Library Award: Reflective Essay

I wrote my thesis for the Department of Government and Politics Honors Program. The paper investigated female political leadership in democracies through the lens of country and leader level indicators, a topic inspired by the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election and research conducted by Dr. Sarah Croco. I have always been interested in women in politics and the 2016 election encouraged me to think about what it takes for a woman to be elected president. I also worked briefly as a research assistant for Dr. Croco; at the time, she was building a dataset about the prior experience of world leaders. This work made me curious about whether male and female leaders have different patterns of experience before entering top political office. Thus, I decided to research the structural and cultural characteristics seen in countries that elect female executives, as well as the prior experience of these leaders.

My thesis advisor for this project was Dr. Kathleen Cunningham; she was an indispensable resource during the research and writing process. After I presented her with my initial ideas, she pointed me towards relevant literature and data, which shaped my analytical approach and understanding of the topic. She also encouraged me to add several variables to my dataset; this made the analysis more interesting and thorough. Her experience in research methodology was invaluable and elevated the quality of my research and analysis.

I found my sources through the UMD Library website and Google Scholar. First, I searched for general information using books from the library. Later, as my research became more specific, I found articles through Google Scholar, which I then accessed through the library. I would search for keywords and experts in the field. I also looked within relevant journals, including *Politics & Gender* and the *Journal of Women, Politics, and Policy*. When I found a useful article or book, I would follow the bibliographical path, looking at the sources it cited and the articles that cited it. Besides journal articles and books, the other major sources I used were online datasets. These included the World Bank Development Indicators, the Archigos Dataset, and the Uppsala Conflict Data Program. My thesis advisor pointed me towards the best places to look for data, which acted as the foundation for the quantitative analysis I later conducted.

I selected and evaluated my sources based on several key criteria. The first was relevancy. The body of literature focused on female executives is not extensive, so I had to find articles on other topics that could be connected to my research (for example, women in the legislature). The second criteria was credibility, which I ensured by using reputable, peer-reviewed journals. Finally, I considered whether the author's argument was supported or contradicted by other sources and looked into any counterarguments I found. I wanted my literature review to showcase the wide range of existing research.

The research process taught me several key lessons. The first was patience. It was difficult to find relevant information; I combed through article after article that failed to advance my research before finding one that did. The same patience was necessary when conducting my data analysis. It took months to collect data; I had more than 3000 observations for the country-level analysis and approximately 100 for the leader analysis. Finding and recording the information was tedious, but necessary. The second lesson was creativity. I would find dead ends in the literature; I would want to learn more about a topic, but discover that little or no relevant research had been published. This meant that I had to be creative about looking for information and expand my research out of the field of political science. I would also get frustrated when data I wanted to use did not exist. For example, I wanted to include female workforce participation in

my country-level analysis; however, this data is inconsistently collected across both time and space. I had to figure out acceptable proxy variables and sources for those variables. These lessons will be useful in my future academic and professional endeavors. I learned that it is very important to be flexible and to look for creative solutions; research is about broadening understanding and knowledge, which takes time and patience.

Finally, reflecting on my research experience, I would take a more cross-disciplinary approach from the start. I knew I had to be creative within the political science literature due to the lack of research on female executives. However, it was only at the end of my research process that I delved into the psychology related to female leadership. It was fascinating, and had I found it sooner, it could have added another interesting dimension to my data analysis. I also should have looked into the fields of public administration and public policy, which contain interesting research about women in government that I was not aware of until later. I would also have consulted with other professors earlier. My thesis advisor was an incredible resource; however, during my thesis defense, the professors on my committee brought up interesting suggestions. This demonstrated that it is best to have as much expert input as possible early in the research process.

Overall, the UMD Library is an incredible resource that improved and eased my research process. One way that I think the library could improve would be to give each student a small research "stipend," perhaps $100 per year. I found that I could access most of the articles that I wanted; either they were open-access or were provided through the UMD Library. However, there were some that I would have liked to read, but was not willing to pay for. Students could use the stipend to purchase articles for their research that are locked behind a paywall. A librarian could approve each purchase to ensure its relevancy and that the student did not already have access. In conclusion, writing this thesis was an incredible learning experience that improved the way I approach and conduct the research process.