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# Savvy politicians know how to ‘perform’ authenticity – the Jacinda Ardern doco offers a masterclass

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## Disclosure statement

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There’s a telling moment in the documentary film [Prime Minister](#) when Jacinda Ardern reflects on her rapid rise from Labour leader to prime minister, saying she had “no time to redesign myself [...] I could only be myself”.

This reference to her “true” self signals a commitment to political authenticity, a thread that runs through the award-winning documentary about Ardern’s remarkable time in office.

But in political communication, authenticity is seldom straightforward. It is primarily understood as a “performance” of self, usually by politicians for voters, and filtered by news and social media.

Skilled politicians – on the right as much as the left – know this. And voters, too, can accept things as simultaneously “real” and manufactured.

By drawing from behind-the-scenes footage shot by Ardern’s partner and producer Clarke Gayford, and from recordings for the Political Diary Oral History Project, Prime Minister is a showcase for certain key strategies of “performed” authenticity.

This is not to say Ardern is “faking it” or that the documentary feels contrived. After all, the goal of the authentic politician is to minimise any differences between their public and private performances of self.

## **Consistency and ordinariness**

In an increasingly mediated world, the desire for authenticity – what is perceived as honest and real – is a powerful social force. From early in her career, Ardern has understood this, presenting herself as relatable and likeable on her popular social media channels.

This consistency is commonly regarded as the central strategy of political authenticity. We see it in the film’s repeated use of footage that captures Ardern’s political values.

There’s her maiden speech to parliament about her passion for social justice, and official speeches and election rallies containing messages of kindness and compassion.

These are reinforced with childhood photos and a car trip down the street where she grew up, allowing Ardern to establish the stability of her inner self.

Conveying a sense of ordinariness is another way to build political authenticity. In *Prime Minister*, we see Ardern in her slippers and engaging in recognisably ordinary activities, usually involving daughter Neve: feeding, bedtime and kite flying.

The dated backdrop of the family's private apartment at Government House adds to this impression of the commonplace. So does footage shot in their modest Auckland home, with all the usual mess of family life on display.

Motherhood is the most accessible source of ordinariness in a documentary about Ardern's prime ministership. And it contrasts with the public events of her time in office – the Christchurch terror attack, Whakaari/White Island and the pandemic – that are so clearly extraordinary.

By regularly interspersing images of a seemingly normal home life with shots of official meetings and state dinners, *Prime Minister* helps defuse the tension between the ordinary and extraordinary that challenges many politicians in their quest to appear authentic.

## **Immediacy and intimacy**

A perception of authenticity is also supported by an impression of immediacy in political communication – the creation of a shared sense of the “here and now”.

*Prime Minister* taps into a common cultural experience by including memorable television footage, such as the daily COVID updates. This is reinforced with scenes from Ardern's current life in the United States, from where she responds to audio recordings made during her prime ministership.

Thanks to Gayford's home recordings, we also hear about Ardern's anxiety levels and sleeping problems. The visuals confirm she is tired. These recordings are not always flattering, which adds to their apparent authenticity.

The audience also gains a kind of political backstage pass, watching Ardern prepare to announce the first pandemic lockdown, distribute presents at a staff Christmas party, and

attempt to work in her noisy office during the parliamentary protests.

Learning about Ardern's pregnancy before she officially announces it, and later hearing her joke about wanting to hit opposition leader Simon Bridges after a parliamentary exchange about the Auckland lockdowns, contribute to the sense of intimate access promised by the documentary's promotional material.

## **Authenticity to the left and right**

All in all, Prime Minister is a compelling performance of political authenticity, complete with its own publicity machine.

But many politicians, from across the ideological spectrum, are working to convince voters of their authenticity in a time when that virtue is under attack from fake news, generative AI and disinformation.

Populist politicians who try to position themselves as "truth tellers" have a particular need to present as authentic. In fact, consistency as a tool of authenticity does not require the steadfastly "positive" attributes exhibited by Ardern in Prime Minister.

Politicians such as Auckland mayor Wayne Brown build authenticity by being consistently abrasive and outspoken.

US President Donald Trump is sometimes described as "consistently inconsistent". But his rhetoric regularly makes use of the same recognisable words, phrases and inflections, providing regular fodder for comedians and impersonators.

How audiences respond to politicians' performances of authenticity is ultimately influenced by their political attitudes and party identifications, as well as exposure to political information across different media.

And research shows people who regularly watch mainstream television news and view or follow political candidates' social media accounts are primed to perceive politicians as more authentic.

But one of the paradoxes of performed authenticity is that audiences can simultaneously perceive communication as “real” while recognising it as a manipulation.

Perhaps authentic politicians are especially alert to this. If you watch Prime Minister, look out for scene where Ardern calls out Gayford for faking the housework.

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## Consistency and ordinariness

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New Zealand

Jacinda Ardern

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