# In a world with more emergencies: We need more women leaders

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Are woman leaders more effective in the ongoing disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic? A recent rigorous comparison of Covid-19 deaths across the 50 states of the US compared the leadership of male and female Governors. Researchers Kayla Sergent and Alexander Stajkovic found compelling differences in deaths across states. States lucky enough to have a woman leading them when a state-wide stay at home order was made had hundreds of deaths (to 5 April 2020), those led by males averaged over 4,000 deaths.

As well as Governor gender, the state’s mandate to use face masks and hospital treatment capacity was significantly related to state deaths.

Most of us have learned to be (somewhat) unbiased about the role of gender in leadership, as well as striving not to think of particular jobs as ‘men’s work’ or ‘women’s work’. It is a bit of a puzzle to see gender differences in leader’s effectiveness emerging so clearly. Sergent and Stajkovic analysed transcripts of Governors’ briefings (1.4 million words of them) to find what it was about the female Governors communications that contributed to the difference in health outcomes.

The women leaders showed more empathy. This was shown in two distinct ways. These leaders demonstrated greater awareness of the feelings of others (“I know that…people are feeling squirrelly from being at home so much with their family. I know that people are worried about getting a job so they can pay their bills…I have these same fears”; Governor Gretchen Whitmer, 17 April 2020).

And these leaders were more likely to pitch their emotional response in a way that matched the welfare of others (“resources are available to you, whether it be economic or mental health or labor employment”; Governor Krisi Noem, 6 April 2020).

The women leaders communicated significantly more confidence (“I am confident that by working together and sharing our best ideas, we will be much, much more likely to get it right for the citizens of our state”; Governor Gina Raimondo, 13 April 2020).

New Zealand was well-positioned when Covid-19 flew in. Jacinda Ardern had already delivered empathy – after the Christchurch massacre and again, in response to the Whakaari (White Island) injuries and deaths.

But it almost didn’t happen. Jacinda Ardern was chosen after the failure of four men to lead Labour to victory. On the other side, three male National leaders had failed to pull their party out of the wasteland of Opposition before colleagues saw Judith Collin’s potential to win, or at least not lose too badly.

Why was it hard for the two leading parties to put a woman into leadership? I compared both Arden and Collins with their less successful male predecessors, and then with each other.

Early and significant political exposure, such as spokesperson roles differentiated both Ardern and Collins from their less successful male predecessors. Ardern also had a significant career in politics before being elected and beginning her rise to leadership.

Putting the two women leaders up against each other; Collins has more tertiary qualifications, Ardern more political training. Collins established a legal reputation, including leadership roles in Law Societies, Ardern went directly into politics. Early on both women achieved recognition as parliamentary spokespersons.

These factors give indications about how potential politicians can develop their careers. And how their parties can help them. This is a tiny sample, and so prone to the distorting effects of unique talents. But assuming the success of these politicians provides some clues, here are some suggestions.

For parties, give young talents early opportunities. That puts pressure on those picking such emerging talent. Those chosen for early opportunities must have the right stuff, rather than a sense of entitlement, ruthless ambition, good family connections and the other attributes often confused with substantive talent.

Providing early opportunities has several advantages.

Early political experience gives people the chance to check out the tough reality of political work. Any job, but especially politics, comes with really hard parts. The chance to try out the job before buying into it helps those with political aspirations to test out the whole package. Not just the glitz, schmoozing, doing good or other aspects that might have surface appeal but also the tough parts.

A massive advantage of providing early opportunities is that decision-makers get to see the person performing, and particularly in roles where arrogance and meanness don’t work. Politics is never a one-woman or one-man show. Stakeholders have to be worked with, support crew encouraged, colleagues, engaged. Can this potential candidate work through such issues?

Objective observation of how the person does on the job provides behavioural evidence to guide decisions about who gets what chances. Relying on a candidate selection interview alone is more prone to error than a more comprehensive sample of behaviour provided by on the job trials, or even interactive simulations of some important parts of the candidate role.

Another benefit of providing relevant political experience is that those with the inclination learn some of the skills of politicking – debating, the ‘modest brag’ of kiwi-style self-promotion, building coalitions and achieving results through successful negotiation and collaboration.

The research into US governors indicates that the confident, empathetic behaviour of women leaders helps them to help their people, bringing them along with the changes required in the crisis of a pandemic. This resonates with Kiwis; these are qualities that Jacinda Ardern has brought to our generally successful response to Covid-19.

Ardern’s empathy is an aspect of what psychologists describe as her ‘agreeableness’. This is one of the five fundamental personality traits. Typically, male, populist leaders are low in this area. Such leaders are more competitive, looking to beat the others, and inclined to set up scapegoats that they can claim they are attacking and beating on behalf of their followers. New Zealand has not yet achieved our version of Donald Trump (the archetypal disagreeable politician), though some have tried to bring a bit of point-scoring or blaming into the pandemic infected political world.

In the near future, we will face the threat of climate change and further pandemics requiring significant public behaviour change. This escalates the priority of identifying and developing the empathetic leaders, including women leaders, capable of encouraging such change across communities.

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