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# Political Corporate Social Responsibility: Reviewing Theories and Setting New Agendas\*

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**There has been rising interest in political corporate social responsibility (political CSR), defined as activities where CSR has an intended or unintended political impact, or where intended or unintended political impacts on CSR exist. Based on a survey and content analysis of 146 peer-reviewed academic articles from 18 journals over the 14-year period 2000–2013, this paper systematically reviews the existing applications of general theories (such as legitimacy theory, the resource-based view and Habermasian political theory) within the political CSR literature. The survey indicates that the political CSR field is dominated by institutional theory and stakeholder theory, but future theory development needs to go beyond these theories in order to address a number of critical gaps. This review specifically points to several avenues for future political CSR research with regard to the individual level of analysis, domain integration and political CSR in multinational enterprises. The paper ends with a call for a new theory-informed and pluralist research agenda on political CSR to integrate different perspectives and re-examine the role of the state.**

## Introduction

There has been rising interest in the political aspects of corporate social responsibility (CSR) over the last decade (Mäkinen and Kourula 2012; Rodriguez *et al.* 2006; Scherer and Palazzo 2007; 2011). Scholars have pointed to various political impacts of CSR: among others, the political role of companies as providers of community services, such as health and education, previously regarded as a preserve of the state (Blowfield and Frynas

2005; Boddewyn and Doh 2011; Newell and Frynas 2007) and the rising role of self-regulatory business behaviour through voluntary initiatives (e.g. global codes of conduct and voluntary environmental guidelines) to fill voids in global governance and national public regulation (Aguilera and Cuervo-Cazurra 2004; Bartley 2007; Slager *et al.* 2012). At the same time, studies have suggested that companies continue to exercise political pressure by affecting regulatory changes in relation to social and environmental issues through active lobbying, membership in advisory committees and other traditional political channels (Child and Tsai 2005; den Hond *et al.* 2014; McWilliams *et al.* 2002). This scholarship points to the rising importance of ‘political CSR’ as a field of research, which is the focus of this paper.

The interactions between business and politics (e.g. Baysinger 1984; Oster 1982; Taylor 1974; for a

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\*A free Teaching and Learning Guide to accompany this article is available at: [http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/\(ISSN\)1468-2370/homepage/teaching\\_learning\\_guides.htm](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/(ISSN)1468-2370/homepage/teaching_learning_guides.htm)

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recent review, see Lawton *et al.* 2013) and business responses to social demands (Ackerman 1973; Carroll 1979; Murray 1976; for a recent review, see Carroll and Shabana 2010) have long been studied in the business studies literature. However, there has been little or no integration between these research domains until recently. While a few older studies have exceptionally taken for granted that companies should integrate social and political issues for the purpose of strategic planning (Greening 1992; Greening and Gray 1994; Taylor 1974), research on non-market interactions of companies was highly fragmented for a long time and largely disintegrated into separate political and social domains. Rodriguez *et al.* (2006, p. 734) bemoaned the ‘troubling trend’ of the ‘development of three parallel literatures on politics, corruption and CSR’ and that ‘each lens has its own literature that too rarely acknowledges advances and insights from the other lenses’.

An integration of the corporate political literature and the CSR literature is important and timely, given that (in the words of Rodriguez *et al.* 2006, p. 734) ‘each lens centres on key aspects of firms’ relationships with society’s norms, laws and institutions’. Both literatures address company interactions with political institutions, non-government actors and local communities to varying degrees. Both literatures explicitly acknowledge that companies can be proactive actors engaged in changing the institutional environment in which they operate. When interacting with non-market actors, companies can use traditional political activities such as lobbying and CSR activities such as strategic philanthropy interchangeably in the pursuit of business objectives (den Hond *et al.* 2014; Weyzig 2009). Indeed, political issues and CSR are increasingly intertwined, as – on the one hand – the boundaries of CSR have expanded to include political concerns such as international development goals (Blowfield 2005) and corporate payments of government taxation (Jenkins and Newell 2013), and – on the other hand – governments have assumed an active role in CSR such as through government participation in social partnerships with companies (Selsky and Parker 2005) and through introducing mandatory CSR requirements for companies (Gond *et al.* 2011). The rise of political CSR provides an overdue integration of the political and social domains.

Alongside the rising interest in political CSR, it has become apposite to search for theoretical frameworks to explain political CSR. However, at this point, it is still unclear what specific theoretical per-

spectives will underpin future research on political CSR, and the survey in this paper demonstrates that previous political CSR studies have advocated the application of very different general theories. Scherer and Palazzo (2011, p. 900) have recently concluded that ‘current theorizing on the firm in the CSR literature has not yet sufficiently integrated this new political role of private business’. Consequently, the aim of this paper is to review the existing applications of general theoretical perspectives within the political CSR literature, in order to identify the existing trends and future directions in relation to theory development. In contrast to previous literature review studies on CSR ‘theories’ (Garriga and Melé 2004; Lee 2008; Secchi 2007), we do not analyse ‘theories of CSR’ or ‘conceptual frameworks’ specifically related to CSR (e.g. Carroll’s (1979) famous conceptual model of corporate social performance, or Matten and Crane’s (2005) corporate citizenship concept have been specifically devised to explain CSR-related phenomena), but only ‘general theories’ presenting a system of ideas that can be used in different fields of business studies scholarship (e.g. stakeholder theory or legitimacy theory are not only applicable in CSR studies, but are generally applicable in other fields of business studies). This paper is not a broad review of political CSR research, but rather we set out to review how general theories have actually been applied within political CSR research. We use the review of theoretical perspectives to inform future directions for political CSR scholarship.

We start by defining the field of study and by providing a short overview of our survey of theory applications. The main body of the paper consists of a discussion of theory applications in political CSR research at the three levels of analysis – macro, meso and micro – followed by a discussion of multi-level theory applications in political CSR research. Insights from this review inform our discussion of future directions for political CSR research. Lastly, we offer some final conclusions.

## CSR vs political CSR: definitions and classifications

### *Defining the field*

*Defining the CSR field.* A key challenge for building CSR theory is that there is no agreement on where the boundaries of CSR lie (Blowfield and Murray 2008; Lockett *et al.* 2006; Waddock 2004).

The term CSR has sometimes been supplemented or supplanted by other terms, including corporate citizenship, accountability and sustainable development (for a review, see Amaeshi and Adi 2007; Garriga and Melé 2004). The meaning of CSR differs between national (Freeman 2011; Waldman *et al.* 2006) and industry contexts (Frynas 2009; Runhaar and Lafferty 2009), and can change over time (Carroll 1999; Matten and Moon 2008). Therefore, it is appropriate to define CSR as an umbrella term for a variety of concepts and practices, all of which recognize that companies have a responsibility for their impact on society and the natural environment, often beyond legal compliance and the liability of individuals (Blowfield and Frynas 2005, p. 503; cf. Matten and Crane 2005). Nonetheless, the lack of a widely accepted CSR concept remains a significant challenge for theorizing CSR.

Just as there is no consensus on the definition and the boundaries of CSR, there is still no emerging consensus on the most appropriate classification of CSR theories. Previous studies offered different criteria for categorizing CSR theories, including the role of the firm (Garriga and Melé 2004; Secchi 2007), the degree of managerial autonomy (Frynas 2009; Secchi 2007) and the level of analysis (Aguilera *et al.* 2007; Aguinis and Glavas 2012). Of these criteria, the level of analysis offers a convenient yardstick by which different theoretical perspectives can be classified for the purpose of this paper, since a focus on the level of analysis addresses calls for more multi-level studies in business studies research (Dansereau *et al.* 1999; Hitt *et al.* 2007; Ployhart and Moliterno 2011) and for a needed shift towards multi-level research on CSR (Aguilera *et al.* 2007; Aguinis and Glavas 2012; Starik and Rands 1995). Therefore, we have structured the main body of this paper according to the levels of analysis in political CSR research. Building on previous multi-level conceptualizations in management (Bies *et al.* 2007; Hitt *et al.* 2007), we distinguish between three levels of analysis: the micro level (involving psychological bases among individuals), the meso level (involving relational issues among organizations), and the macro level (involving wider political, economic and societal dynamics).

*Defining the political CSR field.* Particularly pertinent for this review, there is no single accepted definition of ‘political CSR’, and the existing studies tend to provide rather restrictive definitions that provide a challenge for setting the boundaries of

the field. Whelan (2012) distinguishes between ‘Habermasian political CSR’, ‘Rawlsian political CSR’ and ‘political CSR’, while Mäkinen and Kourula (2012) distinguish between ‘political CSR’ and ‘new political CSR’. A key challenge of political CSR research is not just the absence of an agreed definition of the term, but the attempt of a few key authors to appropriate the meaning of the term ‘political CSR’ for a narrow research agenda that postulates normative theory to the exclusion of descriptive theory and focuses exclusively on the changes in global governance to the exclusion of the traditional domestic political process (Scherer and Palazzo 2007, 2011). Scherer and Palazzo’s (2011, p. 901) definition encompasses that ‘in a nutshell, political CSR suggests an extended model of governance with business firms contributing to global regulation and providing public goods’ and dismisses the ‘instrumental view of corporate politics’ related to CSR in favour of their own normative understanding of ‘political CSR’. In contrast, taking into consideration recent discussions on broadening the meaning of political CSR (Néron 2013; Whelan 2012, 2013), this paper embraces a more inclusive pluralist research agenda in political CSR, which can integrate different perspectives on political CSR in order to account for different phenomena, including global governance changes at macro level, instrumental concerns at organizational level or cognitive dimensions at individual level, in both descriptive and normative terms.

In this paper, we refer to political CSR as activities where CSR has an intended or unintended political impact, or where intended or unintended political impacts on CSR exist (i.e. impacts related to the functioning of the state as a sphere of activity that is distinctive from business activity). Based on a recent review on corporate political activity (CPA) in this Journal (Lawton *et al.* 2013), domains of the political impact can range from deliberate attempts of firms to influence governments in order to gain firm-specific competitive advantages (domain A), sometimes unintended effects of firm activities on the development of institutions such as by acting within ‘institutional voids’ (domain B), to reactive strategies of firms with regard to changes in the external political environment (domain C). In line with this typology, our definition of political CSR encompasses activities whereby CSR is a deliberate attempt to usurp government regulation, CSR-related activities that are geared solely towards responding to government policy and also CSR-related activities where firms

recognize their impact on society and their social responsibilities in a way that has a clear impact on regulation, even though this may not be the intended aim of the activity.

For the purpose of this literature survey (see below), we only selected papers that investigated CSR-related activities that address political impact that can be categorized as domain A, B or C (cf. Lawton *et al.* 2013), as exemplified below. With regard to domain A, our definition of political CSR explicitly encompasses deliberate corporate strategies in response to environmental concerns, with the aim of influencing future government regulation (Halme 2002; Ruihua and Bansal 2003) but, for example, excludes CPA that does not specifically relate to CSR, such as lobbying government for assistance in international trade disputes (Baron 1997). With regard to domain B, our definition of political CSR explicitly encompasses the assumption of responsibility for human rights protection by firms that may unintentionally affect the political context in which firms are operating (Cragg 2000; Seppala 2009), but, for example, explicitly excludes the impact of day-to-day business operations on institutional arrangements, such as the statistical impact of foreign direct investment on levels of corruption (Kwok and Tadesse 2006). With regard to domain C, our definition of political CSR explicitly encompasses self-regulatory business behaviour through voluntary social and environmental initiatives that may fill gaps in global governance and national public regulation (Aguilera and Cuervo-Cazurra 2004; Slager *et al.* 2012), but, for example, explicitly excludes voluntary social and environmental responses to external pressures if external political/regulatory pressures are not discussed (Branzei *et al.* 2004). The next section briefly explains the methodology of the literature survey and a number of key findings.

## Surveying applications of theory to political CSR

In order to identify which theories have been most widely adopted in the political CSR literature, the authors surveyed papers in five leading journals in the field of CSR and social accounting (*Journal of Business Ethics*, *Business Ethics Quarterly*, *Corporate Governance: An International Review*, *Business and Society* and *Accounting, Organizations and Society*) and four relevant journals that are known

for publishing papers related to the political aspects of business (*Business and Politics*, *International Affairs*, *Socio-Economic Review* and *Journal of Economics & Management Strategy*).

In order to avoid a 'silo view' that may exist within any given field of research, we followed the approach of previous literature surveys (e.g. Laplume *et al.* 2008; Pozzebon 2004) by incorporating general management journals. Our survey uses journal quality as a key criterion for selecting journals, in line with previous studies that point to the dominance of a small range of quality journals in the development of management disciplines (e.g. Morrison and Inkpen 1991; Tahai and Meyer 1999). We have modelled the journal selection process of our survey on two related surveys (Aguinis and Glavas 2012; Laplume *et al.* 2008), and we have included all general management journals that were surveyed in both reviews (*Academy of Management Review*, *Academy of Management Journal*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Journal of Management*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Organization Science*, *Organization Studies* and *Strategic Management Journal*) and *Journal of International Business Studies*, which is known for publishing relevant papers in this area and was also listed by Aguinis and Glavas (2012). All political CSR papers from our survey are henceforth identified with a star sign in the text for the reader's convenience.

Given that CSR encompasses a variety of issues and perspectives, we decided not to use keywords, but analysed each journal issue individually, in search of articles that referred to issues related to companies' social and environmental responsibilities (e.g. environmental management, social reporting). We only selected papers where the application of a general theory was explicitly acknowledged, given that this review is limited to reviewing the application of theories within political CSR research, and it is not a general review of political CSR literature. In addition, when the paper title, abstract and keywords did not explicitly and unambiguously indicate whether it was relevant to political CSR or whether a theoretical perspective has been applied (for example, institutional theory might be referred to as neo-institutionalism, national systems or isomorphism pressures, instead of using the explicit keyword 'institutional theory'), we examined the main body of the paper to ensure that the paper was properly classified.

Given the relatively recent rise in political CSR literature, the 18 journals were surveyed over the

14-year period 2000–2013. This yielded a sample of 146 political CSR papers that apply general theories for content analysis, as per our definitions above. Some of these 146 papers applied multiple theoretical perspectives – therefore, we obtained a total count of 173 applications of theoretical perspectives.

Tables 1 and 2 summarize the findings from our survey by journal and by year. Table 1 highlights that theory-informed political CSR research is dominated by the *Journal of Business Ethics* (over 28% of all theory applications) and several other journals related to society and politics (*Business & Politics*, *Business & Society* and *Business Ethics Quarterly*, combined, accounted for almost 30% of all theory applications). Table 2 highlights that interest in discussing and theorizing political CSR has grown over the last decade. While there was only one political CSR paper adopting a theoretical framework in 2000, there were 30 papers in 2012 and 15 papers in 2013.

The survey indicates that the application of theories within political CSR research is enormously diverse. Focusing on firm–society relationships, relational perspectives in political CSR research include stakeholder theory, institutional theory and resource dependence theory. Focusing on the role of the firm as an instrument for wealth creation, instrumental economic and managerial perspectives include the resource-based view (RBV), agency theory and transaction cost economics. Focusing on the power and political interactions of firms and other actors, political perspectives include Habermasian theories of discourse ethics and deliberative democracy, Rawlsian theory of justice and integrative social contracts theory. One important finding highlighted in Tables 1 and 2 is that political CSR scholarship has been advanced largely with the help of relational theories (institutional theory, stakeholder theory and legitimacy theory) and the political CSR field is dominated by stakeholder theory and institutional theory. Tables 1 and 2 further reveal that political theories (social contract theory, Habermasian political theory and Rawlsian theory) have also influenced the political CSR field albeit to a lesser extent, while instrumental theories have been largely marginalized (only the RBV attracted a few notable applications).

The main political CSR-related rationale of each of the identified theories and the key authors are summarized in Table 3. An important and striking finding highlighted in Table 3 is the focus of almost all theories (except the RBV) on the process of legitimation, which is indicative of the current political

CSR research focus on questions related to explaining and legitimizing the political CSR activities of firms at the expense of a number of theoretical constructs that would be able to improve our understanding of the underlying processes and conditions whereby political CSR translates into specific organizational outcomes. Indeed, Table 3 is notable for the absence of important theoretical perspectives – for example, reciprocity and exchange theories and agency theory – that have previously been applied in CPA and CSR research to investigate issues such as *inter alia* behavioural dynamics between actors, the role of individual decision-makers in setting strategies or the relationship between individual decision-maker characteristics and the level of CSR or CPA performance.

The almost complete absence of behavioural theories such as agency theory or game theory in political CSR scholarship can be attributed to the neglect of the individual level of analysis. Our survey points to the domination of meso-level and macro-level analyses within the political CSR field: 73 papers (50% of the sample) and 44 papers (30.1%) addressed the macro level and the meso level, respectively; 29 papers (19.9%) were multi-level studies, while we did not find a single paper that addressed the individual level on its own.

What follows is the main body of the paper, which discusses in turn the application of theories in the political CSR field at the three levels of analysis – macro, meso and micro – followed by a discussion of multi-level theory applications.

## Theorizing political CSR at multiple levels of analysis

### *Theory at macro level*

Institutional theory overwhelmingly dominates macro level analysis in terms of theory application in general CSR research (cf. Aguinis and Glavas 2012) and in political CSR research (22 papers use institutional theory in our 14-year survey of political CSR research). Perhaps unsurprisingly, political theoretical frameworks were also prevalent at the macro level. Among political theory applications in our survey, the two most popular perspectives included the social contract perspective (applied by 12 papers) and the Habermasian perspective, encompassing deliberative democracy and discourse ethics (applied by six papers). Key political CSR macro level papers are presented in Table 4.

Table 1. Application of key theoretical perspectives, number of theory applications, 2000–2013 (by journal)

Journal/theory	AMJ	AMR	AOS	ASQ	B&P	B&S	BEQ	CGIR	IA	JBE	JEMS	JIBS	JM	JMS	OSci	OS	SER	SMJ	Total
<b>Relational theories</b>																			
Institutional Theory	1	1	0	0	5	7	1	0	0	6	0	7	0	3	2	5	10	4	52
Stakeholder Theory	0	0	0	0	1	3	1	0	2	15	0	0	0	4	0	1	0	1	28
Legitimacy Theory	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	5
Other	0	1	0	0	3	5	0	0	0	4	0	2	0	1	0	2	0	2	20
<b>Political theories</b>																			
Social contract theory	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	10	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	15
Habermasian	0	1	0	0	0	1	4	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	9
Rawlsian	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6
Other	0	1	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	7	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	14
<b>Instrumental theories</b>																			
Resource-Based View	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	1	6
Other	0	0	0	2	3	0	2	0	0	3	2	3	0	0	0	1	0	2	18
<b>Total theory applications</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>173</b>

Journal abbreviations: *Academy of Management Journal* (AMJ), *Academy of Management Review* (AMR), *Accounting, Organizations and Society* (AOS), *Administrative Science Quarterly* (ASQ), *Business & Politics* (B&P), *Business & Society* (B&S), *Business Ethics Quarterly* (BEQ), *Corporate Governance: an International Review* (CGIR), *International Affairs* (IA), *Journal of Business Ethics* (JBE), *Journal of Economics & Management Strategy* (JEMS), *Journal of International Business Studies* (JIBS), *Journal of Management* (JM), *Journal of Management Studies* (JMS), *Organization Science* (OSci), *Organization Studies* (OS), *Socio-Economic Review* (SER) and *Strategic Management Journal* (SMJ).

Table 2. Application of theoretical perspectives, number of theory applications and papers, 2000–2013 (by year)

Year/theory	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	Total
<b>Relational theories</b>															
Institutional Theory	0	3	2	1	1	2	6	5	2	2	5	4	16	3	52
Stakeholder Theory	0	1	4	2	2	2	3	1	2	3	3	1	3	1	28
Legitimacy Theory	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	5
Other	0	1	1	1	2	1	3	4	0	1	0	2	3	1	20
<b>Political theories</b>															
Social contract theory	1	1	0	1	2	1	4	2	1	0	0	0	1	1	15
Habermasian	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	2	1	0	0	2	1	1	9
Rawlsian	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	6
Other	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	2	4	1	0	3	1	14
<b>Instrumental theories</b>															
Resource-Based View	0	1	1	0	0	1	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6
Other	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	3	1	2	2	0	2	5	18
<b>Total theory applications</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>173</b>

Table 3. Theoretical perspectives on political CSR (alphabetical order)

Theoretical perspective	Main political CSR-related rationale	Important political CSR-related papers
Habermasian	Appeals to either/both the Habermasian concept of discourse ethics and/or deliberative democracy to offer an account of the way in which political CSR can be legitimized	Gilbert and Rasche 2007; Mena and Palazzo 2012; Scherer and Palazzo 2011
Institutional Theory	Explains the changing function of CSR as a result of the companies' conformity to different institutional pressures	Detomasi 2007; Kang and Moon 2012; Ungericht and Hirt 2010
Legitimacy Theory	Explains the emergence of political CSR as a strategy to achieve legitimation via congruence with the norms and values of the society in which they operate	Blasio 2007; Cashore <i>et al.</i> 2003
Rawlsian	Applies Rawls' Theory of Justice in order to establish the just (and legitimate) rights and responsibilities of the corporation as a social and political actor	Bishop 2008; Cohen 2010
Resource-Based View	Considers the way in which political CSR is being used as a specialized skill or capability in order to gain a competitive advantage	Chan 2005; McWilliams <i>et al.</i> 2002
Social Contract Theory	Employs the Social Contract mechanism to offer an account of what the political role of companies should be and/or how it could be realized	Cragg 2000; Dunfee 2006; Sacconi 2006
Stakeholder Theory (normative)	Asserts that the legitimacy gap created by political CSR should be addressed by appealing to the interests of stakeholders and increased involvement of affected parties in the decision making processes of the corporations	Crane <i>et al.</i> 2004; Logsdon and Wood 2002
Stakeholder Theory (descriptive)	Explains the changing function of CSR in terms of its response to stakeholder demands	Gilbert and Rasche 2008*; Reed 2002

*Institutional theory.* Within the general CSR literature, institutional theory has been applied to CSR by various authors to highlight that firm strategies and practices become similar within a defined institutional environment – typically the national institutional context – as a result of isomorphic pressures (e.g. Campbell 2007; Husted and Allen 2006; Jennings and Zandbergen 1995; Matten and Moon 2008). Similarly, with regard to political CSR, institutional theory studies have, for example, highlighted how differences between the national institutional context and between political legacies have led to marked differences in isomorphic pressures on corporate CSR strategies as well as government policies between the USA and Europe (Levy and Kolk 2002\*; Doh and Guay 2006\*). However, the application of institutional theory in political CSR research (as in general CSR research) largely fails to explain proactive CPAs and idiosyncratic behaviour of firms within domain A research.

The alternative for institutional theorists in political CSR research has been to push the boundaries of institutional theory within CSR research by highlighting that companies are not only shaped by the institutional environment, but can shape that institutional environment too. Some authors within the general institutional literature (Dacin *et al.* 2002;

Greenwood and Suddaby 2006; Lawrence *et al.* 2011) have attempted to apply institutional theory to address the question of how social actors actively seek to change institutional arrangements (sometimes referred to as 'institutional entrepreneurship'). Within the political CSR literature, a number of studies have probed the application of institutional theory in order to explain the political impact of CSR institutional entrepreneurship (Detomasi 2007\*; Levy *et al.* 2010\*; Ungericht and Hirt 2010\*). However, the existing applications of institutional theory to political CSR exhibit limitations in terms of explaining proactive political strategies of firms. Prototypical for this approach, Detomasi (2007\*) has purportedly applied institutional theory to highlight how global public policy networks, which include companies, have developed new global governance frameworks in addressing the inability of national governments to enforce social and environmental standards, but this study did not use any institutional concepts to guide the analysis of the policy networks' impact on institutional structures, while Ungericht and Hirt (2010\*) have applied institutional theory to draw attention to how business associations have successfully lobbied European Union (EU) decision-makers in order to change regulatory approaches to CSR within the



Table 4. Macro level applications of theory in political CSR

Author/year	Paper type	Theory applied	Summary of key papers
Crane <i>et al.</i> 2004	Conceptual	Stakeholder Theory	Examines the role of stakeholders in the context of corporate citizenship, arguing that there should be greater democratic participation by stakeholders in the governance of business and that new institutions need to be created in order to achieve this.
Scherer <i>et al.</i> 2006	Conceptual	Habermasian	Presents a discussion of the role that multinational corporations should play in developing global governance, creating a framework of rules and regulations for the global economy. Argues that instrumental stakeholder theory and business and society research can only partially solve the global governance issue, and that more recent concepts of corporate citizenship and republican business ethics deliver theoretically and practically helpful, fresh insights.
Wempe 2008	Conceptual	Social Contract Theory	Presents a social contract framework for Business Ethics, drawing on both moral and political theory.
Marens 2007	Conceptual	Social Contract Theory	Argues that the economic and social fairness of business needs to be re-examined, and that the Social Contract approach is a suitable way of doing this. Compares the Lockean social contract and Donaldson and Dunfee's Integrative Social Contracts theory with Rawls' approach, and concludes that Rawls acknowledges the significance of the power of government.
Gilbert and Rasche 2008	Conceptual	Stakeholder Theory	Discusses the strengths and weaknesses of Standardized Ethics Initiatives (e.g. UN Global Compact) in addressing the responsibility of corporations, which it is argued has emerged as a result of their power and the failure of national governments to respond effectively to this.
Levy 2008	Conceptual	Neo-Gramscian Theory	Presents a critical framework on international management and production. The framework views global production networks as integrated economic, political, and discursive systems in which market and political power are intertwined. The framework offers insights into contested political and social issues, such as sweatshops and incomes for coffee growers.
Baur and Palazzo 2011	Conceptual	Habermasian	Presents an argument that NGOs assume a status as special stakeholders of corporations which act on behalf of the common good. Introduces a conceptual framework for analysing the moral legitimacy of NGOs along three dimensions, building on the theory of deliberative democracy.
Ungericht and Hirt 2010	Conceptual	Institutional Theory	Discusses the way in which the European Commission has recognized CSR as a political activity. The authors argue that the political role of CSR has emerged due to globalization and the 'responsibility vacuum' created.
Mäkinen and Kourula 2012	Conceptual	Rawlsian	Presents a review of three key periods of political CSR literature—classic, instrumental, and new political CSR. Uses the Rawlsian conceptualization of division of moral labour within political systems to describe each period's background political theories.
Whelan 2012	Conceptual	Institutional Theory	Presents a critical research agenda for the political perspective of CSR, arguing that 'Political' CSR should be conceived as one potential form of globalization, and not as a consequence of 'globalization'; that contemporary Western MNEs should be presumed to engage in CSR for instrumental reasons; that 'Political' CSR should be associated with a corresponding 'political' model of corporate governance; and that both a 'Rawlsian' and 'Habermasian' perspective of political CSR are different from 'Political' CSR.

EU's political structures, but this study did not employ any institutional concepts other than making a distinction between 'implicit' and 'explicit' CSR towards the beginning of the paper.

Going beyond a purely institutional approach, we found several multi-theory papers in our political CSR survey combining the application of institutional theory with another theory, which can better

explain strategic political behaviour of organizations (Child and Tsai 2005\*; Darnall 2006\*; Egels-Zandén and Wahlqvist 2007\*; McKay 2001\*). For example, Child and Tsai (2005\*) have applied institutional theory in tandem with the resource-dependence theory, precisely because institutional theory on its own was insufficient in explaining how organizations may actively attempt to influence political outcomes. Using insights from the resource-dependence theory, they highlighted how companies strategically influenced environmental regulation in China, and concluded that 'institutions are more open and pervious to corporate strategic action than is often allowed for in the literature' (p. 118). Egels-Zandén and Wahlqvist (2007\*) have applied institutional theory in tandem with actor-network theory to explore how the Business Social Compliance Initiative emerged as a result of company frustrations with the ineffectiveness of previous partnerships with governments, trade unions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Using insights from actor-network theory, they highlighted how corporate initiatives can counterbalance powerful actor-networks formed by other groups such as trade unions and NGOs. Nonetheless, it is unclear at this point to what extent institutional theory can enrich the political CSR literature, as applications of institutional theory in political CSR studies to-date tended to conceptualize companies as passive actors who largely adapt to changes in the political environment, and not as political actors in their own right (Doh and Guay 2006\*; Levy and Kolk 2002\*; Tan and Wang 2011\*; Webb 2012\*).

*Political theory.* Within the context of globalization, political theory can possibly explain more persuasively the global context within which companies proactively influence new global governance systems, most notably with reference to the posited diminished regulatory power of state institutions within the post-Westphalian order (cf. Scherer and Palazzo 2011\*). The existing political CSR scholarship from an institutional perspective is currently unable to offer an account of what the implications of these purported global changes are, or indeed offer any alternatives. In this context, applications of political theories such as Habermasian Deliberative Democracy (Baur and Palazzo 2011\*; Mena and Palazzo 2012\*; Scherer and Palazzo 2011\*; Scherer *et al.* 2006\*), the Rawlsian Theory of Justice (Bishop 2008\*; Cohen 2010\*; Hsieh 2009\*; Mäkinen and

Kourula 2012\*) and Neo-Gramscianism (Levy 2008\*; Levy and Egan 2003\*) can offer alternative macro-level frameworks for theorizing political CSR.

There is a relatively well-established tradition of applying the social contract to issues of business ethics, and this was evidenced in our sample where a contractarian approach was adopted in a total of 15 papers, including 12 papers at the macro level (e.g. Cragg 2000\*; Hartman *et al.* 2003\*; Sama 2006\*). Within this literature, discussions of Donaldson and Dunfee's integrative social contracts theory (ISCT) are prevalent (e.g. Hartman *et al.* 2003\*; van Oosterhout *et al.* 2006\*). The importance of the contractarian approach as a theoretical perspective suggests a growing concern with the legitimization of corporate activity, and a business-specific application of the social contract offers a way of explaining and legitimizing the political and social involvement of business without reliance on state regulation or indeed a legitimate state.

The social contract as presented in political philosophy was also applied by a number of papers, notably the Hobbesian account of the social contract (Palmer 2001\*) and the Lockean concept of the social contract (Marens 2007\*). Rawlsian political philosophy received significant attention (although papers applying Rawlsian theory were classified separately in our survey, as they do not all refer to his account of the social contract). Three papers applied a Rawlsian perspective at the macro level, each focusing on a different aspect of Rawlsian theory, the principles of justice (Bishop 2008\*), the duty of assistance (Hsieh 2009\*) and the moral division of labour (Mäkinen and Kourula 2012\*). However, while social contract theory and Rawlsian approaches are able to account for the responsibilities of the corporation without appealing to the state, they offer little insight into the institutional frameworks that are required in order for these responsibilities to be realized. As a consequence, this strand of theory is unable to address the legitimacy gap arising from the changing nature of global governance.

As an alternative within political theory, Habermasian theory has been increasingly adopted within political CSR research. Notably, Habermas' concept of the post-national constellation can help to explain the loss of legitimacy of nation-states and the rise of political CSR with reference to the weakening of democratic control and the growing pluralism of cultures, values and lifestyles as challenges to the

democratic order at a global level (Scherer and Palazzo 2011\*). Different authors have used insights from Habermasian theory of deliberative democracy, which assumes that politics starts at the level of deliberating civil society associations, in order to conceptualize the growing relevance of private actors in global governance processes. Specifically, this theory can help to explain the rise of companies (Scherer and Palazzo 2011\*), the rise of NGO partnerships (Baur and Palazzo 2011\*) and the rise of multi-stakeholder initiatives (Mena and Palazzo 2012\*) as legitimate political actors.

Going beyond a descriptive account, Habermasian theories have been applied to the field of political CSR in order to offer a normative account of institutional changes that will legitimize business' political CSR activities. This literature appeals to the Habermasian concept of 'deliberative democracy' and is concerned with the procedural legitimacy of political CSR, and offers the alternative of deliberative democracy as a way of addressing the legitimacy gap created by the involvement of non-state actors in political decision-making. According to this view, the political power of corporations needs to be harnessed and legitimized through a new form of democracy, where the nation state will be responsible for the implementation and protection of these new institutions. Proponents of this view argue that, in this way, the corporation will be democratically accountable, and the nation state will remain a dominant institution (Scherer and Palazzo 2007\*, 2011\*; Scherer *et al.* 2006\*).

This review suggests that there are potentially fruitful avenues for further macro-level political CSR research, including exploring further isomorphic influences and comparisons across institutional environments arising from institutional theory possibly in conjunction with a political theory, and accounts of stakeholder dialogue and institutional changes arising from Habermasian theory, albeit there has been little integration of these perspectives to date.

### *Theory at meso level*

This survey seems to indicate that, in addition to institutional theory discussed above that has meso-level applications, stakeholder theory dominates the meso-level analysis in terms of theory application in political CSR research. Stakeholder theory was specifically conceived to explain and guide organizational behaviour and, although it offers various

applications not specifically related to CSR, it has been most embedded within the CSR literature (Laplume *et al.* 2008). Key political CSR meso-level papers are presented in Table 5.

*Stakeholder theory.* Stakeholder theory spawned different variants and interpretations. Different classifications of stakeholder theory have been developed (Donaldson and Preston 1995; Gray *et al.* 1996; Hendry 2001; Kaler 2003; Steurer 2006) but, arguably, the key distinction remains between descriptive and normative perspectives (Donaldson and Preston 1995; Gray *et al.* 1996). Treviño and Weaver (1999) persuasively questioned whether an integration of descriptive (empirical) and normative (ethical) stakeholder theory is at all possible. For the purpose of using stakeholder theory as a social science theory for explaining CSR, we follow Gray *et al.* (1996, pp. 45–46) in ignoring normative stakeholder theory, 'as it has little descriptive or explanatory power in a CSR context'. Indeed, all meso-level stakeholder theory papers in our survey take a descriptive approach.

Given that stakeholder theory predicts organizational behaviour as a direct result of pressures from different stakeholders (Freeman and Reed 1983; Jawahar and McLaughlin 2001; Mitchell *et al.* 1997), previous general CSR studies have *inter alia* empirically tested the relative impact of different stakeholder attributes on a firm's CSR under certain conditions and how stakeholder pressures influence a specific firm activity (Brammer and Millington 2004; Bremmers *et al.* 2007; Lamberti and Lettieri 2009). Similarly, within political CSR research, some studies apply stakeholder theory in order to investigate the nature of stakeholder relationships and the relative salience of different external stakeholder groups with regard to firms' CSR strategies (Gilbert and Rasche 2007\*; Lucea and Doh 2012\*; Reed 2002\*).

The political uses of stakeholder management by companies have also been analysed from a stakeholder theory perspective (e.g. Halme 2002\*; Sharratt *et al.* 2007\*; Walker 2012\*). This literature explores how companies use stakeholder relations with different groups of stakeholders to influence and mediate the regulatory process. For example, Walker (2012\*) applies stakeholder theory to highlight how companies use grassroots lobbying as a means of bolstering their political as well as social and economic interests, while Sharratt *et al.* (2007\*) apply stakeholder theory to highlight how companies

Table 5. Meso-level applications of theory in political CSR

Author/year	Paper type	Theory applied	Summary of key papers
Reed 2002	Conceptual	Stakeholder Theory AND Habermasian	Argues from a critical theory perspective that two sets of factors tend to come together to increase the responsibilities of corporations active in developing countries to a full range of stakeholder groups: (a) the different (economic, political, and sociocultural) circumstances under which corporations have to operate in developing countries and (b) several key normative principles, which typically do not come into play in the context of developed countries.
Levy and Egan 2003	Conceptual	Neo-Gramscian	Develops a neo-Gramscian theoretical framework for corporate political strategy and applies the framework to analyse the international negotiations to control emissions of greenhouse gases, focusing on the responses of firms in the US and European oil and automobile industries. The analysis suggests that the conventional demarcation between market and non-market strategies is untenable.
Child and Tsai 2005	Conceptual	Institutional Theory AND Resource Dependency Theory	Combines institutional and resource dependence perspectives to develop a framework for analysing firms' strategies in relation to demands for environmental protection in emerging economies. Institutions are found to be more pervious to corporate strategic action than has been assumed by recent institutional theory, and with consequences that are not necessarily inimical to local community interests.
Sama 2006	Conceptual	Social Contract Theory	Uses ISCT to develop a conceptual model to analyse the drivers of corporate choices in the adoption and implementation of codes of conduct, and the relative power of relevant communities to the process.
Kolk and Pinkse 2007	Empirical	Institutional Theory	Explores the international dimensions of multinational firms' corporate political activities, focusing on an international issue—climate change—being implemented differently in a range of countries. Findings suggest that the type of political activities can be characterized as an information strategy to influence policy makers toward market-based solutions, not so much withholding action on emission reduction. Moreover, multinationals pursue self-regulation, targeting a broad range of political actors.
Sharratt <i>et al.</i> 2007	Empirical	Stakeholder Theory	Presents research into the way in which companies perceive the role of regulation and their relationship with the regulator. Argues that within the regulatory framework the potential for innovative social products and services appears more likely to stem from competitive activity than moral or ethical justifications.
Scherer and Palazzo 2011	Conceptual	Habermasian	Presents a review of the management and economic literature, and suggests that there are a growing number of publications from various disciplines that propose a politicized concept of corporate social responsibility, and considers the implications of this new perspective for theorizing about the business firm, governance, and democracy, with reference to Habermasian theory.
Tan and Wang 2011	Conceptual	Institutional Theory	Presents a study investigating how multinational enterprises (MNEs) balance ethical pressures from both the home and host countries. Drawing on theories from institutional theory, international business, and business ethics, a theoretical framework is applied to explain the ethical behaviour of MNEs. It is proposed that MNEs will pursue distinctive ethical strategies under different scenarios and choose the 'right' configuration of core values and peripheral components that align with the institutional environment in host countries.

influence and negotiate regulatory demands from government regulators.

However, stakeholder theory emphasizes the role of (particularly external) actors in transmitting ideas and beliefs about desirable managerial practices to

the organization and adaptation to stakeholder pressures, and this perspective is not well suited for explaining active choice behaviour in the setting of social, environmental and political strategies of companies.

*Economic theories.* An alternative to stakeholder theory at meso level are instrumental economic theories, which permit the study of the proactive political behaviour of companies. Within the strategic management literature in general, the RBV has become the dominant theoretical perspective (Acedo *et al.* 2006; Newbert 2007). The RBV has also become the dominant instrumental economic theory within the general CSR literature (Aguinis and Glavas 2012) and in political CSR research (we found six applications of the RBV in our sample).

Given that the RBV focuses on the heterogeneity of companies in terms of their strategic and resource endowments and their strategic ability to exploit internal resources (e.g. Barney 1991; Peteraf 1993; Wernerfelt 1984), work linking the RBV to CSR has suggested that specialized skills or capabilities related to investment in CSR can lead to firm-specific competitive advantages (Hart 1995; McWilliams and Siegel 2011; Russo and Fouts 1997). With regard to political CSR, a number of studies have applied the RBV in linking social/environmental issues with political questions (e.g. Banerjee 2001\*; Chan 2005\*; McWilliams *et al.* 2002\*).

Insights from the RBV can, for example, explain why companies formulate heterogeneous environmental management strategies and develop heterogeneous firm capabilities when faced with stricter environmental government legislation (Chan 2005\*) or why companies may indeed lobby for environmental legislation that is damaging to the company, if that legislation has an asymmetric impact on individual players in an industry by disproportionately raising the rivals' costs and thereby improving the company's overall competitive position (McWilliams *et al.* 2002\*). This type of inquiry can help to gain a better understanding of the proactive strategies of firms in exploiting commercial opportunities and developing capabilities related to social and environmental issues, and may help to explain why companies assume political roles in the quest for commercial advantages.

However, the literature linking the RBV to CSR has so far not provided a detailed picture of how social, environmental and political capabilities of companies are conceptualized, acquired and developed by managers, where the RBV could arguably provide the greatest insights in future. Furthermore, applications of the RBV – like other instrumental approaches – suffer from some of the same limitations as stakeholder theory by failing to incorporate insights from political theory into the role of the state

and non-state actors in governance. Scherer and Palazzo (2011\*, p. 900) noted that instrumental perspectives have not been linked 'to helpful conceptual ideas in adjacent disciplines, such as political theory, international relations, and legal studies, where the political role of private actors in global governance has already been discussed intensively'.

*Political theory.* In the face of insufficient explanations provided by the existing popular theories at meso level, political theory can supplement insights into political CSR. Political theory has been applied to political CSR at meso level with reference to cosmopolitanism (Janssens and Steyaert 2012\*), Habermasian theory (Scherer and Palazzo 2011\*) and neo-Gramscian theory (Levy and Egan 2003\*). While all these diverse perspectives view companies as active political actors within a landscape of changed global governance, the application of neo-Gramscian theory by Levy and Egan (2003\*) offers probably the clearest sense of proactive corporate strategies. For example, the neo-Gramscian concept of the three pillars of hegemony (organizational, economic and ideological pillars) can help to explain why companies use multiple strategies to obtain societal legitimacy, ranging from community investments, issue-specific associations to 'astroturf organizing', while the concept of 'war of position' points to the close integration of political and market strategies (Levy and Egan 2003\*).

However, no coherent research agenda has yet emerged on how political theory should be used to inform political CSR at the meso level, while political theories lack the fine-grained ideas about the internal processes inside companies that address issues such as capability creation and competitive advantage, which are integral to understanding the motivations behind corporate political strategies. Conversely, popular relational and instrumental theories in CSR research still require considerable refinement at the meso level in order to become relevant to political CSR.

#### *Theory at micro level*

Previous reviews of general CSR research point to a lack of attention of the extant literature to the micro level. In a recent survey of 181 papers on CSR by Aguinis and Glavas (2012), only 4% of CSR papers focused on the individual level of analysis, while 57% and 33% of CSR papers focused on the organizational and institutional levels, respectively.

In general, it has been argued that individual employees ‘as the unit of analysis have received scant attention in the CSR literature’ (Aguilera *et al.* 2007, p. 839). Bies *et al.* (2007, p. 791) posed the question of why CSR-related studies focus so little on individual corporate leadership or entrepreneurship: ‘Is this because there is so little of it, or is this because the current theories that most guide work like this, such as institutional theory, do not primarily focus on action and leadership?’

*Agency theory.* Of all the different theories used in the general CSR literature, applications of agency theory to CSR are arguably most closely focused on the micro level, examining issues such as the role of individual CEOs in setting CSR strategies (e.g. Barnea and Rubin 2010; Beliveau *et al.* 1994; Faley and Trahan 2011; Galaskiewicz 1985) or the relationship between CEO compensation and the level of CSR performance (e.g. Berrone *et al.* 2010; Deckop *et al.* 2006; McGuire *et al.* 2003). Within the political science literature, agency theory has also been used to explain how international organizations derive a significant degree of autonomy as a result of the difficulties of monitoring them by multiple principals, and as a result of incomplete contracts (Nielson and Tierney 2003; Vaubel 2006). In contrast to the above literatures, we only found one paper – albeit a notable one – that applied agency theory to political CSR in our survey. Chin *et al.* (2013\*) applied agency theory in combination with upper echelons theory to investigate how the political ideologies of CEOs influence the practice of CSR inside organizations.

*Lack of theorizing at micro level.* Agency theory aside, leading scholars often dismissed the importance of the individual level of analysis, ignoring the significance of individuals in shaping CSR. Prototypical for stakeholder theory, Jawahar and McLaughlin (2001, p. 411) asserted: ‘The stakeholder theory we present ignores individual differences’ even though ‘managers’ beliefs, values, and ideologies are likely to influence the strategies the managers use to deal with different stakeholders’. Prototypical for the RBV as the leading instrumental perspective, Hart (1995, p. 989) stated: ‘Socially complex resources depend upon large numbers of people or teams engaged in coordinated action such that few individuals, if any, have sufficient breadth of knowledge to grasp the overall phenomenon’.

Similarly, with reference to political CSR, our survey suggests that the individual level of analysis is

the least studied and the least theorized level of analysis. Despite the highlighted importance of CSR-related entrepreneurship (Baron 2007; Dixon and Clifford 2007; Spear 2006) and the cognitive, conative and linguistic dimensions of CSR (Basu and Palazzo 2008; Joutsenvirta 2009; Secchi 2009), the popular theories applied in political CSR research (just as in general CSR research) have largely ignored the significance of individuals in shaping CSR. Similarly, no general theory for guiding micro-level political CSR research has emerged to date.

In this survey, we did not find a single paper that applies a theoretical perspective to political CSR solely at the micro level of analysis. We found seven papers that apply theory to dimensions of political CSR at the micro level in parallel with another level of analysis (or 4.7% of the sample). Each of these papers addressed a different issue and applied a different theoretical lens, ranging from agency theory (Chin *et al.* 2013\*), stakeholder theory (Grit 2004\*), Habermasian discourse ethics (Gilbert and Rasche 2007\*), to cosmopolitan social theory (Maak and Pless 2009\*); these papers are briefly discussed further under multi-level research in the next section.

#### *Theory at multiple levels*

Political CSR research may benefit from research at multiple levels of analysis. Indeed, several key papers in top journals have put forward CSR frameworks for conducting research at multiple levels of analysis (Aguilera *et al.* 2007; Aguinis and Glavas 2012; Starik and Rands 1995). However, multi-level CSR studies are currently relatively scarce. In a recent survey of 181 papers on CSR by Aguinis and Glavas (2012), only 5% of CSR papers used a multi-level approach, while only 1% of papers (two out of 181 papers) combined all three levels of analysis (these two notable papers were Aguilera *et al.* 2007; Bansal and Roth 2000). In our 14-year survey, we found as many as 29 multi-level papers related to political CSR, making up almost 20% of our sample and significantly higher than the Aguinis and Glavas (2012) sample for the general CSR literature, reflecting perhaps the wider perspectives that political CSR studies necessarily take. Key political CSR multi-level papers are presented in Table 6.

*Multi-level applications in political CSR research.* The most common form of multi-level application of theory to political CSR is meso-macro, which has been applied in 22 papers.

Table 6. Multi-level applications of theory in political CSR

Level of analysis	Author/year	Paper type	Theory applied	Summary of key papers
Micro/meso	Banerjee 2001	Empirical	Stakeholder Theory AND Resource-Based View	Examines managerial perceptions of corporate environmentalism and describes how key organizational members interpret the relationship between their firm and the biophysical environment. Discusses managerial perceptions of regulatory forces, public environmental concern, top management commitment and need for competitive advantage, and how perceptions of these factors may translate into environmental strategies.
Meso/macro	Logsdon and Wood 2002	Conceptual	Stakeholder Theory	Presents a review of the development of the concept of global business citizenship and argues that Corporate Citizenship needs to be re-conceptualized on a global level in order to recognize the changing relationship between business, society and politics.
Meso/macro	McWilliams <i>et al.</i> 2002	Conceptual	Resource-Based View	Applies the RBV to suggest that it can be used to analyse the effectiveness of competitive strategies. The uses of political activity to block the availability of substitute resources are discussed in detail and examples are provided to highlight how such strategies are used and to illustrate how effective they can be.
Micro/meso	Grit 2004	Conceptual	Stakeholder	Presents an analysis of the new, complex responsibilities of management in terms of the scope and the legitimization of corporate citizenship and argues that stakeholder management fits the best with the idea of corporate citizenship, but has serious risks of failing.
Meso/macro	Scherer and Palazzo 2007	Conceptual	Habermasian	Reviews two important schools within business and society research (positivist and post-positivist corporate social responsibility) and proposes a new approach, based on Habermas's theory of deliberative democracy, and defines the new role of the business firm as a political actor in a globalizing society.
Micro/meso	Maak and Pless 2009	Conceptual	Cosmopolitan Social Theory AND Stakeholder Theory	Discusses the idea of business leaders acting as agents of world benefit, taking an active co-responsibility in generating solutions to problems. It argues that we need responsible global leaders who are aware of the pressing problems in the world, care for the needs of others, aspire to make this world a better place, and act in word and deed as global and responsible citizens. In concluding, key cosmopolitan business principles are proposed to help leaders build a more inclusive world.
Meso/macro	Weyzig 2009	Conceptual	Political Economy AND Stakeholder Theory	Analyses what types of CSR initiatives are supported by political and economic arguments. Argues that ordinary boundary conditions for business behaviour in a market economy provide support for some, but not all, CSR initiatives. It is proposed that more attention should be paid to the behaviour of large MNEs in their normal business operations and to CSR issues with a potentially large impact on market functioning.
Meso/macro	Jensen and Sandström 2011	Conceptual	Stakeholder Theory	Discusses the way in which stakeholder theory should be responding to globalization, by considering the increased power of corporations relative to states and their corresponding increased social and political responsibility.
Micro/meso	Chin <i>et al.</i> 2013	Empirical	Agency Theory AND Upper Echelons Theory	Investigates how the political ideologies of CEOs influence CSR profiles of organizations. It finds that CEOs' political ideologies are significantly related to their corporate political action committee (PAC) allocations, and that liberal CEOs exhibit greater advances in CSR compared with conservative CEOs.

This reflects academic concerns with how the firm is interacting with global institutions. The majority of the meso-macro multi-level papers (e.g. Campbell 2007\*; Logsdon and Wood 2002\*; Weyzig 2009\*) offer some kind of insight into the way in which the companies do or should behave in the context of changing international structures. This is probably most evident in studies applying a political theory at the meso/macro levels, such as the social contract perspective (Sacconi 2006\*) or Rawlsian theory of justice (Hsieh 2004\*), where firm-level analysis is conducted through consideration of the social contract between business and society or through the application of broader political theories of rights and justice. Similarly, a number of political CSR studies have applied institutional theory (Campbell 2007\*), stakeholder theory (Logsdon and Wood 2002\*) and legitimacy theory (Blasio 2007\*) to understand the relationship between firms and the institutional conditions in which they operate as economic and political actors.

Similarly, applications of theory at the micro-meso levels (e.g. Cohen 2010\*; Grit 2004\*; Maak and Pless 2009) reflect a concern with the relationship between the individual and the wider institutional conditions. Papers applying stakeholder theory (Grit 2004\*) and Cosmopolitan Social Theory (Maak and Pless 2009\*) at the micro-meso levels present the role of manager or business leader as one of global citizenship, reflecting a re-conception of the relationship between business leaders and the firm as a political actor. Thus, the presence of multi-level analysis is also evidence of a growing concern with the way in which the individual and the firm are operating as political actors in a global context.

*Multiple theoretical perspectives in political CSR research.* Our analysis in previous sections suggested that a specific theoretical perspective tends to be particularly suited to explaining phenomena at a given level (e.g. institutional theory at the macro level, the RBV at the meso level, and agency theory at the micro level). Indeed, within the general CSR literature, we can find various studies applying multiple theoretical perspectives at multiple levels of analysis, combining relational and instrumental elements (as early examples: a combination of institutional theory, instrumental-economic theory and agency theory in Beliveau *et al.* (1994); or institutional theory applied in conjunction with the RBV in Bansal and Roth (2000)).

In our sample of political CSR papers, we found seven papers that apply multiple theoretical perspectives at multiple levels. Three papers combine stakeholder theory with a political perspective (Cohen 2010\*; Maak and Pless 2009\*; Weyzig 2009\*). Drawing on different political theories, including Habermasian, Rawlsian and cosmopolitan approaches, this scholarship largely sets out to propose new normative foundations for stakeholder management and discourse as theoretical frameworks for outlining new duties for business in a changing global governance. However, this literature does not offer any basis for systematic research methodologies for studying the political role of business in CSR at multiple levels.

Future political CSR studies can usefully construct multi-level frameworks combining the wider changes in global governance at the macro level, the strategic organizational factors at the meso level, and individual perceptions at the micro level, which requires the application of multiple theoretical perspectives. Furthermore, given the importance of partnerships and multi-stakeholder initiatives in political CSR (Baur and Palazzo 2011\*; Mena and Palazzo 2012\*), future political CSR studies may also benefit from theorizing the dyad (containing two organizations) and group (containing multiple organizations) levels of analysis. Aguinis and Glavas (2012) have recently concluded that ‘a clear future research direction involves the integration of conceptual models that reside primarily on one or another level of analysis and that currently are tested independently from one another’ (p. 954). The next section will discuss directions for future political CSR research in greater depth by focusing on three broad areas: research on political CSR and the multinational enterprise (MNE); political CSR at the individual level of analysis; and domain integration in political CSR scholarship.

## Future research directions

### *Political CSR and the multinational enterprise*

The role of politics for multinational enterprises (MNEs) has long been studied in international business studies (e.g. Boddewyn 1988; Brewer 1992), and – more recently – the role of CSR for MNEs has become an important concern in international business studies (e.g. Campbell *et al.* 2012; Husted and Allen 2006). As the need for an integration of these two research strands has become obvious over the



last decade, scholars have called for new conceptual frameworks on the interface between the social/environmental and political spheres in MNEs (Levy and Prakash 2003\*; Scherer *et al.* 2006\*) and Rodriguez *et al.* (2006, p. 734) have notably argued that the integration of these ‘lenses on the MNE is fertile ground for interdisciplinary theory development and cross-country studies’ and requires ‘multi-disciplinary borrowings’. An important part of this integrative research agenda must be a better understanding of how CSR activities and CPAs are aligned in MNEs, asking questions such as: is one of them subservient or are they of equivalent importance, what specific factors affect this alignment, are there cross national variations? For instance, Integrative Social Contracts Theory can contribute insights on how MNEs use CSR as a way of legitimizing CPAs without reliance on the role of the state, while the RBV can contribute insights on how MNEs can obtain competitive advantages from aligning CSR and CPA.

An application of multiple theoretical perspectives can help to contribute new insights related to political CSR on specific topics of importance in MNE research. For example, Rodriguez *et al.* (2006) have called for cross-disciplinary research on how CSR activities are related to the incidence of corruption in MNEs, while Muller and Kolk (forthcoming) have recently called for more research on responsible payment of government tax by MNEs across different jurisdictions.

Given the significant role of foreign subsidiaries of MNEs in terms of CPAs (Blumentritt and Nigh 2002; Hillman and Wan 2005) and in terms of CSR activities (Jamali 2010; Surroca *et al.* 2013; Yang and Rivers 2009), future political CSR research could explore the integration of these activities at subsidiary level, the MNE subsidiary–headquarter relationship with regard to this integration and the characteristics of institutional environments in different host countries that impinge on this integration. Multi-theory and multi-level studies would be of particular value for this type of research. The institutional theory literature can, for example, provide insights at meso level on institutional duality – the conflicting pressures to adopt corporate practices shaped by the firm’s home country and to respond to the institutional pressures in host countries where the firm operates (cf. Hillman and Wan 2005), while Habermasian theory can provide insights on the post-national constellation – how the growing pluralism of cultures, values and lifestyles across different host countries of the MNE

can present challenges to the democratic order at a macro level (cf. Scherer and Palazzo 2011\*).

Cross-country comparative studies can yield valuable insights into contingencies that affect political CSR in MNEs in different institutional settings. Mäkinen and Kourula (2012\*, p. 670) argued that combining theoretical frameworks from the mainstream CSR literature with ‘political theories and international business and comparative economics offers a more in-depth analysis of CSR in different institutional contexts’. A particularly exciting area for future research would be the variability of political CSR approaches among MNE subsidiaries in different developing/emerging economies, given that governments in such economies are often assumed to lack the capacity to effectively regulate social and environmental issues that can give rise to pressures for voluntary CSR initiatives by MNEs, on the one hand (Börzel and Risse 2010; Frynas 2012; Jamali 2010), while governments in some developing/emerging economies such as China, India and Indonesia have started to introduce mandatory legal provisions in order to regulate CSR, on the other hand (Kumar 2014; Marquis and Qian 2014; Waagstein 2011).

Finally, given that the development of political resources by MNEs has been shown to be linked to long-term cooperative interactions and reciprocity by the actors involved (Frynas *et al.* 2006; Sun *et al.* 2010), political CSR research would benefit from longitudinal case studies that apply a combination of theories to investigate how MNEs acquire, integrate and sustain political and social resources, and how political CSR evolves over the long term.

#### *Individual level of analysis*

Given the explicitly political nature of political CSR research that focuses on macro and meso levels of analysis, it is perhaps less surprising that theoretical applications are considerably less common at the micro level of analysis. However, the absence of micro-level theorizing points to a major gap in the political CSR literature by failing to account for the significance of cognition. Indeed, political CSR research has so far failed to draw on existing micro-level theory applications in the general CSR literature and in the general management literature. Building on existing theory applications in the extant literature, one promising avenue for future political CSR studies would be to apply institutional theory and the RBV with regard to the individual level of analysis.

Several authors have applied institutional theory to CSR with reference to individual decision-making, by setting out to study internal institutional determinants focusing on the mental frames and sensemaking processes within which CSR is embedded (Angus-Leppan *et al.* 2010; Basu and Palazzo 2008; Roxas and Coetzer 2012). Within the general CSR literature, the sensemaking approach has been applied by various authors at the micro level to explore individual-level perceptions of CEOs and other decision-makers (e.g. Cramer *et al.* 2004; Fassin and van Rossem 2009), and to address specific issues such as leadership styles (Angus-Leppan *et al.* 2010) and cross-national differences in the meaning of stakeholder management and CSR (Fassin *et al.* forthcoming; Schlierer *et al.* 2012). Within the general management literature, a political sensemaking approach has been used by various authors to explore issues such as political tactics of middle managers in change management (Hope 2010) and political aspects of strategic management in organizational restructuring (Clark 2004).

Highly relevant to political CSR, sensemaking studies have from early on explored how sensemaking precipitates or unfolds during crises, notably portraying environmental disasters as politically constructed phenomena that produce contested accounts of reality (Gephart Jr. 1984; Weick 1988). This type of inquiry points to the value of micro-level theorizing as an avenue for studying the subjective nature of political CSR realities. With a view that 'micro level sensemaking practices produce the macro social order' (Maitlis and Sonenshein 2010, p. 555), studies highlight how micro-level shifts in behaviour and collective sensemaking can lead to social changes at the macro level (Sonenshein 2006; Weick 1999). Political CSR scholarship could profitably use institutional theory to link these micro-level sensemaking practices to macro-level institutional practices.

Similarly, political CSR scholars may begin to apply the RBV with regard to the individual level. The existing RBV scholarship has been criticized for treating processes by which resources and capabilities are deployed as a 'black box' and for not sufficiently recognizing 'the role of the individual judgments or mental models of entrepreneurs and managers' (Kraaijenbrink *et al.* 2010, p. 356), but the RBV can be readily used at the individual level. On the one hand, it has been argued that the RBV could build on Austrian economics to make it relevant to the individual level (Foss and Ishikawa 2007; Kraaijenbrink *et al.* 2010; Lewin and Phelan 1999),

and calls have been made to use Austrian economics in CSR research (Frynas 2009; Maxfield 2008). In contrast to the RBV, which is rooted in neo-classical economics and its assumption of competitive equilibrium model, Austrian economics focuses on the market process and assumes that market conditions are always dynamic, and above-average profits within a competitive market result from innovation and finding new opportunities, with the cognitive abilities of entrepreneurs playing a key role in allocating productive resources over time. Individual-level Austrian perspective on political CSR would suggest that asymmetric information and heterogeneity assumptions of the current RBV scholarship are not enough to explain strategic differences between firms' political CSR. Rather, strategic choices and outcomes can be explained on the basis of divergence of perceptions or expectations – asymmetric expectations – among economic actors, recognizing that political and social/environmental information is interpreted differently by different actors.

On the other hand, it has been argued that the existing shortcomings of the RBV could be addressed with insights from the strategy-as-practice perspective (Ambrosini *et al.* 2007; Jarzabkowski 2005; Johnson *et al.* 2003) by providing (in the words of one proponent) 'a more micro focus on those activities and actions from which socially complex resources are constituted' (Jarzabkowski 2005, p. 7). While the above-discussed sensemaking approach has been criticized for its purely subjective interpretative focus and the lack of consideration of power and strategic constraints (Child 1997; Whittington 1988), the strategy-as-practice perspective is concerned with situated theories of action, and links everyday activities that take place inside organizations directly to strategic outcomes. Building on strategy-as-practice empirical studies on other research areas (Ambrosini *et al.* 2007; Jarzabkowski 2003; Sharp and Zaidman 2009), political CSR studies could apply the RBV, for example, with reference to a comparative case-study approach to explore how managers conceptualize and create political and social/environmental resources, or to use the effectiveness of business processes (e.g. resource allocation or customer services) as the dependent variable, instead of the commonly used overall firm performance, which could help in understanding the political CSR–performance link better.

One key area for future research would be to investigate how senior managers in companies

conceptualize the relationship between political and social/environmental issues. It would appear that senior managers can view CSR and CPA as substitutes and thus jointly manage them, or they can view CSR and CPA as distinct arenas and thus ignore the relationship between political and social/environmental issues (den Hond *et al.* 2014). The institutional-sensemaking approach or the RBV could be used to investigate, in particular, to what extent senior executives in MNE subsidiaries conceive of CSR in host countries as a substitute for CPA, and then investigate the variability of these attitudes according to different characteristics (e.g. influence of institutional context, industry sector, subsidiary type or nationality of managers).

Another key area for future research would be the cognitive aspects of corporate illegal activities. While individual characteristics of top executives and top management teams are arguably key predictors of corporate illegal activities (Daboub *et al.* 1995), there has been little research on corporate illegal activities at the individual level of analysis. With reference to corruption, Rodriguez *et al.* (2006, p. 739) argued that 'surprisingly, most of what we know about corruption has almost nothing directly to do with the individuals who engage in the practice'. The institutional-sensemaking approach or the RBV could be applied at the individual level to investigate a range of illegal activities beyond corruption, such as tax evasion or anti-trust violations.

#### *Domain integration*

While domains A, B and C have often been studied as part of discrete research agendas, albeit with some overlaps, a number of scholars have indicated that future research could benefit from the integration of these different domains, linking the macro level and the meso level of analysis as well as linking the domestic and international political processes (Lawton *et al.* 2013; Levy and Prakash 2003\*; Rodriguez *et al.* 2006). Such an integration could help to understand better the contingencies under which firms are able to purposefully influence governments and institutional arrangements (domain A), under which firms may inadvertently affect and be affected by institutions (domain B) or under which firms more passively react to changes in the external political environment (domain C). Despite the benefits offered by domain integration, only ten of the articles included in this survey addressed all three domains (or less than 7%),

suggesting that there is much scope for future work in this area.

Given that research on a given domain may require different conceptual underpinnings, domain integration requires the application of multi-theory approaches. Based on the extant literature on CPA, Lawton *et al.* (2013) proposed that domain A may especially benefit from the application of the RBV, which is able to explain proactive firm strategies persuasively, although only one paper in our survey (McWilliams *et al.* 2002\*) took such an approach. Domain B may especially benefit from the application of institutional theory that can explain how firms are interdependent with the institutional structures within which they operate, as is evidenced by the popularity of institutional theory applied to domain B in this survey (e.g. Detomasi 2007\*; Levy *et al.* 2010\*; Slager *et al.* 2012\*). Domain C is more ambiguous, since reactions of firms to external pressures may be explained on the basis of various established relational theories, including stakeholder theory, legitimacy theory or social network theory, but political CSR studies already commonly use institutional theory to explain domain C phenomena (e.g. Child and Tsai 2005\*; Doh and Guay 2006\*; Ruihua and Bansal 2003\*).

It follows that a combination of the RBV and institutional theory may provide a convenient starting point for future political CSR research across domains, even if such research may still benefit from additional insights and borrowings. Indeed, multi-theory studies applying a combination of institutional theory and RBV have recently been on the rise within the general CSR literature (Aguilera-Caracuel *et al.* 2012; Arevalo *et al.* 2013; Escobar and Vredenburg 2011; Lin 2012; Lourenço *et al.* 2012; Menguc *et al.* 2010; Perego and Kolk 2012), although only one paper in our political CSR survey combined the institutional theory and RBV (Darnall 2006\*) indicating that the full value of this approach has yet to be realized in the area of political CSR.

Going beyond the existing general CSR research, the integration of political CSR domains can greatly benefit from political theory contributions. As this survey suggested earlier, political theories can help to explain the increasing legitimation process of companies as political actors without reliance on the role of the state (most relevant to domains B and C) as well as proactive CPA within a landscape of changed global governance (most relevant to domain A). Political theory has been enthusiastically embraced by the key recent conceptual papers that

advocate political CSR as a new and distinct area of research with distinct theoretical approaches, notwithstanding whether they advocate Habermasian (Scherer and Palazzo 2011\*), Rawlsian (Mäkinen and Kourula 2012\*) or Kantian (Whelan 2012\*) political theories.

We can think of various specific strands of political CSR research that would benefit from a multi-domain lens. One important area for future research is 'private corruption', given that most of the research on corruption focuses on government corruption and its impact on company operations (domain C phenomena) (e.g. Brouthers *et al.* 2008; Rodriguez *et al.* 2005; Rose-Ackermann 1999), while we know little about company strategies for addressing corruption, substitution effects between CSR and corruption, or the influence of corporate actions on corrupt external environments (domain A and B phenomena). Incidence of corruption remains (in the words of Rodriguez *et al.* 2006, p. 738) 'a particularly important issue that may be better addressed through links with CSR and political strategies', and it would be important to integrate current work on government corruption with work on private corruption through a multi-domain and multi-theory lens. Research on other corporate illegal activities (e.g. tax evasion or anti-trust violations) could arguably also benefit from a multi-domain and multi-theory lens.

Another important area for future research relates to the outcomes of CSR and CPA for other stakeholder groups. While there is a long tradition of investigating the link between CSR and firm performance (Bragdon and Marlin 1972; Moskowitz 1972; cf. Carroll and Shabana 2010) and the link between CPAs and firm performance (Hillman *et al.* 1999; Leone 1986; cf. Lawton *et al.* 2013), it has been argued that we know 'little about the real outcomes of CSR as judged in terms of the impact on its stated beneficiaries (e.g. poor and marginalized people, the natural environment, local communities)' (Blowfield 2007, p. 685). Future research would benefit from a multi-domain and multi-theory lens in exploring *inter alia* institutional differences between countries with regard to maximizing the outcomes from CSR for other stakeholder groups (domain C), the impact of CPAs on the outcomes for other stakeholder groups (domain A) or unintended effects of firm activities on such outcomes (domain B). The next and final section of the paper will summarize the main findings and the main directions for future research across domains.

## Conclusions

This paper set out to review how general theoretical perspectives have actually been applied within political CSR research. Our survey indicates that the political CSR field is dominated by institutional theory and stakeholder theory, but these dominant theories cannot satisfactorily account for changes in global governance and the assumption of political roles by companies. Future theory development needs to go beyond these two theories in order to address a number of critical gaps.

This review points to several avenues for future political CSR theorizing with regard to political CSR in MNEs, the individual level of analysis and domain integration. We suggest that a combination of the RBV and institutional theory may provide a convenient starting point for future political CSR research across domains and may enrich future research on a range of specific topics such as the CPA-CSR integration in MNE subsidiaries, corporate illegal activities such as corruption, or cognitive differences with regard to the relationship between political and social/environmental issues. However, the established theories in business and management research need to be linked to political theories that can satisfactorily explain wider changes in global governance and the new political roles of companies.

A key contribution of this paper has been to review and theorize political CSR research at different levels of analysis. Given the complex and multi-faceted nature of political CSR, future studies should improve and refine methodologies for studying political CSR at multiple levels of analysis. In the words of Aguinis and Glavas (2012, p. 957), 'it will be the integration of variables at different levels of analysis that has the greatest potential to move the [CSR] field forward'. Given that a specific theoretical perspective tends to be particularly suited to explaining phenomena at a given level of analysis, future multi-level studies should be underpinned by multiple theoretical perspectives. Political CSR scholars can learn many valuable lessons from scholarship in other management fields where such scholarship is already well established, in terms of constructing multi-level, multi-theory frameworks (e.g. Hitt *et al.* 2007; Klein *et al.* 1994) and in terms of devising appropriate research methodologies for multi-level studies (e.g. Peterson *et al.* 2012; Zhang *et al.* 2009). Furthermore, prior scholarship in other management fields can provide valuable lessons for theorizing the dyad and group levels (e.g. Dansereau

*et al.* 1999; Johnson *et al.* 1996). Internalizing these lessons will be crucial for advancing empirical research in political CSR, which has been scarce until now (in our survey, only 26% of papers were empirical), as political CSR scholarship moves beyond the current focus on developing conceptual frameworks.

What is clear from our analysis is that no single theoretical perspective can offer fully satisfactory predictions and prescriptions for political CSR research. At this point, it may be useful to reiterate that political CSR is a very broad movement and the emergence of a single, testable, unified multi-theory model of political CSR is unlikely and perhaps undesirable. We need to accept that theoretical perspectives on political CSR are competing and sometimes overlapping, and may occasionally combine descriptive and normative elements. Nonetheless, political CSR research can benefit from combining multiple theoretical perspectives, as different theories can contribute complementary insights at different levels. Such a pluralist approach may allow for more robust and richer theory building.

Our pluralist approach to political CSR allows for a more inclusive and more critical analysis that reassesses some of the key assumptions of the current political CSR scholarship. Most notably, the axiomatic assumption of leading scholarly contributions on political CSR about the loss of power by national governments in a globalized economy (e.g. Mäkinen and Kourula 2012\*; Scherer and Palazzo 2007\* and 2011\*) may be misplaced and misleading in the light of many scholarly contributions within political science and the mounting evidence from around the world of government intervention with regard to CSR.

On the one hand, while political scientists and legal scholars clearly acknowledge an increased importance of non-state actors and private social and environmental regulation in global governance (e.g. Abbott and Snidal 2010; Bernstein and Cashore 2007; Braithwaite and Drahos 2000), political science scholarship suggests that state power remains strong and, indeed, remains a necessary precondition for successful economic globalization (e.g. Evans 1997; Kim 2013; Weiss 2000) and, most notably, political science scholars continue to puzzle over the enduring power of authoritarian states in a globalizing world (e.g. Diamond 2002; Gat 2007; Magaloni and Kricheli 2010). On the other hand, CSR scholarship provides mounting evidence that governments increasingly intervene to influence

CSR standards, multi-stakeholder CSR initiatives and sustainability reporting: for example, Denmark's National Action Plans for CSR launched in 2008 and 2012 (Knudsen and Brown forthcoming), Indonesia's corporate and investment laws in 2007 that required companies to implement social and environmental responsibilities (Waagstein 2011), the Chinese government's attempt at promoting its own version of CSR through a plethora of guidelines and regulations since 2006 (Marquis and Qian 2014) or the requirement in India's Companies Act 2013 for large companies to spend 2% of their profits on CSR-related activities (Kumar 2014), to name a few (for an overview of government policies on CSR with a European focus, see Knudsen *et al.* (forthcoming)).

With regard to political CSR, this scholarship points to, on the one hand, the increasingly blurred boundary between mandatory regulation and voluntary 'beyond the law' CSR interventions and, on the other hand, to the attempts at the reassertion of power by the national state with regard to CSR. This should not come as a big surprise, since CSR can be very attractive to governments, as CSR 'can substitute for government effort; it can complement government effort; and it can legitimize government policies' (Moon 2002, p. 399). By extension, we require a new research agenda for theory-informed political CSR research in terms of reassessing the role of the state. Political theory and broader insights from political science have an important role to play in this endeavour beyond their current use by political CSR scholars, who at present largely apply political theory in a very selective manner in order to justify the power of non-state actors in a globalizing economy. In this context, current political CSR-related scholarship suffers from the lack of involvement of political scientists. A reassessment of the role of the state presents an important challenge for future political CSR researchers, as it may lead to a richer understanding of the actual political influence of companies, the companies' role within global governance or the nature and effectiveness of new hybrid forms of social and environmental regulations.

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