

## Can Electoral Incentives Explain Gender Differences in Leaders' Behavior?



Female and male mayors in Brazil responded differently to the COVID-19 crisis, with effects on mortality that varied over time.



In the early months of the pandemic, female-led municipalities were less likely to close essential businesses and had higher COVID-19 death rates compared to male-led municipalities.



Towards the end of the year 2020, however, female-led municipalities were more likely to close essential businesses and had fewer COVID-19 deaths than male-led municipalities. This suggests that female and male mayors handled the crisis in distinct ways, with implications for understanding gender differences in policymaking and crisis management.

### CONTEXT

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Prior research has shown that there are gender differences in the behavior of elected officials. For example, relative to male leaders, female leaders often prioritize public goods like education and health and exhibit lower levels of corruption. However, there is limited understanding of what drives these differences in behavior. This research addresses this gap by examining the impact of electoral incentives on the behavior of female and male mayors during the COVID-19 crisis in Brazil.

### PROJECT

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This study compares municipalities where a female candidate narrowly won against a male candidate in the 2016 election with those where the reverse occurred (shown in the figure). This allows us to focus on municipalities with similar characteristics except for the gender of the mayor and isolate the causal impact of female leadership on COVID-19 deaths, containment policies, and residents' isolation behavior over time. Furthermore, the new municipal elections in November 2020 were used to explore the role of electoral incentives, comparing first-time mayors who were not term-limited (eligible for re-election) with mayors who were term-limited (not eligible).

#### Key Concept



#### VOTERS' GENDER BIAS

Voters' tendency to evaluate and assess the actions of female leaders differently from those male leaders.

## RESULTS

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The study finds not only that the behavior of female and male mayors differed during the COVID-19 crisis, but also that the direction of these differences changed over time. At the beginning of the pandemic (April-May 2020), a period characterized by uncertainty about the severity of the threat, municipalities led by female mayors experienced a higher number of COVID-19 deaths compared to male-led municipalities. However, towards the end of the year (November-December 2020), a period where this uncertainty was reduced, female-led municipalities had fewer deaths relative to male-led municipalities.

These gender differences in mortality aligned with gender differences in the use of containment policies. Female mayors were less likely to implement commerce restrictions at the beginning of the crisis, resulting in fewer days of non-essential business closures in their municipalities. Conversely, as the year progressed, female mayors became more likely to impose commerce restrictions, leading to more days of non-essential business closures compared to male mayors. The study also found that, in female-led municipalities, a higher share of the population stayed at home in the period leading up to the November 2020 election.

Importantly, our research demonstrates a link between these gender differences in leadership behavior and electoral incentives. The effects described above were found when we compared male and female mayors who were eligible for re-election, but not among those who were not eligible for re-election. Furthermore, we found that the effects are more pronounced in municipalities where gender discrimination is likely to be more pronounced (e.g., municipalities with higher gender gaps in the labor market). This indicates that the observed differences in behavior are, at least partially, driven by voters' gender biases, which prompt electorally-motivated female and male mayors to act differently.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

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The findings of this study highlight a few important messages that are relevant for policymakers. First, it is important to recognize that voters can have biases (based on gender or other personal characteristics of elected officials) that affect the way they evaluate the actions of policymakers. This in turn can generate electoral incentives that prompt elected authorities with different individual characteristics to act differently.

Second, because voters' gender biases can shape policymaking in ways that may lead to suboptimal decisions, the study highlights the importance of promoting gender equality and reducing gender discrimination in political contexts. Addressing gender biases among voters is important for fostering a more inclusive and fairer political environment. Policies aimed at promoting gender equality in leadership positions can contribute to more effective crisis responses and better outcomes for communities.

Finally, this research emphasizes the fact that biases can operate in different directions depending on time and context. At the beginning of the pandemic, when the severity of the threat and the need for containment policies were unclear and containment policies could be seen as an "overreaction," female mayors seeking re-election were less willing to intervene than male mayors. Later that year, when it became clear that the threat was significant and that a more forceful intervention was needed, electorally-incentivized female mayors imposed even stronger policies than male mayors. This suggests that, in trying to extract lessons about policy interventions and their results, it is critical to ask whether those results can vary if they are evaluated in different periods.

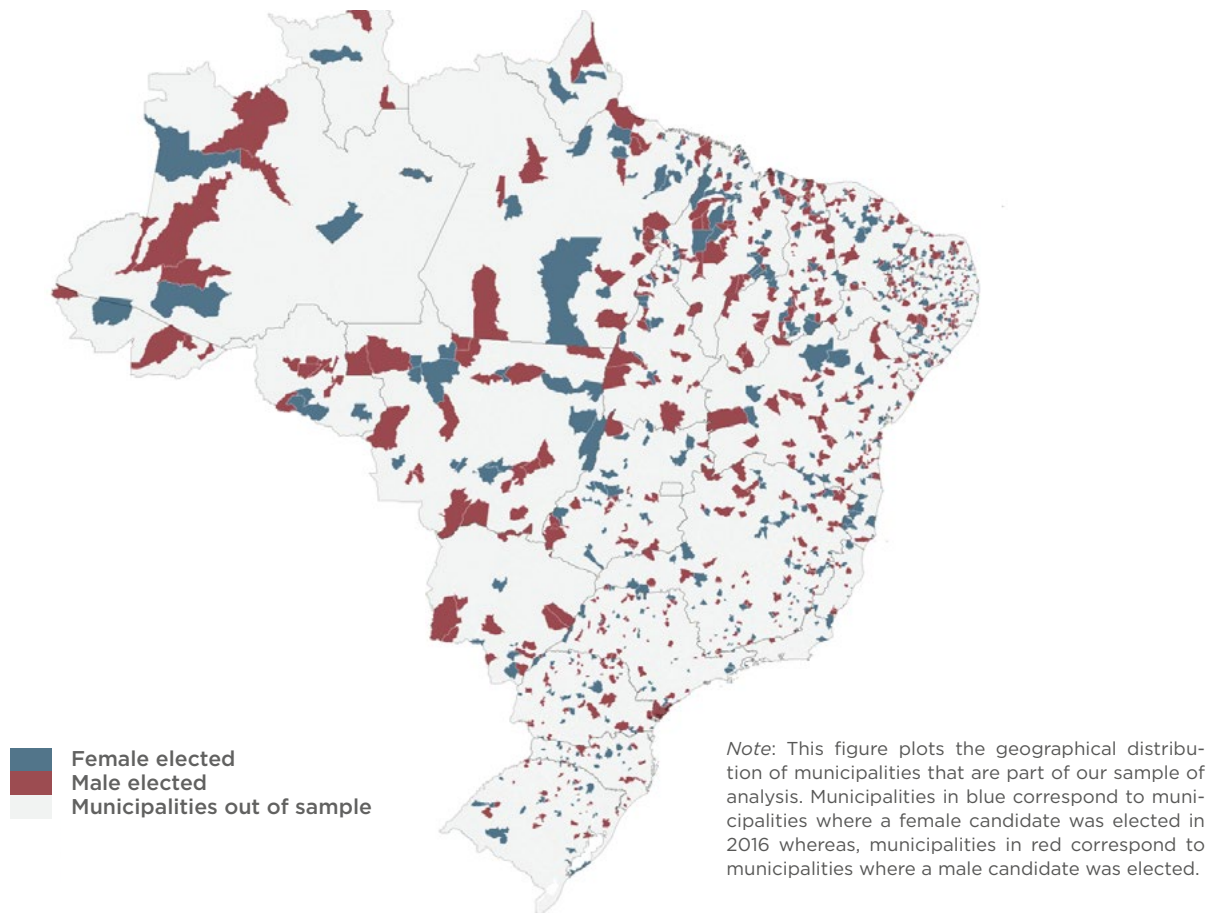
### Key Concept



### ELECTORAL INCENTIVES

Motivations and pressures faced by politicians due to electoral processes. For instance, politicians seeking re-election might be more responsive to the short-term priorities of voters than those not running again.

**Figure 1. Municipalities with Close Mayoral Elections in 2016, in which the Top Two Candidates Were a Man and a Woman**



**Key Concept**



**TERM LIMITS**

Legal restrictions on the number of times an individual can hold a particular public office. They aim to promote turnover, prevent excessive concentration of power, and offer new leadership opportunities.



**FULL STUDY**

[Chauvin, Juan Pablo, and Clemence Tricaud. 2022. "Gender and Electoral Incentives: Evidence from Crisis Respons." Washington, DC: Inter-American Development Bank.](#)

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