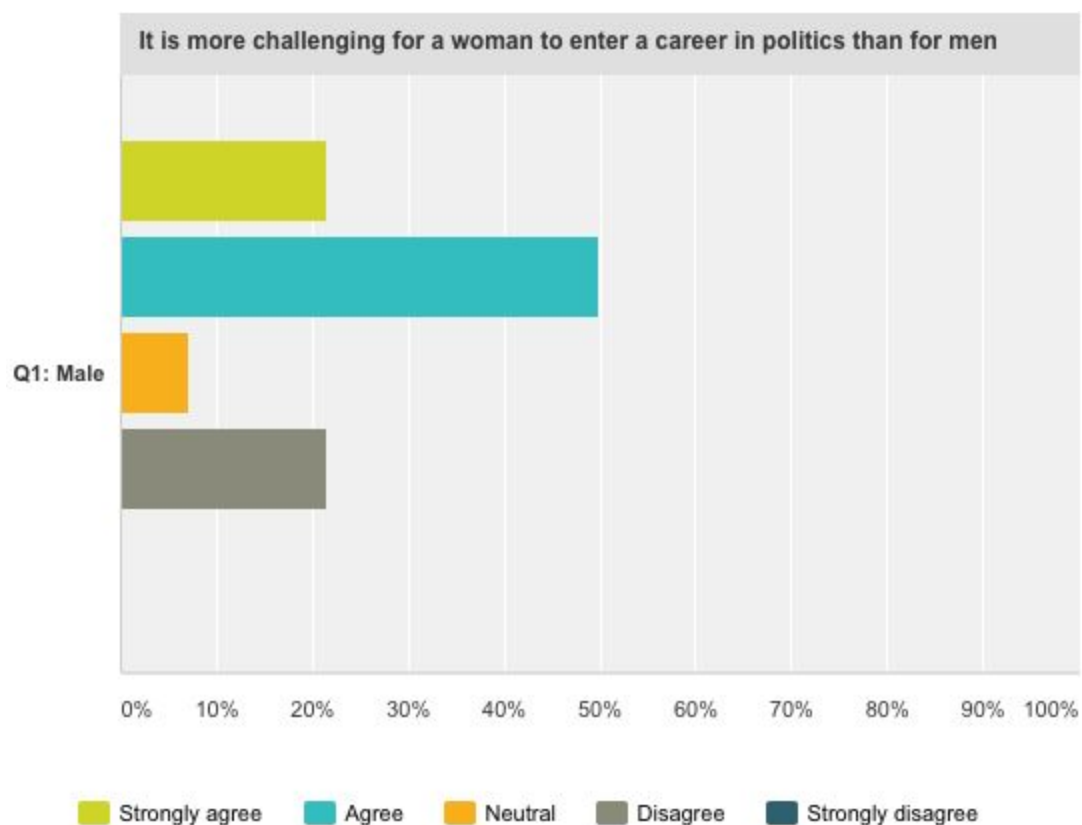
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## Findings

### 1. Young male respondents aware of most of the challenges faced by women in politics

The survey revealed that young men are mostly aware of the challenges faced by women pursuing a career in politics, with 50% of agreeing that it is more challenging for women to follow this career path and 21% strongly agreeing with the statement.



In particular, most young men believed that social media trolling (79%) and a focus on clothing (70%) were issues that held aspiring female politicians back. In addition, 50% of young male respondents said that a lack of female role models could also contribute to young women being reluctant to enter a political career.

While the above statistics showed that young men are becoming more aware of the challenges their female peers face, other findings showed that they were less aware about other challenges faced by women in politics. Only 35% of young men believed maintaining a “home/work

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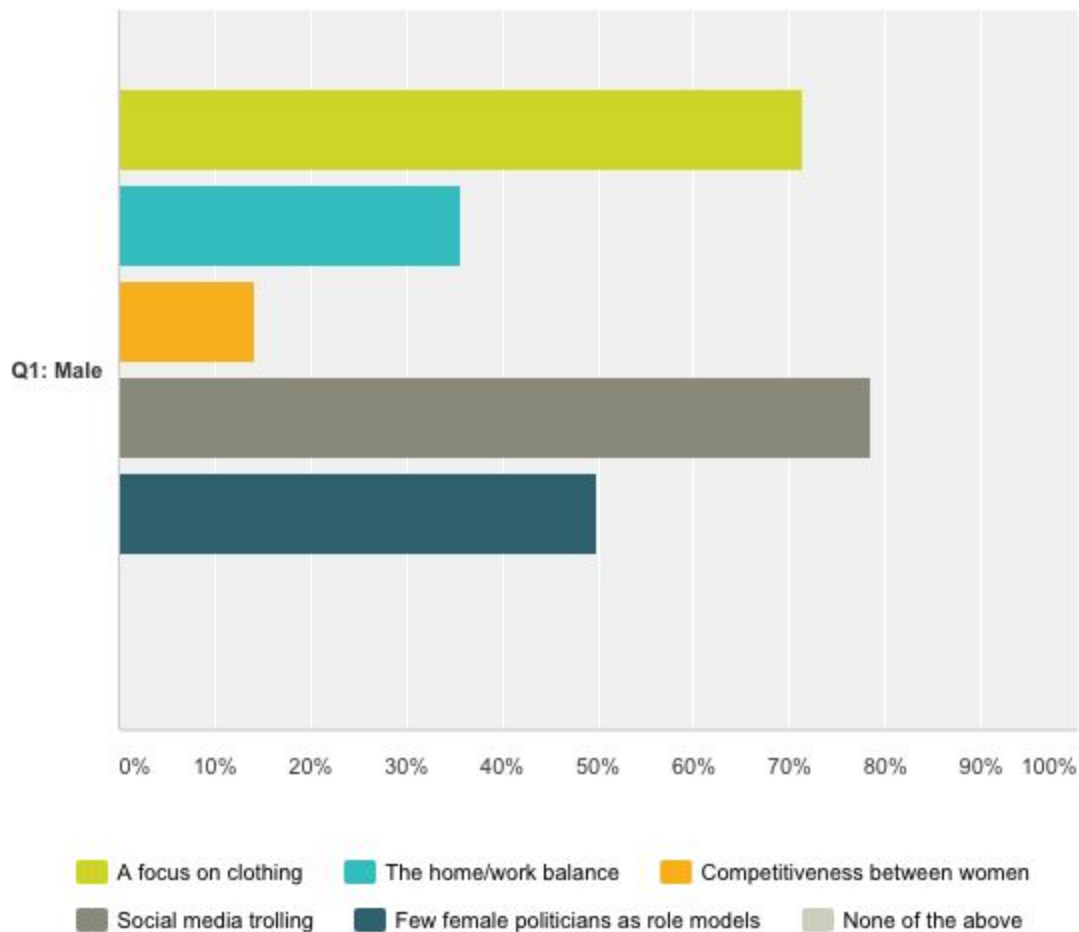


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balance” is a challenge to women, while only 14% acknowledged competitiveness between women as an issue for females.

### Which of the following do you think pose a challenge to women in politics? (tick all that apply)

Answered: 14 Skipped: 0



These results could be attributed to the fact that male respondents, having never been in the shoes of their female peers, are unaware of the reality of living as a woman. The same was noted in a question about women wishing to enter politics having less family support than men. None of the male respondents “strongly agreed” with this statement and 43% of male respondents chose to stay neutral.

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While this could provide further proof that men had not been fully informed about the challenges faced by women in politics, it could also be attributed to the fact that male respondents chose to look at the scenario from a personal standpoint and, perhaps, assumed that since they would support their female family members who wished to follow a career in politics, it would also be the case in other families.

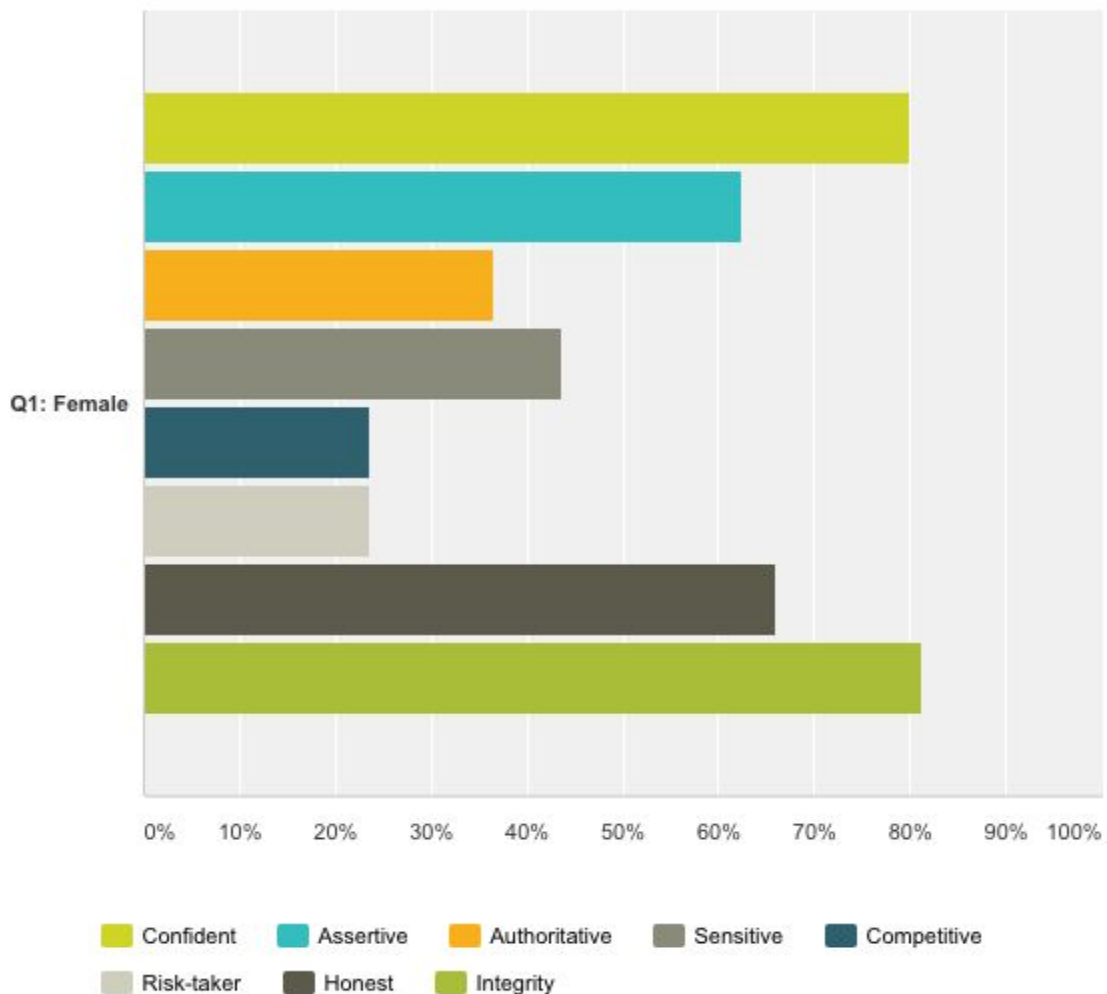
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## 2. Young women do not think they have the “essential traits” they need to become politicians

When asked what personality traits were essential in a political career, female respondents put integrity (81%), confidence (80%), honesty (66%) and assertiveness (62%) on the top of the list. But when asked if they believed they have those traits, young women’s answers revealed interesting information about why they might hold themselves back from a career in politics.

### Which of the following traits do you think are essential to those seeking a career in politics? (tick all that apply)

Answered: 85 Skipped: 0

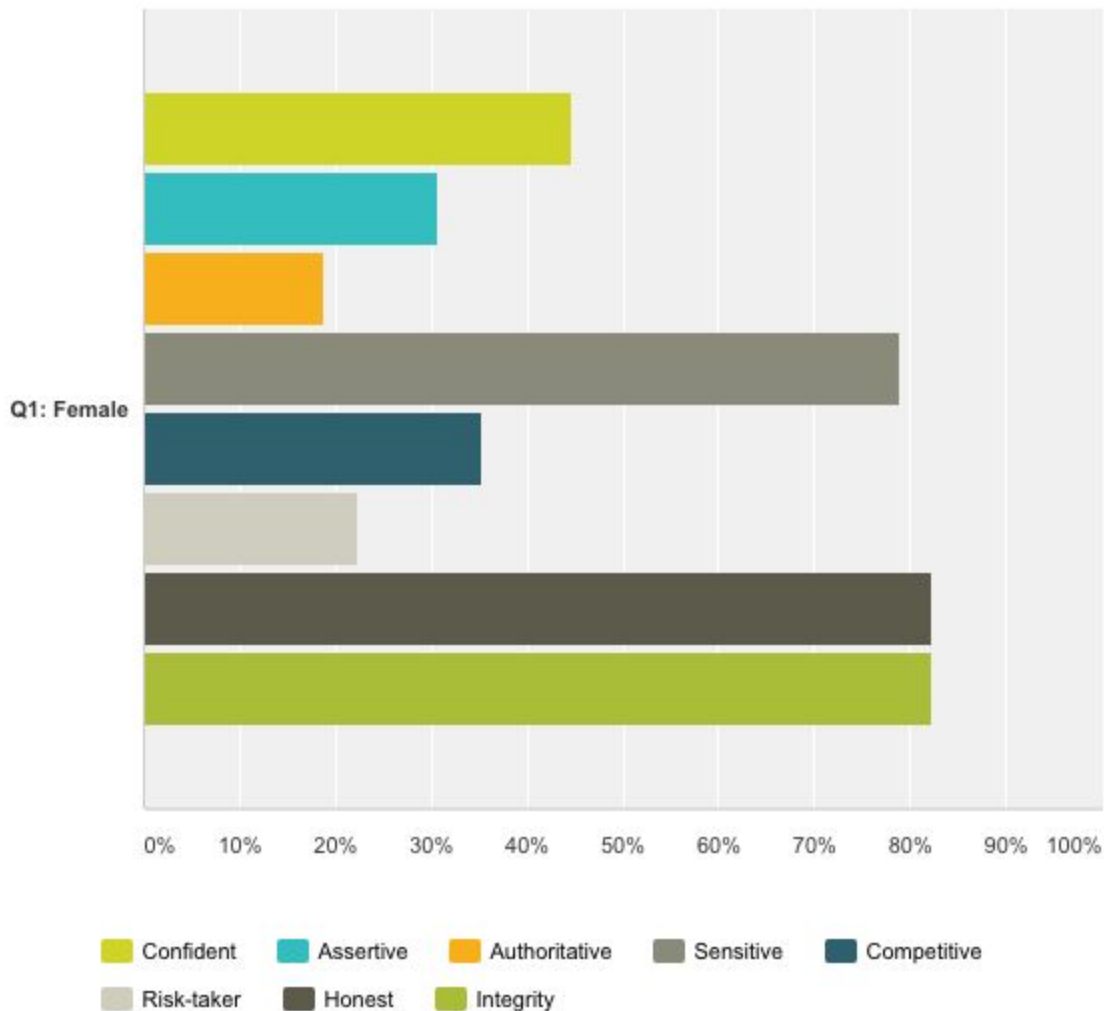


While most women believed they possess integrity (82%) and honesty (66%), only 45% saw themselves as confident and only 31% believed they could be assertive, both of which were

marked as important traits to having career in politics. Instead, most women believed that they were sensitive (79%), something that less than half of them (44%) believed to be an essential trait in the political world.

### Which of these traits do you think you possess? (tick all that apply)

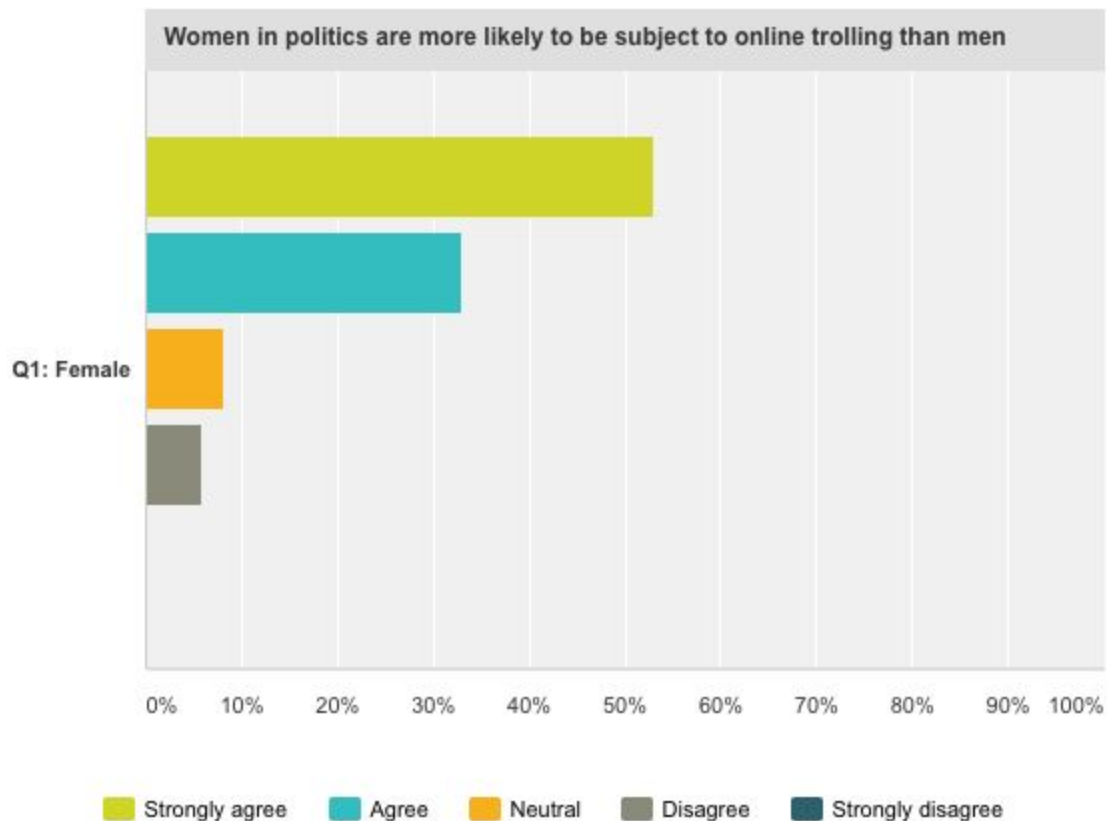
Answered: 85 Skipped: 0



It is worth comparing them with the male respondents' trends. While all male participants considered confidence essential in the pursuit of a career in politics, only 57% believed they possessed this trait themselves. Similarly, while 78% of male respondents considered assertiveness important, only 42% saw the trait in themselves. These results could indicate that even young men do not see themselves as having the right set of traits to become politicians.

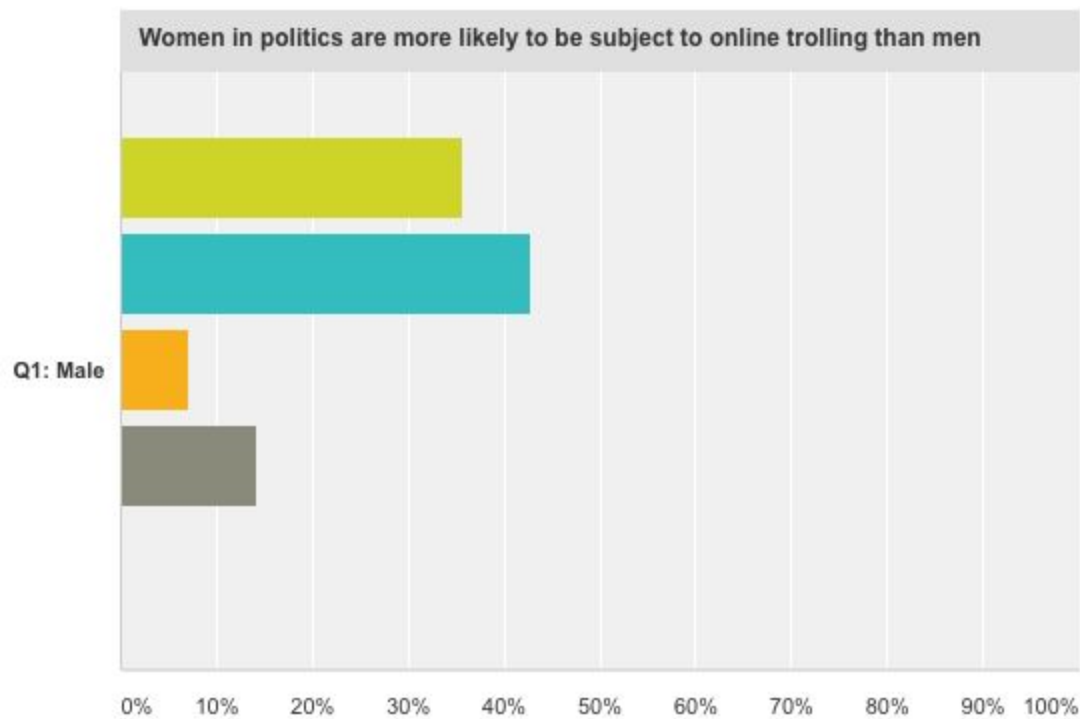
### 3. Women scrutinised in politics through social media trolling

Nearly 90% of female respondents noted that women are put under a microscope more than their male counterparts. While almost half of male respondents (43%) agreed with this statement as well, a large percentage (36%) chose to stay neutral.



However, when it came to the social media trolling of women in politics, even male respondents agreed that this was a problem. A total of 86% of female respondents noted that women in politics are more likely to be subject to social media trolling than men. More than 60% of their male counterparts agreed, with only 7% of men choosing to stay neutral on the topic.

The almost unanimous agreement on social media trolling of women in politics could be a reflection of the emphasis national media has placed on the issue in recent months. The killing of Labour MP Jo Cox in June 2016 prompted a [nationwide debate on the topic](#), with people pointing out that more needs to be done about violence directed towards female MPs online. That same month, Labour MP Tulip Siddiq said female MPs should receive training to deal with online trolling and noted that many female MPs who are the target of online abuse had [formed an unofficial support group](#) in the House of Commons.



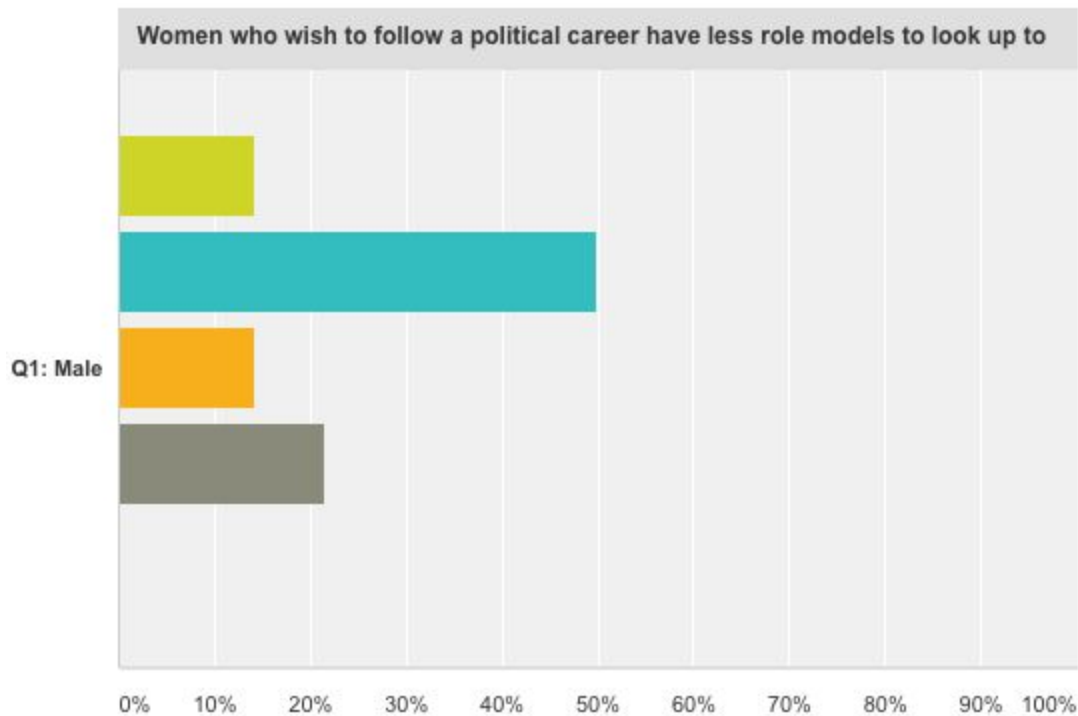
Other challenges were also raised by both men and women, illustrating how women can be scrutinised more than their male counterparts in politics. More than 70% of male respondents believe there is too much focus on clothing of female politicians, with one male respondent even noting in the comments that voters can be “sexist”.

In early 2017, British Prime Minister Theresa May was criticised by fellow Conservative Party MP Nicky Morgan for wearing leather trousers costing nearly £1,000. This instance not only highlighted the focus on female politician’s clothing, but the competitiveness between some women that still poses as a challenge. Others were quick to point out that no one had commented on the price of David Cameron’s suits when he was Prime Minister. These factors could have a large influence on why women choose not to enter a career in politics, with a fear that she will be judged on her clothing rather than her policies.

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#### 4. Lack of female role models affects young women’s participation in politics

More than half of female and male respondents agreed that women have less political role models to look up to in comparison to men. Nearly 40% of women and 35% of men “strongly agreed” with the statement, while 42% of women and 43% of men agreed with the notion.



This highlights the fact that the UK lacks female political leaders across all the major parties. Significantly, one male respondent noted that political parties somewhat contradict their “stance” by not having more female MPs. In particular, the male respondent suggested the Liberal Democrats appear to provide more equal opportunities for women, while the Labour Party, a “modern” and “liberal” party, is yet to have a female leader.

According to [UK Political Info](#), 101 out of 230 Labour MPs are female, 70 out of 331 Conservative MPs are female, 20 out of 56 Scottish National Party MPs are female, while only 5 out of 32 MPs in the remaining parties are female. The current UK prime minister is only the second female prime minister in British history, compared to [73 male prime ministers](#) since 1721.

The survey results could indicate that, had there been more female leaders throughout British history, more women would see themselves in a political career.

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## Conclusion

It is encouraging to note that male respondents seem to be aware of most of the challenges faced by women in politics. Although the number of men who responded to the survey was not significant and could be representative of only a certain group of men in the UK, it raises questions about why men might be reluctant to get involved in the discussion.

However, the focus of the research lies on the young women who responded to the survey. Their responses reveal that young women who are politically engaged are still shying away from entering a career in politics and show that they have been let down through a number of ways:

1. Young women have been made to believe that they do not have the traits they require to enter the world of politics.
2. Young women are backing away from a career where the social media trolling of women has become all too frequent.
3. Young women are discouraged by the fact that they are not represented by enough female MPs.
4. Intense scrutiny of women on trivial matters such as their clothing, which is often greatly in contrast with their male counterparts.

### **Recommendations:**

1. The IPF should repeat this research annually for ongoing monitoring about the challenges young women face in UK politics and make this research accessible to relevant organisations and political parties.
  2. The IPF must attempt to engage more young men in the debate on challenges for young women in UK politics.
  3. UK Parliament must go ahead with their work on tackling the social media trolling of female politicians.
  4. Members of UK Parliament must address the issue of lack of role models for young women who are aspiring politicians.
  5. Government bodies could consider launching a campaign to challenge what is perceived to be the most desired leadership traits.
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