The public leadership research challenges of exploring the dimensions of COVID-19 responses

As we write this article, many countries around the world are in the midst of a second wave of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19 pandemic), with illnesses and deaths on the rise. There are now more than 50 million cases of COVID-19 globally and more than 1.254 million deaths attributable to the virus with fewer cases from the developing world. The most affected countries are advanced industrialized states primarily located in the Americas (US 1st and Brazil 8th) and Europe (France 3rd; Italy 4th; Poland 5th; UK 6th; Germany 7th and Spain 10th); and India, as the second most affected country, and Russia, currently sitting in ninth spot, round out the top 10 (Johns Hopkins University, 2020).

While the COVID-19 pandemic has not had a uniform impact, virtually every country in the world has been grappling to contain it for the better part of a year now. One of the reasons that some countries are struggling more than others to flatten the curve of this coronavirus outbreak can be correlated to the containment strategies that have been adopted. Different countries have been confronting this crisis in their own unique ways. The responses have been varied with a tension between the role of elected officials and appointed administrative officials. On the continuum of responsible leadership, has been the central role of public leaders and administrators (Holzer and Newbold, 2020). However, rather than any one nation responding to this crisis, the Council on Foreign Relations (2020) notes that the national and international dimensions of the pandemic are mutually reinforcing and cannot be considered in isolation, developing a compelling case that public leadership needs to facilitate active global engagements across nations in addressing pandemics.

To prevent the spread of the virus and minimize the loss of life, many governments resorted to enforced social distancing, which, at different points in time, led to a virtual shutdown of all non-essential economic activity. Public leaders, elected and appointed, have had to balance the serious financial and psychological ramifications on citizens as they attempted to cope with the resultant social isolation and the reduction in or complete loss of income. Leaders face tensions in balancing the concern about the health and safety of the public with a recognition that public opinion data are indicating that the financial strain from COVID-19 is an even greater concern; this holds true even for those who are not necessarily struggling to purchase food or pay their bills (Keeter, 2020; IPSOS, 2020).

While it would be a stretch to call the COVID-19 pandemic – and the ensuing response – unprecedented, very few societal or health events throughout human history have necessitated the range of leadership on a global scale as has been the case with this crisis. For leadership scholars, the implications are profound. The pandemic presents a richness of data from which to theorize about leadership and, more specifically, the leader–follower dynamic in times of crisis. The interdisciplinary challenges of COVID-19 (Callahan, 2020) call for public leadership scholars to look across not only the political and administrative dimensions but also public leadership from a range of disciplines and fields engaged in responding to the pandemic. The complexity of the COVID-19 response calls for more than leaders in epidemiology, medicine and health systems, to include public administration, sociology, political science, journalism, and other disciplines and professional fields. The complexity of the challenge outstrips the capacity of any one-dimensional approach.

Sadly, the picture that has emerged with respect to our global leadership capacity is sobering. Although there have been some prominent examples of effective and inspiring leadership during this crisis, it is troubling how widespread the public leadership failures
have been with respect to responding to this pandemic. On balance, the mortality data suggest that at a national level the leadership responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have ranged from abysmal to effective. The leadership failures in countries such as the United States, to initially identify, then to respond and prevent, the impact of health inequities from causing a disproportionate impact on people of colour is particularly noteworthy (Sharstein, 2020).

As ‘t Hart and Tummers (2019) note, public leadership comprises three distinct forms: political, administrative and civic. With respect to the COVID-19 pandemic, manifestations of political leadership have been the most palpable. This is not surprising since citizens look to and expect their presidents and prime ministers to lead (Peters and Helms, 2012), especially during a crisis (Boin and ‘t Hart, 2003). Politicians by and large have recognized that fact and political leaders at all levels of government – from presidents and prime ministers, to state governors and provincial premiers, to city mayors – have been front and centre during this crisis holding daily press conferences (at least in the early stages of the pandemic) to provide updates to the public on the efforts to contain the spread of the virus and to address the social and financial ramifications of this global pandemic.

However, it is at the political level where the public leadership failures have also been most glaring. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern of New Zealand has been widely recognized for her deft handling of the COVID-19 pandemic in that country (Wilson, 2020), but other political leaders, like President Donald Trump in the US (Mayer, 2020), Prime Minister Boris Johnson in the UK (Paton, 2020) and President Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (Barberia and Gómez, 2020) amongst others, have been widely maligned. Their initial responses to the pandemic were flawed and they never recognized the folly of their approaches or initiated corrective action. At the same time, they have ignored the advice provided to them by administrative leaders, especially those entrusted in managing health crisis, including hospitals.

It is important, however, not to neglect the temporal dimension (Compton and ‘t Hart, 2019) when assessing the policy effectiveness of the COVID-19 response of various political leaders. The challenge of assessing public leadership is both in the events prior to the pandemic and in the immediate responses to contain it, as well as longer-term impacts. For example, in the United States, a growing body of research has outlined the trend of underinvestment in public health (Maani and Galea, 2020), as well as the inadequacies in recent national leadership preparations prior to COVID-19 for a potential pandemic (Quamaman, 2020; Yong, 2020).

In assessing the response, it may be that perceptions of leadership effectiveness have shifted over time. In Canada, for example, prior to the pandemic, Ontario Premier Doug Ford was regarded as a polarizing political figure and was heavily criticized for being a petty and ineffective political leader, but he received widespread praise from friends and foe alike over his calm, compassionate leadership in the first stage of the crisis (Taube, 2020). Many of the Canadian political leaders benefitted from career high public approval ratings as a result of their initial handling of the pandemic. However, in the case of Premier Ford, the increase was extraordinary. His public approval rating soared to 83% from an abysmal pre-pandemic level in the 20s (Bricker, 2020). As the pandemic raged on and Ontario entered the second wave in late September, Ford’s judgement and leadership has been increasingly questioned (Arthur, 2020).

On the other hand, some developing countries, especially those in Africa, seem to have comparatively fewer cases of the virus, balancing prevention with the need to address the socio-economic needs of their people. The COVID-19 response in Africa invites meaningful research on how the experience from the 2014 Ebola virus disease crisis in West Africa may have increased awareness amongst African leaders that the failure to contain COVID-19 would threaten the health, prosperity and security of their countries (Loembé et al., 2020) and guided their responses to the current pandemic.
Given the high profile that politicians have had during the COVID-19 pandemic and the propensity for scholars to focus on the political executive (Mau, 2020) – especially the US presidency (Kellerman and Webster, 2001) – when studying public leadership, we expected that our call for papers for this special issue would generate a number of submissions that focussed on the chief executives and other political leaders at different levels of government and across a range of countries. However, the submission of manuscripts with this focus was far greater than desirable since the vast majority of them adopted that approach. Nearly 30 manuscripts were submitted, most of which addressed the strategies and leadership of various African, Asian, European, Latin American and US politicians.

Our goal was that this call for papers would result in viewpoint articles pertaining not only to political leadership but also to other forms of public leadership, particularly administrative leadership. With numerous political leaders around the world sharing the stage at their daily press conferences with key public health officials and explicitly deferring to their science-based judgements regarding the management of the pandemic, there were unique opportunities to explore and assess the leadership of these health care professionals or, as Peters and Helms (2012) urged, to foster a greater awareness of the linkages between these two sets of actors.

Moreover, there have been countless examples of less visible forms of administrative leadership that have been occurring as senior bureaucrats and frontline public servants have provided much need public services (both pre-existing and an array of new programmes in response to COVID-19) and continue to work tirelessly to navigate their countries through this pandemic. Most notably, health care workers, EMT personnel, social workers, police officers, fire fighters and teachers have continued to serve the public with dedication and professionalism while placing their own health and safety at risk while doing so. Therefore, it seems that Van Wart’s (2003, p. 216) observation regarding the neglect of administrative leadership research still holds true. As he noted, “many of those interested in executive leadership may find political leadership more attractive, with its dramatic and accessible policy debates and discussions, rather than administrative leadership, with its more subtle and nuanced decision-making routines.”

In issuing this call for papers, we highlighted what we believed to have some critically important questions for enhancing our understanding of public leadership, particularly its administrative component, which included the following:

(1) How are frontline public servants or street-level bureaucrats and their superiors providing leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic?

(2) How do supervisors, managers and directors provide leadership to their staff members who are largely working remotely?

(3) Has the interface between political and administrative leadership changed as a result of the pandemic? Does the power shift from the politicians to various administrative leaders with an increased emphasis on evidence-based decision-making?

(4) Has the crisis resulted in more examples of innovative leadership by public servants at all levels?

(5) Are charismatic administrative leaders more effective at motivating and inspiring public sector well-being as well as the safety of their immediate and extended families?

Elsewhere, preliminary research by Kirlin (2020) in the context of COVID-19 in the United States, reveals there are shortcomings in the administrative collection of data, which is
having a significant impact on public leaders’ decision-making. This also merits further exploration.

There is also the limitation in terms of how culture affects what leaders can do or cannot do in different contexts. For instance, in my developing countries, how leaders behave both politically and administratively are highly affected by societal culture. With COVID-19, the question arises if societal cultures in developing countries facilitate or impede how political and administrative leaders make decisions and how they are constrained by different institutional arrangements. This is necessary since the attributes and behaviours of leaders highly influence or contribute to leadership effectiveness. Thus, understanding the various cultural dimensions and how they influence leaders’ behaviour and developing theoretical perspectives to explain such are paramount, as leadership theories are Anglo-American centred.

Regrettably, even with the publication of this special issue of the *International Journal of Public Leadership*, these questions remain largely unanswered. It would be easy to lament this enduring lacuna in our knowledge of public leadership as a missed opportunity. However, we choose instead to seize upon it to issue a rallying cry for public leadership scholars to take up the challenge of pursuing research trajectories that begin to address these questions. Far too often the focus of public leadership is on the political even when administrative leadership is front and centre as has been the case during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the meantime, in this special issue of the journal, we have published a collection of thoughtful and insightful articles that address a diverse range of viewpoints about the successes and failures of the public leadership responses in countries around the world – both political and administrative – to the COVID-19 pandemic. The US response figures prominently in this research. Both the articles by Schismenos, Smith, Stevens and Emmanouiloudis and Weidner and Nelson address the failure of US political leadership; in the first instance, they examine the shortcomings of American political leaders to address the pandemic at the federal level and in the state of California, while the latter contribution identifies maladaptive denial in conjunction with power-addiction as the key contributing factors to the Trump administration’s failed response to COVID-19. The article by Sadiq, Kapucu and Qian hones in on the role of US governors in providing leadership for this crisis, while the Glenn, Chaumont and Villalobos Dintrans’ piece places the US crisis leadership response in comparative perspective with Chile and France. Also in the realm of political leadership are the articles by Nemec, who attributes the early Slovak success in dealing with the pandemic to an orderly government transition, and Plaček, Špaček and Ochrana, who classify Czech mayoral leadership related to the pandemic as either being one of municipal activism or passivism. Finally, Pounder examines how Prime Minister Mottley of Barbados demonstrated responsible leadership to support the cruise tourism sector while managing the crisis.

The other articles comprising this special issue expand the discussion of public leadership beyond the political. Alam, for instance, addresses the administrative leadership challenge to deal with COVID-19 in Bangladesh. Noting the absence of strong political leadership in the Bangladeshi case, his article focusses on the intersection of administrative and health sector leadership in that country and the resultant tension that emerged between those two groups of leaders. For Entress, Tyler, Zavattaro and Sadiq, this global pandemic has demonstrated a compelling need for political, administrative and civic leaders to band together to adopt a more human-centric approach to death care policy in the US. Finally, Rampasso, Anholon, Serafim, Lourenzani and Silva document the unique role that academic leaders at three Brazilian universities assumed, not just for their post-secondary institutions, but also for the Brazilian government and society more broadly.

The public leadership research invites a consideration of what authors Begley and Branswell (2020) ask in a recent title: ‘How the World Can Avoid Screwing Up the Response
to Covid-19 Again.” Similarly, as Kettl (2006) notes in describing wicked problems, for these high consequence problems that cross political boundaries, there is always a need to replenish depleted intellectual capital. The research in this issue, as well as in an upcoming second special issue in 2022 on leadership responses in times of crisis, which we intend to address a wider range of political, social, economic or health crises, focusses on replenishing the intellectual capital through deepening the understanding of the current public leadership dimensions, to join with the range of research worldwide to develop actionable recommendations for moving forward.

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