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Contrasting styles, some substance: 5 experts on the first TV leaders' debate of NZ's election

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Nonetheless, the debate was a fair and largely evenly matched contest, covering the COVID-19 response, border control, health, housing, employment, income inequality and climate change.

Our five experts watched the debate closely for what it revealed about policy, performance and the likely tone of the campaign to come.

Genuine differences in substance and style

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Read more: [Ardern versus Collins: ahead of their first TV debate, how much will charisma and eloquence matter?](#)

Despite misleading impressions, however, the first debate between the leaders of the two largest parties revealed genuine differences of style and substance. The debate delivered on substantial issues, from climate change to housing the poor.

Collins was quick to call out “nonsense” and often looked fed-up. She criticised the Ardern government for failing to reduce material hardship for the poor, even though her own plan to “stimulate the economy” with tax cuts would most benefit middle- to higher-income earners. She would raise housing supply through reforming laws that affect developers.

Ardern was reserved but sincere. She acknowledged that it’s been a tough time for New Zealanders, but backed public investment in people and their well-being. She saw climate change innovation as an opportunity for farmers and agriculture, not a cost.

Both leaders showed substance, but different styles. National will go for stimulus through tax cuts; Labour will stimulate through raising incomes for the lowest earners. I'd call it a draw.

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Collins played to her base, repeating the claim that New Zealand is so small, whatever it does won't make a difference (it will), and that farmers feel bagged by the Greens and Labour (they do). It was left to Ardern to offer more substance and collaborative pathways forward: incentives for reducing emissions, cleaning up rivers (including urban rivers).

But beyond a bit of banter about electric vehicles, neither leader had a policy to fundamentally reduce our transport emissions. Pumped hydro schemes may help create jobs and provide stable energy supply over dry years, but neither tackled how we will afford the costs that are coming for homes and infrastructure exposed to sea level rise.

COVID-19 consumes us right now but climate change hasn't gone away and neither has inequality. Again no one really answered the question posed by head girl of Aorere College, Aigagalefili Fepulea'i Tapua'i, about the stress on low-income school communities where students have to choose between study or taking a job to help their family.

There were gestures towards answers. Collins made the most direct connection, saying, "My husband is Samoan and had to leave school", but had no solution. Ardern gestured towards raising the lowest incomes but didn't make a firm commitment beyond saying, "I am not done with child poverty."

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Ardern promised 8,000 new homes are coming down the line, and that’s ostensibly leftist policy and politic. Yet the waiting list for public housing is 20,000 people long. Is 8,000 left enough? It’s certainly left — or centre! — enough to win.

Especially against a strangely flat and staggered National Party leader. People expect Judith Collins to go hard, because of course it’s a brand she cultivates, but it was a jarring juxtaposition: the hard woman (Collins) against the kind and optimistic prime minister. The advocate for a “border protection agency” (Collins) against the person who’s protected the borders (Ardern). It was hard to pin down, then, precisely what Collins was angry at. Other, of course, than the fact she’s leading the losing side.

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The prime minister did that and reiterated the importance of a tightly managed and controlled border. In response, Collins brought up the need for “someone to be in charge”. With a National-led government that would be the job of a new border protection agency. I'm all in favour of an agency dedicated to defending us from pandemic threats, but focusing solely on our border won't achieve that. Any agency should have a much broader remit that also addresses what makes us vulnerable to pandemics.

Collins also raised not letting anyone board a plane to New Zealand unless they test negative. This policy will certainly stop some infectious people from being able to travel but it won't catch all of them. I really worry it'll discriminate against those who can't afford to, or aren't able to, access testing. To me this policy runs the very real risk of stranding New Zealanders overseas while not really increasing the security of our border.

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Hagen Hopkins/Mark Tantrum (Getty)



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Party	Percentage	Change	Change %
LABOUR	48%	▼	5%
NATIONAL	31%	▼	1%
ACT	7%	▲	2%
GREEN	6%	▲	1%
NZF	2%	-	n/c

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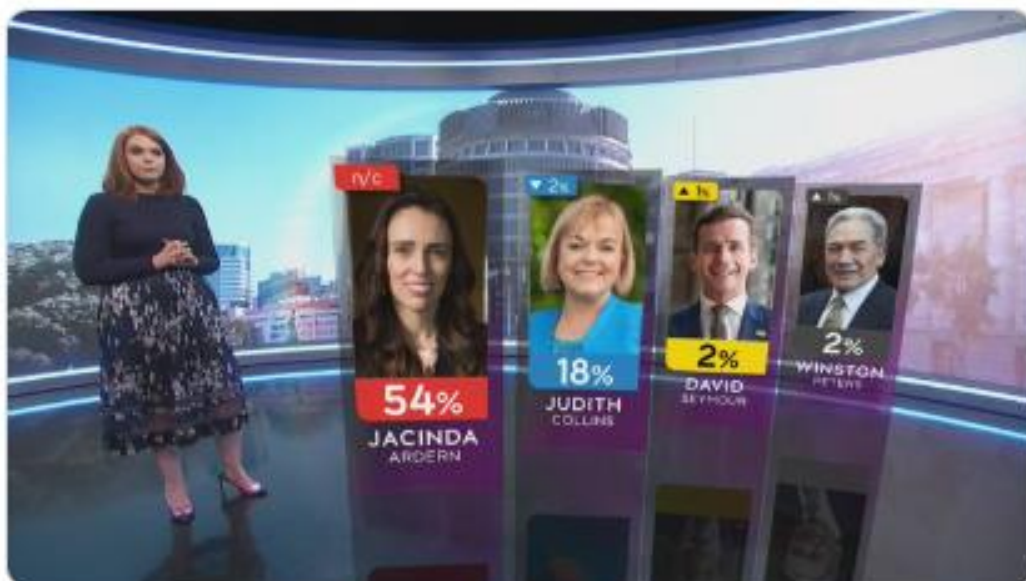
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 **Anna Fifield**
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Pre-election leaders’ debate in New Zealand: the two leaders are Jacinda Ardern of Labour (polling at 54 percent in the preferred PM polls) and Judith Collins of National (18pc). Either way, New Zealand’s next prime minister is a woman — again



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