

Leadership trait analysis (LTA) of successful state leaders in COVID times: Tsai Ing-wen and Jacinda Ardern

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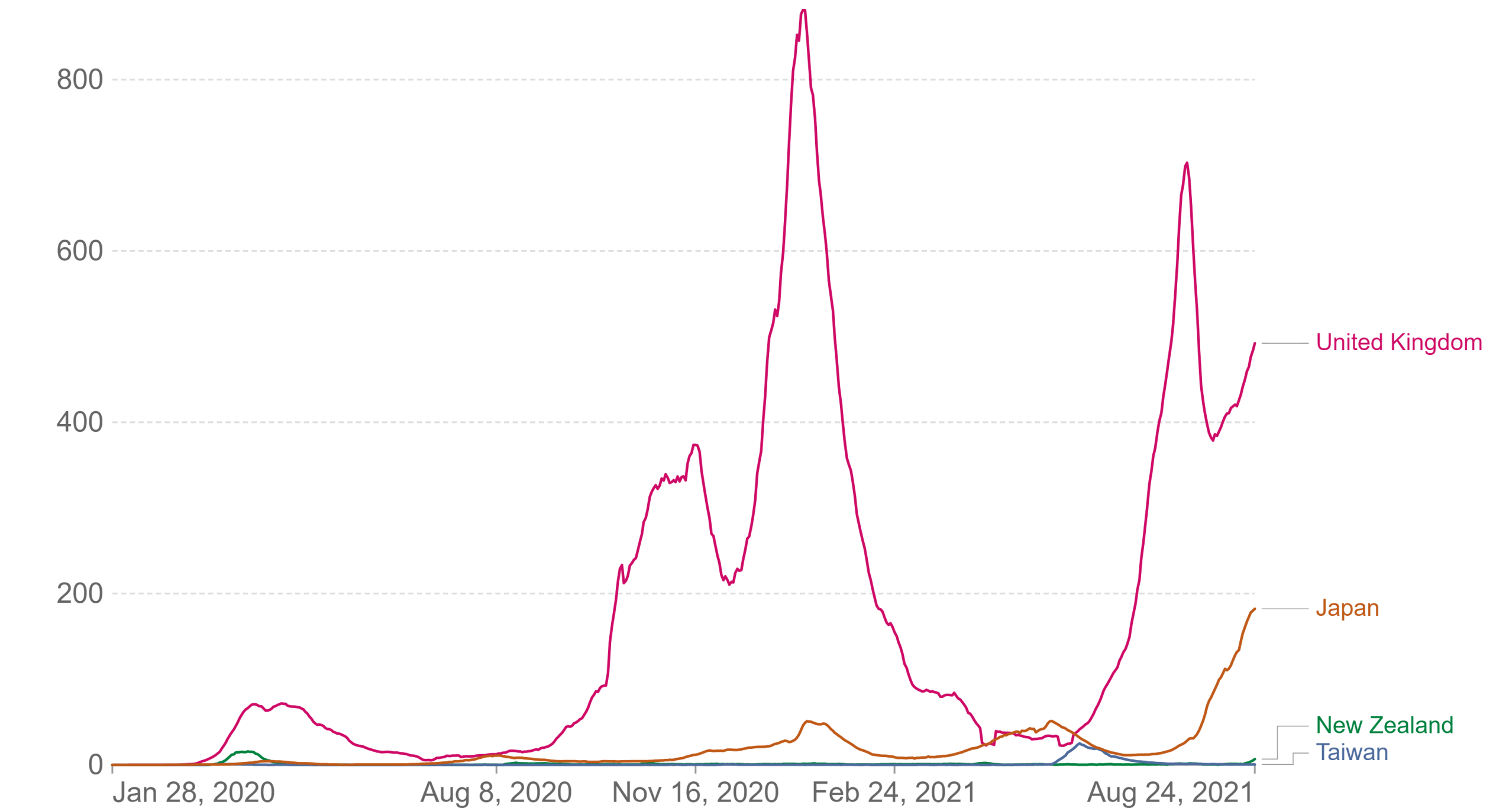
Introduction

Personal idiosyncrasies of decision makers is widely attributed as a key variable in determining the course of international relations - yet in the grander scheme of international events, it is often overlooked in the analysis of key events (Byman & Pollack, 2001). With the development and subsequent rollout of vaccines against the COVID-SARS-2 coronavirus underway, the international community has begun a new phase of managing the COVID-19 pandemic, shifting from reliance on socially-based non-pharmaceutical intervention (NPIs) to greater emphasis on mass vaccination as means of achieving herd immunity. It is therefore a good time to review the leadership traits of world leaders who have played key roles in combating the pandemic, and understand how these traits have correlated to their perceived successes and failures over the course of the pandemic.

Taiwan and New Zealand are two states that have adopted an elimination/ 'Zero-COVID' strategy, which has seen them achieving largely COVID-free environments and retaining a relatively normal way of life, following their first wave of outbreak - a timeframe within which the rest of the world grappled with multiple new waves of outbreak, infection rates growing with each subsequent wave, and large timeframes required to contain each outbreak (Fig. 1). In this project, we therefore regard **Tsai Ing-wen, President of Taiwan**, and **Jacinda Ardern, Prime Minister of New Zealand**, as our subjects of interest. Their shared leadership over economically developed liberal democracies that are, geographically, island states of small landmass limits the effects of confounding variables arising from systemic differences and geopolitical concerns that impact the extent to which their leadership traits influence their decision-making. We aim to see if any commonalities in behavioural and leadership style that facilitated their success can be found.

Fig. 1. Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases per million people

Shown is the rolling 7-day average. The number of confirmed cases is lower than the number of actual cases; the main reason for that is limited testing.



Source: John Hopkins University CSSE COVID-19 Data

Methodology

For this study, we used Levine and Young's (2014) software ProfilerPlus (version 7.3.13), which, through an automated analysis of speech and interview transcripts of leaders, generate scores for each of the seven traits based on Hermann's (2003) framework of LTA: Belief in ability to control events (**BACE**), Need for power (**PWR**), Self-confidence (**SC**), Conceptual complexity (**CC**), Task focus (**TASK**), In-group bias (**IGB**), and Distrust of others (**DIS**). Results of these seven traits, used in conjunction, can aid us in making the following conclusions: whether a leader is a **constraint challenger or constraint respecter**; their **openness to contextual information**; their **motivation for seeking office**; and their **motivation towards the world**.

Based on our aim and our understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic as a fast-evolving public health crisis that demanded receptiveness for adequate management, this study hypothesised that Tsai and Ardern will:

- Share traits beyond the average range, which are critical for the facilitation of successful COVID-19 management against their peers
- Demonstrate the following traits: high CC, high TASK, openness to information, and low distrust

Results and Analysis

Based on Tsai's results, her relatively higher PWR category against BACE suggests that she is a **constraint challenger**, but often via less direct actions and on the condition that she would be less accountable.

She also tends to be **closed to contextual information**, as indicated by her SC being higher than her CC.

Her motivation for seeking office is driven by both a **need to solve problems** and **building relationships**, as a result of her average score in TASK.

Her motivation towards the world is focused on **taking advantage of opportunities and building relations, while remaining vigilant**, due to a stronger DIS over IGB.

Table 1. LTA Results of Tsai and Ardern, generated by Profiler Plus

Tsai's category	Tsai's score	Trait (World leaders' mean)	Ardern's score	Ardern's category
Average	0.34	BACE (0.35)	0.36	Average
Lean high	0.29	PWR (0.26)	0.24	Average
High	0.46	SC (0.36)	0.41	Lean high
Average	0.61	CC (0.59)	0.6	Average
Average	0.65	TASK (0.63)	0.71	High
Average	0.17	IGB (0.15)	0.09	Low
High	0.2	DIS (0.13)	0.16	Lean high

For Ardern, a further analysis reveal a greater distance in her BACE score and its mean, compared to her PWR score and its mean. This suggests that Ardern is a **constraint challenger** - though one that is willing to challenge openly, at the expense of being potentially less successful. Her relatively stronger sense of SC than CC suggests that she also tends to be **closed to contextual information**.

Her motivation for seeking office is to be driven by a **need to solve problems**, as a result of her high TASK.

Her motivation towards the world is focused on **taking advantage of opportunities and building relations, while remaining vigilant**, due to a stronger DIS over IGB.

Conclusion

Our results in this study suggest that Tsai and Ardern are state leaders with generally average personality traits. With each leader demonstrating only 2 traits beyond the average range out of the 7 (since lean high and lean low categories belong to the average range), we conclude that, despite the unique nature of their success, this success is not facilitated by a state leader who demonstrates particularly strong or weak tendencies for the traits analysed - as such, this success is attainable by most leaders.

And despite their generally similar trait patterns, given they have by and large been categorised within the average range, where they demonstrated uniquely high or low trait categories, they were demonstrated for different traits. This therefore **refutes our first hypothesis**, suggesting that there is no singular leadership trait combination that guarantees success in COVID-management.

Our **second hypothesis** has also been **refuted**, on the basis that Tsai's LTA results did not meet any of our predictions, and Ardern meeting only our expectations of high TASK and low DIS. On examining other issues associated with COVID, it is plausible that, given the widespread misinformation throughout the pandemic which can give rise to potentially devastating results on a community and global level, their shared average CC and relatively closed attitude towards contextual information have been what enabled them to pick out reliable, accountable and valid information that inform their decision. Their presentation of this coherent leadership style also engendered trust in the public - with their initial success portrayed to be based on reliance of credible sources of information, general governmental competency and confidence in dealing with the situation, this continued limited receptiveness to contextual information may have been key to maintaining morale and support for the oft harsh policies they impose for the achievement of the success they found.

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