ASIA 18.06.2020 | Jennifer Curtin

Will Jacinda Ardern's popularity endure?

Ardern's Covid-19 response has won praise at home and abroad. But challenges for her brand of social democracy remain

Jacinda Ardern recently became the most popular prime minister that New Zealand has seen in recent memory. Or at least since systematic opinion polling first began in New Zealand (which was in the 1970s). It is certainly the case that she has won over the hearts and minds of many New Zealanders since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. For although the international media have often hailed Ardern as an inspirational leader, her personal popularity, and that of her centre-left Labor party, has been more tempered.

A Colmar Brunton poll from November 2019, had Ardern's preferred prime minister ratings as significantly higher than her opponent's (36 per cent compared to 10 per cent), but the Labor Party's support stood at 39 per cent support, up only 2 points from the party's 2017 election result, while support for the opposition centre-right National Party was at 46 per cent. By February 2020, little had changed; Ardern's personal popularity had increased by six points and Labor had gained an additional two points, but support for the opposition remained firm. Commentators were claiming the September 2020 general election was too close to call.

Fast forward through March, April and May, and the associated global chaos that came with Covid-19, to Colmar Brunton's first pandemic-period opinion poll, with headlines reporting a seismic shift in the political landscape. Labor's support was up 18 points to 59 per cent, National's had dropped 17 points to 29 per cent. And 63 per cent of respondents rated Jacinda Ardern as their preferred prime minister. This surpassed the 59 per cent achieved by the popular former National Prime Minister John Key, in September 2011.

One week later, according to an IPSOS poll of 1000 respondents, the Labor Party was seen as the party most capable of managing 18 of the

country's 20 key issues. The top six concerns were the economy, unemployment, housing, healthcare, poverty and inflation, and on each of these items, (and 9 others) Labor scored significant increases in their capability rankings.

Jacinda Ardern's political trajectory

In part this can be attributed to the government's handling of Covid-19, not just in terms of the policy decisions taken, but also in the way Jacinda Ardern communicated the necessity for New Zealand's lockdown. Her rhetorical approach was a mix of warm, sometimes witty, calm determination that called on New Zealanders to be kind, to 'unite', to 'Stay home and Stay safe' and to create a small 'bubble' of loved ones to prevent community transmission. She conveyed these messages formally, with the Director General of Health, daily at 1pm on mainstream media, and in more conversational tones through Facebook and Instagram. Hundreds of thousands of New Zealanders tuned in, almost daily, to catch her updates.

Throughout all of this, her rhetorical approach has emphasised the importance of kindness and care for both current and future generations, in both the process and outputs of governing.

The comparative success of New Zealand and some other countries with women leaders, has led to increased media speculation that perhaps women have been better at managing this crisis than their male counterparts, for a range of reasons. One I have argued for elsewhere, is the halo effect caused by some of the world's high profile male leaders who have proved themselves so inept.

However, in the case of New Zealand, the focus on Ardern's Covid-19 leadership overlooks her cumulative record as prime minister, including the range of challenges she has faced compared to prime ministers in the past. Specifically, in 2017 she pulled a coalition together as the second placed party (unheard of in New Zealand's version of the German MMP system) with both a populist conservative party and the Green party, a politically unusual grouping that has held together.

In 2018, Ardern became the second woman in the world to have had a baby while holding the office of prime minister, having previously fended off some male commentators disdain for combining motherhood and political leadership. She went on to become the first leader to have her baby with her at the United Nations General Assembly. In 2019, she responded with resolve and compassion in the wake of the Christchurch mosque attacks and the lethal volcanic explosion on Whakaari (White Island).

Social democracy for the 21st century? Not yet!

Throughout all of this, her rhetorical approach has emphasised the importance of kindness and care for both current and future generations, in both the process and outputs of governing. She ensured Child Poverty Reduction targets were written into legislation; she has empowered her Minister of Finance to shift New Zealand's budgeting system to one that focuses on wellbeing rather than traditional definitions and measures of growth; and, she has enabled her coalition partners to advance policy initiatives in regional development and climate change.

Initially there was a lot of talk of 'transformation' but ultimately, the desire to be seen as fiscally 'responsible' and the constraints of sharing power has meant that Ardern's government has not yet reinvented social democracy for the 21st century. The realities of a three year term, determinedly low levels of business confidence and a conservative approach to much-needed increases in welfare benefits and fair pay agreements, meant that, at the beginning of 2020, a solid minority of voters on the right and the left remained unsure about whether the Ardern-led government deserved a second term.

Nevertheless, with less than 100 days until the election, and a cushion of around 10 per cent, Ardern looks to be in a strong position to form government after the polls close on 19 September.

But then Covid-19 arrived and Ardern's earlier crash courses in crisis management, as well as her innate ability to lead and communicate with calm resolve, came to the rescue. This country of five million rallied around her government's decision to lockdown and to take a slow, staged return to some kind of normal, although borders remain closed. The National Party has changed its leader, in an effort to claw back some of their supporters, as yet with minimal effect. The right-wing trolls are continuing their anti-Ardern campaigns on social media with derogatory hashtags and expressing more than a hint of horror that a progressive young woman continues to be a beacon of hope internationally on climate change, tolerance of diversity and inequality, as well as pandemic management.

Less than 100 days until the election

However, despite her popularity, New Zealanders are unlikely to hand Ardern a majority government in the September election. Many New

Zealanders split their vote across two parties, to ensure there are some checks on executive power. Moreover, the OECD's latest predictions are that the economic consequences of our lockdown measures will be severe and long lasting. With unemployment rates expected to rise significantly over the coming months, support for Labor may prove fragile. On the other hand, the government used its May 2020 Budget to establish a $NZ50bn Covid-19 Response and Recovery Fund, with a considerable proportion of the $30bn already allocated going to physical infrastructure projects and apprenticeships in trades.

In this sense, the Ardern-led government looks a little like the old social democracy – a party representing the aspirations of working class men. Not surprisingly, there have been loud calls for a gender lens to be applied to the allocation of the $20bn still left to be spent. There is a growing expectation from women's groups that Jacinda Ardern should use her political capital to substantively advance the material wellbeing of women post-Covid19, especially since women made up the majority of essential workers. Winning the women's vote has also proved important to Labor's success in the past.

Nevertheless, with less than 100 days until the election, and a cushion of around 10 per cent, Ardern looks to be in a strong position to form a government after the polls close on 19 September. Indeed, this is now Labor's election to lose. Whether their win will result in a more progressive and inclusive social democratic image for New Zealand society post-Covid19 remains to be seen.



Jennifer Curtin
Auckland

Jennifer Curtin is a Professor of Politics and Public Policy at the University of Auckland, New Zealand.