Public value and political astuteness in the work of public managers: The art of the possible

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Abstract

The public value framework, with its call for more entrepreneurial activities by public managers, has attracted concern and criticism about its implicit breaching of the politics/administration dichotomy. This paper explores the role of political astuteness not only in discerning and creating public value, but also in enabling public managers to be sensitive to the dichotomy. We employ a conceptual framework to identify the skills of political astuteness, and then articulate these in relation to identifying and generating public value. Drawing on a survey of 1012 public managers in Australia, New Zealand and the UK, and depth interviews with 42 of them, we examine the perceptions and capabilities of public managers in producing value for the public while traversing the line (or zone) between politics and administration. We conclude that political astuteness is essential to both creating value and maintaining allegiance to democratic principles.

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Introduction

The 'politics/administration dichotomy' – the principle that politicians should not interfere with public administration and appointed public servants should not encroach on the realm of politics – has waxed and waned as a topic of interest in public administration (see Campbell and Peters 1988; Aberbach and Rockman 1988; Svara 2006; Peters 2010). However, the emergence of the public value (PV) framework (Moore 1995) has reanimated the debate in recent years, most particularly in its call for public managers to be more entrepreneurial and strategic, which implies some degree of discretion in activities undertaken and goals pursued, a need for public servants to operate with a degree of political 'nous' or astuteness.

Two issues run through this debate. One is the extent to which public managers actually *are* 'political' in their work; the second is how *legitimate* it is for them to be political in their work. These issues have a long history, but seem to have resisted resolution, partly because the empirical evidence has been fairly modest. In this article, we shed light on these two issues with both conceptual and empirical contributions based on empirical data from a survey of 1012 public managers and from in-depth interviews with 42 of them in three countries (Australia, New Zealand and the UK), and across a range of governments and agencies.

We argue that political astuteness is a valuable set of capabilities (skills, knowledge and judgement (Boyatzis 2006)) that helps public service managers to discern and create public value through their work. Drawing on the public value framework (Moore 1995), we examine the activities of public servants in the 'political' space, suggesting that their efforts to create public value are underpinned by political astuteness. The apparent paradox is that the greater the political astuteness of public servants, the more capable they are of recognising and working within the acceptable 'zone' between politics and administration – and therefore not being 'too political'.

Theoretical background and literature

The politics/administration dichotomy has been the subject of periodic contention since Woodrow Wilson (1887) first formulated it (see also Weber 1922). Historically, it has had strong normative force, founded in affirmation of the principle that unelected bureaucrats should be subordinate to elected politicians (Goodnow 1900; see Shafritz and Hyde 1987). However, a long line of scholars has argued that the pure dichotomy rarely holds in practice. In reality, they contend, the line between the two domains is rather blurred, and often crossed by politicians and/or bureaucrats in their work (Waldo 1948/84; Mosher 1968; Aberbach *et al.* 1981; Aberbach and Rockman 1988; Svara 2001; Campbell and Peters 1988; Krause

1999; Hughes 2012; Carboni 2010; Demir and Reddick 2012; Demir and Nyhan 2008). A recent variant posits a complementarity between the two domains (Svara 2006; Miller and Wright 2011; Zhang 2014).

More recently, the debate has been reanimated by Moore's (1995) public value model. Its critics charge that public value theory implicitly violates the dichotomy, casting public managers as 'platonic guardians and arbiters of the public interest...' (Rhodes and Wanna 2007, 412), and thereby encourages them to 'usurp the democratic will' (Rhodes and Wanna 2009, 180; see also Stoker 2006; West and Davis 2011). This critique clearly frames managerial involvement in politics, broadly defined, as illegitimate.

While there is much heat in the politics/administration debate, the light is less intense. Svara (2006, 970) notes that 'the topic has often elicited commentary unencumbered by data'. The available empirical research suggests that public managers vary in the extent to which they venture into the realm of the politicians (Stocker and Thompson-Fawcett 2014), but those who do so are more prevalent (Aberbach *et al.* 1981; Peters 1987). While politicians tend to dominate the setting of the policy agenda, career public servants exercise predominant influence in generating alternative options and in modifying policies in light of operational feedback (Kingdon 2011). Bureaucratic influence may be more likely in situations where politicians' leadership is weak (Zhang 2014). Surveys of city managers by Demir and Nyhan (2008) and Boyne et al (2010) did not find empirical support for tendencies predicted by the dichotomy (see also 't Hart and Wille 2006). Despite these contributions, further evidence is sorely needed.

Parallel to this political science literature, the generic management field is also home to a debate about the role of politics in management, though deploying different frameworks. This literature, which has tended to focus more on 'micro'-situations involving individual pursuit of self-interest or small group machinations, has traditionally viewed managerial political behaviours as 'politicking', which distorted the rational, evidence-based skills and judgements of managers. It was manipulative, self-promoting and 'Machiavellian' (Ferris *et al.* 2002; Vigoda-Gadot and Drory 2006). Those subscribing to this 'dark side' view of politics conceptualized it as both dysfunctional and illegitimate (Mintzberg 1983).

However, a growing literature adopts a more constructive view of organizational politics – in particular, that it is not solely a matter of conflict and contention, but also of efforts to bring actors together to achieve constructive outcomes for the organization or for society, including 'those activities used to advocate for and reconcile multiple interests and goals' (Smith *et al*. 2009, 430; see also Butcher and Clarke 1999). Rouleau and Balogun (2011, 956) note 'increasing evidence from research on both senior and middle managers of their need to be "politically able".' Madison *et al.* (1980) and March (1984) argue that as a manager moves up the hierarchy, objectives become more ambiguous and conflicting, with more scope and requirement for political behaviours. Thus, the generic management literature has started to rehabilitate politics as a valuable and even necessary skill for managers, particularly in senior ranks.

Turning to the overlap between the two literatures, there has been less attention to *public* managers, whose work intertwines not just with organizational politics but also directly with the work of politicians, public policy and the public. Theoretical studies have explored how public managers are more effective where they are politically aware (Baddeley and James 1987a; 1987b; Hartley *et al.* 2013). Charlesworth *et al.* (2003) touch on the value of political skills for navigating both organizational and formal external politics, but only as part of a larger study.

The literatures indicate varied meanings of the concept of politics, and many writers offer a range (Aberbach and Rockman 1988; Leftwich 2004; Stoker 2006). Here we note three different conceptualizations, each of which is relevant to considering public value and political astuteness, and which interconnects in the 'politics/administration' debate. The first is the formal institutions and processes of the state, and the elected politicians who form its governance. The dichotomy is partly predicated on this definition of formal, electoral politics, and the presumed desirability of keeping appointed officials separate from politicians. The second concept concerns party politics, where again public servants are expected to show neutrality (Asmeron and Reis 1996), particularly where such engagement is not permitted, as in Westminster systems (Hood and Lodge 2006). The third definition includes both formal and informal activities to do with 'managing' diverse and sometimes competing interests in groups, organizations and societies, in ways to achieve acceptable outcomes (Hartley and Fletcher 2008). We draw on each of these nuances of politics because each is germane to the literatures, the conceptual frameworks and empirical evidence we examine in this paper.

In summary, the literatures display varied views about the existence and legitimacy of politics and political skill in public managers' work, and this highlights the pressing need for further conceptualization and systematic evidence. There are questions to answer about how public servants understand their roles and whether and how political astuteness helps them both to undertake their work and also to navigate appropriately 'the line' between themselves and politicians. This paper offers a capabilities perspective, by using political astuteness, which has rarely been applied to these roles and relationships, to explore these matters. It uses the public value framework to look beyond roles and norms in the debate to activities undertaken by public managers.

Political astuteness

Political astuteness is an increasingly valuable element in managerial work across all sectors, due to diverse interests and politics inside and outside the organization, particularly for those in more senior positions (Gandz and Murray 1980). Other terms include: political savvy, (Chao et al 1994; Ferris et al 2005); political acumen (e.g. Perrewé and Nelson 2004; Dutton *et al*. 2001); political nous (Baddeley and James 1987a; 1990; Squires 2001); socio-political intelligence (Burke 2006); political antenna ('t Hart 2011; Benington 2011); and political sensitivity (Page 2012; Vredenburgh and Maurer 1984).

Political astuteness as used here, following an extensive literature review and empirical research (Hartley *et al*. 2013) is a set of capabilities (skills, knowledge, judgement and behaviours). Here, the competences and behaviours constituting political astuteness overlap with those reviewed in the literatures above – and to that extent cannot be seen as alien to them. They are like many of those in other spheres, but in this case relevant to politics in the terms we have described it. Like Buchanan (2008), we use the term 'skills' to cover these varied competencies. Political astuteness is defined as '…deploying political skills in situations involving diverse and sometimes competing interests and stakeholders, in order to achieve sufficient alignment of interests and/or consent in order to achieve outcomes' (Hartley *et al*. 2013, 24). This approach is neutral about outcomes, so political astuteness may or may not achieve public value outcomes (as defined by Benington and Moore 2011). It encompasses 'small p' as well as 'big P' politics – the informal as well as the formal. Thus 'political' is not solely about formal institutions and actors, nor even only about partisan politics, but also includes political interactions with the wider set of issues, arenas and stakeholders referred to above. This broader conception offers room to consider organisational politics, and the related organisation theories, alongside the various understandings in political science.

Attempts to identify and assess the political skills of managers have been sparse (see Buchanan 2008; Silvester 2008). The current authors developed a conceptual framework of the capabilities (skills) of political astuteness, operationalized as a 50 item questionnaire, and rigorously tested statistically in other research (Hartley and Fletcher, 2008, 2014). The five dimensions of the framework are robust and items in each dimension justified both theoretically and empirically. This framework is sketched in Table 1. The five dimensions are: Personal Skills; Interpersonal Skills; Reading People and Situations; Building Alignment and Alliances; and Strategic Direction and Scanning. Together, these form a meta-competency (Briscoe and Hall 1999) in that the exercise of such skills effectively requires competence in each dimension, though certain dimensions may be salient for certain activities. The elements of each dimension were derived from extensive research with UK managers and substantiated by confirmatory factor analysis from two further countries.

TABLE 1 *The framework of political astuteness skills*

| Dimension	Description
Strategic direction and scanning	Strategic thinking and action in relation to organizational purpose. Thinking long-term and having a road map of the journey. Not diverted by short-term pressures. Scanning: thinking about longer-term issues in the environment which may potentially have an impact on the organization. Attention to what is over the horizon. Analytical capacity to think through scenarios of possible futures. Noticing small changes which may herald bigger shifts in society. Analysing and managing uncertainty. Keeping options open rather than reaching for a decision prematurely.
Building alignment and alliances	Detailed appreciation of context, players and objectives of stakeholders in relation to the alignment goal. Recognizing difference and plurality and forge them into collaborative action even where there are substantial differences in outlook or emphasis. Works with difference and conflicts of interest not just finding consensus and commonality. Actively seeking out alliances and partnerships rather than relying on those already in existence. Ability to bring difficult issues into the open and deal with differences between stakeholders. Knowing when to exclude particular interests. Creating useful and realistic consensus not common denominator.
Reading people and situations	Analysing or intuiting the dynamics which can or might occur when stakeholders and agendas come together. Recognition of different interests and agendas of both people and their organizations. Discerning the underlying not just the espoused agendas. Thinking through the likely standpoints of various interests groups in advance. Using knowledge of institutions, processes and social systems to understand what is or what might happen. Recognizing when you may be seen as a threat to others. Understanding power relations.
Interpersonal skills	'Soft' skills: ability to influence the thinking and behaviour of others. Getting buy-in from those over whom the person has no direct authority. Making people feel valued.
	'Tough' skills: ability to negotiate, able to stand up to pressures from other people, able to handle conflict in order to achieve constructive outcomes. Coaching and mentoring individuals to develop their own political skills.
Personal skills	Self-awareness of one's own motives and behaviours. Ability to exercise self-control, being open to the views of others, ability to listen to others and reflect on and be curious about their views. Having a proactive disposition (initiating rather than passively waiting for things to happen).

Source: Hartley et al. 2013.

Public value

Public value was first expounded by Moore (1995; see also Benington and Moore 2011; Moore 2013; and Alford and O'Flynn (2009). (There is another strand of scholarship that goes under the label 'public values', most strongly identified with Bozeman (see e.g. Jørgensen and Bozeman 2007). This sees values as norms or personally held principles, by contrast with Moore's work, in which value is more akin to 'worth' or 'usefulness' (Rainey 2009)).

Public value can potentially be created by a variety of entities, including public organizations, private contractors, non-profits, volunteers and citizens (Moore 1995). It is created when processes, outputs and outcomes are valued by the public or add value to the public sphere. Citizens value them in part because they gain individually from them, directly or indirectly, even though they can only do so through a collective mechanism. They also value their aspirations for society as a whole (Moore 1995; Tyler 1990; Etzioni 1988), such as concern for the environment, fairness and equity, or national pride. Making choices among them typically calls for public deliberation as well as decisions by elected representatives, so there is also value in the institutional arrangements that underpin that deliberation (Benington 2011).

However, ascertaining and creating what is valuable to the public and to the public sphere is very challenging for public managers; they may not be able to discern these things solely through politicians' instructions. Moore offers a way of making sense of these challenges: the 'strategic triangle' (Figure 1) (Moore 1995).

Moore argues that public managers undertake three activities in trying to create public value. First, they seek to discern and formulate purposes that are intended to create or enhance public value. Second, they work to gain legitimacy and support from the relevant authorizing environment, comprising elected politicians and other stakeholders, with differential legitimacy and power. Third, they seek to garner the capacities necessary to achieve the public value goal, either from within their own organization or from external parties, such as volunteers or private contractors. Moore argues that the manager's job is to bring these factors into some degree of alignment in order to achieve public value (1995; see also: Benington and Moore 2011; Alford and O'Flynn 2009).

While the framework is deceptively simple in abstract, each corner of the triangle poses challenges for the public manager's job, especially in creating alignment across them. This stems, essentially, from the nature of the public domain where purposes, processes, outcomes are often contested or complex because citizens, as individuals and groups, have varied and sometimes conflicting interests (Hoggett 2006;). Hughes (2012) notes that external stakeholders were not considered particularly important in the traditional model of public administration, but that this is no longer true, and that public managers as well as politicians

FIGURE 1: *The strategic triangle*
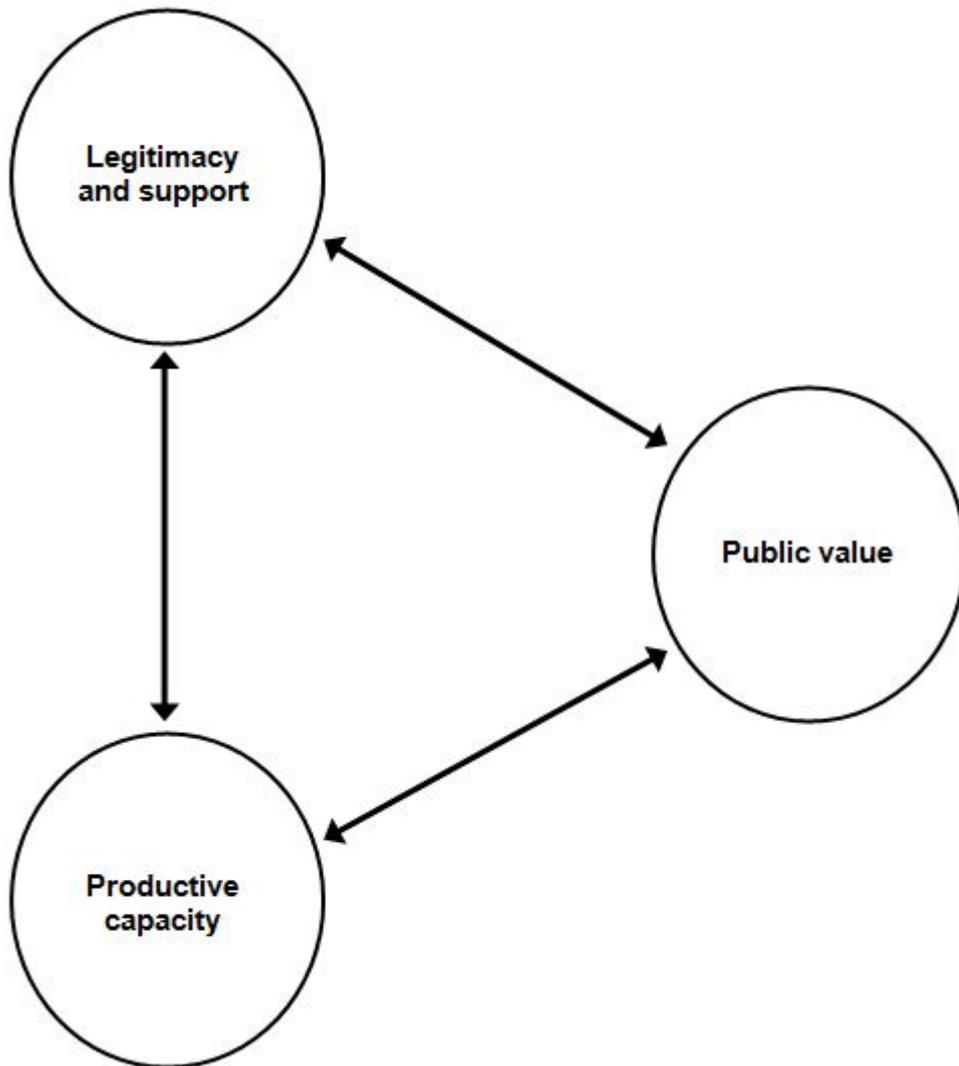
Source: Moore 2013, p. 103.

try to address some of the conflicting interests across a society. The diversity of interests also means that simple consensus is unrealistic.

Prima facie, therefore, discerning and creating public value requires political astuteness or sensitivity, to elected politicians and to a range of diverse interests. But perhaps surprisingly for a construct that implies a more entrepreneurial role for public managers, the public value framework has little to say about political astuteness. This paper is a contribution to filling that gap. First we explain our methodology.

Research design and methods

This paper analyses quantitative and qualitative data from public servants in three countries: Australia, New Zealand and the UK (all variations on the Westminster system where political neutrality of public servants is core). We undertook a survey with senior and mid-ranking public servants in the three countries, and this paper analyses the responses in aggregate; it is *not* a comparative study because the aim is to understand the relationship between public value and political astuteness in general rather than by country.

The survey sample consisted of 1,012 managers working at national/federal level in all three countries, as well as state and territory government for Australia, and local government for the UK (broadly equivalent in size and scope to some state governments). 81% of the participants self-identified as senior or very senior managers, and the remainder were middle managers. They worked in a wide range of geographical locations, type of public service organization, and type of role.

Participants were chosen to be as representative as possible of each country through using dominant institutional structures to recruit participants. In the UK, participants were members of the major UK professional body for managers. In Australia and New Zealand, the central agency responsible for government employment in each jurisdiction sent out invitations to managers in the Senior Executive Service (or equivalent) to participate in the study. The survey was completely anonymous, though if they volunteered for interview they were asked to supply an email address at the end of the survey.

Some of the survey items focused on aspects of formal politics and others on informal politics, but many entailed both, consistently with our more expansive conception of politics. The survey was designed to elicit responses about what public managers understood by politics in their own work as a manager; the contexts in which they used political skills; their rating of their own skills and, separately, their ratings of fellow senior managers; and how they had acquired any political astuteness. Not all these data are reported here.

Our 42 interviews encompassed national, state and local governments, and central and line agencies as well as a range of professional services (e.g. policing, environment, and human services). The interviewees were a selection of volunteers from survey participants, and additional interviews were included from a related research project in the UK. Respondents were reassured that responses would be anonymized. The interviews were semi-structured and followed up some of the survey areas in more depth. All interviews except three were audio-recorded (detailed notes were taken for the rest). Analysis was by thematic coding using NVivo (Robson 2011) and keyword searches. We did not use interviews to assess the frequency of particular views and reported behaviours and skills, but rather in an interpretive way to understand the skills and judgements that can underpin public value activities.

Findings: Political astuteness in public value

We now bring political astuteness and public value together. We first address whether public managers *are* political in their work, by considering the role of political skills in each of the three activities involved in the public value 'triangle': value, authorization and productive capacities. In each case, we infer the theoretical imperatives of each activity, then organize the empirical findings (quantitative and qualitative) around the two research questions: A subsequent section asks to what extent it is *legitimate* for public managers to engage in politics.

Are public managers political?

The survey shows that public servants, in aggregate, find certain political skills 'very' or 'extremely' valuable (ratings of 3 and 4 on a scale from 0-4) in their own work. These were: 'dealing with ministers' (mean of 3.42; SD .79); 'dealing with other politicians' (2.96; SD .92); 'working with local or regional government' (3.20; SD .93); 'dealing with central agencies such as the Treasury or the PM/Premier's department' (3.14; SD .79); and 'how public opinion has an impact on your organization' (3.10; SD .79). Hence they apply their political skills externally both to formal politics and to relevant stakeholders, and internally to their own organizations. Another question asked about the use of political skill in their own organization (i.e. not necessarily in their own work); across the three countries, the most popular choices from a list of 12 were: 'shaping key priorities within the organization' (68%); 'influencing external decision-makers e.g. politicians or central agencies' (60%); 'building partnerships with external partners' (57%); 'managing risks for the organization' (53%); and 'competing for resources within the organization' (45%) – see Table 2 for a complete list. Thus political skills again loom large. The following sections explore key elements.

TABLE 2 *For which of the following activities are political skills most important in your organisation?**

Activity	% selecting activity
Shaping key priorities within the organisation	68
Influencing external decision-makers e.g. politicians or central agencies	60
Building partnerships with external partners	57
Managing risks for the organisation	53
Competing for resources within the organisation	45
Promoting the reputation of the organisation	43
Influencing internal decision-makers	42
Analysing key future activities which may impact on the organisation	38
Overcoming conflict and tensions within the organisation	32
Securing external funding for your work	31
Reducing external criticism or negative media stories	27
Individual career advancement	13

*Participants were asked to select their top five options

Reading collective aspirations: The public value proposition

Public servants have to try to understand what the public values in order to frame their strategy and work. One way they can discern this is from sources with formal authority, such as legislation, or a politician's direction. But as the literature on the dichotomy suggests, these sources may not be enough – either because politicians do not provide clear mandates, and/or because important parts of the message reside in less formal sources: external stakeholders, with diverse and sometimes conflicting interests.

The survey data cited above already indicate that public managers' political engagement is mostly with formal politics, and this is also true of how they read collective aspirations. Interviewees tended to confirm this finding:

> P01 (AU): [Political astuteness] *probably comes down to understanding what drives and motivates politicians so that you can couch your policy proposals in a way that they can both adopt and also implement.*

> P36 (UK): *The key is to set* [your argument] *in a political context that makes sense of their* [politicians'] *reality.*

However, some interviewees had involvement beyond formal political processes. First, for those with regular access to politicians this is not a passive process but one of active sense-making, testing out ideas and trying to disentangle contradictions in policies or preferences:

P01 (AU): *There's two ways of doing it, one is that you can work with them to actually have a clear policy position around some things which you think vague and contradictory.... But the other thing you can do... is you can go back and say I think this is what you want to have happen, this is what I am doing about it, is this OK?*

Second, public servants work to contextualize the policy, so that it is not seen in isolation from either the larger policy platform:

P03 (AU): *Sometimes it's just like a sort of physical understanding of overall what is it you're trying to achieve, and what of the different things you could be doing is going to get you there. Or what piece of the policy and program landscape that you've got is the essence of the reform. ...if you lose sight of that... then you don't get the fundamental reform.*

…or from the wider party environment and not solely the immediate minister:

P04 (AU): [Political astuteness is] *having an intelligent understanding of the objectives and interests of the party... and why those things influence their policy so that you can have a fair understanding of how a new issue might be tackled by your political masters without having to go and ask them.*

Finally, while public managers 'read' the immediate demands of the public and politicians, they also consider longer-term issues, which may have consequences beyond the lifespans of most voters.

P30 (UK): *And then there's* [a skill] *about time horizons I think, that you have to in my view be able to work with the grain of* [politicians'] *short term perspective, but nevertheless come up with long term solutions.... If you simply don't buy it, don't acknowledge their short term perspective, you're going to lose. If on the other hand you are entirely driven by that, then you end up with very bad decisions ultimately. But somehow you have to harness the short to achieve the long.*

Thus, most of the respondents go beyond working for public value as defined by politicians to explore in various ways the wishes and aspirations of 'the public'.

Securing a mandate: The authorising environment

Overwhelmingly, the respondents underscored the significance of securing a mandate – for a policy direction or a particular value-proposition – in order to be able to do their jobs, and in the main this entailed an active political role on the part of managers, which diverged from traditional expectations in two aspects: people and policy.

In the *people* aspect, securing a mandate called for significant engagement with *informal* stakeholders as well as elected politicians. Asked in which situations they found political

skills useful, survey respondents reported that 'working with influential people in your organization' was 'very valuable' (mean rating of 3.07 on a scale of 0-4) and 'working with partners and strategic alliances' only slightly lower (2.94), with 'working with the media' just a little lower again (2.86). The interviews confirmed and elaborated these findings, with frequent references to dealing with various interest groups. For example:

> P17 (AU): *I think about before I act, are there likely to be political blockers, who are they going to be, do I need to influence those people, do I need to influence somebody else?*

Even more variable was the range of possible *processes* through which managers might deal with politics, which was considerably more elaborate than providing policy briefs and receiving ministerial instructions. Public managers did not simply test the mandate against a given environment – it was negotiated, adapted, and sometimes bartered in attempts to get enough alignment amongst stakeholders to get things done. This has traditionally been seen as the domain of the elected politician, as of course it still is, but our research shows that public managers engage in these activities as well, though not as the final arbiter.

The central process, especially where stakeholders' interests are deeply different, is negotiation. One respondent (P16, AU) talked of '*lots of horse trading with ministerial staff and with people working at* [other levels]' and '*loads of layers of negotiation*'. But public managers also engaged in regular processes to create dialogue and explore key beliefs and interests:

> P29 (UK): *… you need to bring a variety of people with you. And so one of the roles which I think officials can play, and particularly officials in a leadership role, is to act as a proxy for the politicians in relationship-building with stakeholders.*

Even where there was not wholehearted support, ensuring commitment to the *process* of developing policy or to the eventual decision was seen as important:

> P01 (AU): *It's important that you understand the stakeholders and deliver messages to stakeholders around particular policies or programs so that even if they don't agree at least they understand and respect the thinking behind it.*

Thus, interviewees appear to believe that they can best support their political masters' formal mandate by being alert to the kaleidoscope of interests, cross-currents and goals of the various stakeholders, many of whom are trying to influence outcomes.

Enlisting operational capacity

Garnering contributions of time, effort or co-operation to the public value goal can appear more straightforward, but it may depend on the complexity of the goal and who needs to contribute which capacities. Both the survey and interviews disclosed a variety of entities

from whom they sought such contributions, and a range of techniques for doing so. Where they come from elsewhere in the public manager's own organization, astute understanding of cliques, factions and sectional rivalries may be essential. Where the capacity derives from outside the organization (e.g. from private or third sector organizations or citizens) then the skills to encourage and persuade others into the delivery of their resources may be particularly salient – and cannot rely on formal authority.

Respondents attached high importance to working with external parties. In particular, while they saw those who gave them formal authorization as vital, they gave considerable weight to those who supplied external capabilities. The highest-rated survey definition of politics in their work as a manager (63%) was 'Alliance-building to achieve organizational objectives'. Most interviewees commented on the importance of some kind of cooperation from external parties.

Within that broad view were several more specific factors. First, managers employed various techniques to elicit cooperation, most of them calling for a degree of political astuteness in whether and how they were wielded. Some sought to shore up broad formal authority with more specific authorization. But often, cooperative strategies were adopted, such as mobilizing peer stakeholders:

> P20 (AU): *I think the more collaborative and inclusive you can be of people, then you get much better results… we're all here for the same reason and that's about the client and that's about people in the community, so it's really incumbent on us to work together.*

A second strategy was to make it easier for external parties to contribute, while a third was to elicit cooperation by offering something in return, but clearly on the basis that there was bureaucratic support:

> P20 (AU): *When I went to* [prison name] *it was an extremely violent jail, so the Department said do what you want in terms of trying to reduce the level of violence. I sat down with prisoners and said right, here's your list of violent incidents for the last 12 months, what would it take for you to be less violent? So they sat there and they said well we want family days, and we want some parenting programs and all this sort of stuff, so I said OK, I'll do this, you give me that. It was a fair trade… and the level of violence actually decreased.*

These strategies – both coercive and cooperative – aimed at enlisting external actors to help get things done required more than official authorization, from either ministers, bureaucratic superiors, or legislation. Thus political astuteness in reading and influencing *informal* stakeholders to assist in implementing policies also necessitates political astuteness in understanding and securing *formal* authority.

Having examined whether public managers are political, we now turn to the findings about legitimacy.

The legitimacy of public servants creating public value

The evidence so far has established that public managers report finding political astuteness a very *useful* skill. However, there is also the question of whether its use is *legitimate* in a democracy. Managers need to understand how far they can deploy their political astuteness without compromising the legitimacy of their recommendations. In short, they need to be particularly sensitive about the 'line' is between politics and administration.

Moore (1995) has argued that public managers should always work within a democratic framework and be subject to the authority of elected politicians, but in calling for more entrepreneurial behaviours by public managers, it is not clear where 'the line' is between their work and that of politicians, or how far they are answerable to the conflicting demands of politicians compared with other stakeholders. A number of scholars in the dichotomy debate also express this dilemma. We argue that political astuteness helps rather than hinders in working out where 'the line' is between the roles of public manager and politician.

The reason is that where the line or zone is both ambiguous and shifting, then the public servant will be unable to decide on appropriate behaviours simply by recourse to formal decision-makers, static principles or codes of conduct. Knowledge and judgement are vital in knowing the boundaries of acceptable behaviour and activities. The skills that help a public manager to recognize and reflect on the boundaries are precisely the skills of political astuteness. The boundaries are policed, at least in part, by reflexive analysis on the public manager's own behaviours and goals compared with those of other stakeholders. This is not formally part of the public value framework, but we argue that it is the missing piece of the jigsaw in blending entrepreneurial spirit with 'proper' conduct in a democracy. Paradoxically, exercising political astuteness (with its hint of 'knowing' politicking) enables public managers to make better judgements about the issues of legitimacy.

Our empirical data supported this theory. First, there is clear evidence from the survey that public managers saw the politics in their work in largely constructive terms. This is shown in Table 3, where 'alliance-building to achieve organizational objectives' was most strongly endorsed. Close behind was politics as concerned with the formal processes and institutions of government. This cannot be interpreted by itself as about legitimacy but these public managers do seem to rate both getting things done and formal democracy as important. They also see politics as being about 'ways in which different interests are reconciled' and about 'scanning factors in the external environment that the organization needs to consider'. With much lower endorsement comes 'people protecting their turf' and 'pursuit of personal advantage', which represent the more negative perspective noted in the generic literature.

TABLE 3 *Which of the following comes closest to your understanding of politics in your work as a manager?**

Understanding of politics	%
Alliance-building to achieve organisational objectives	63
Formal processes and institutions of government	56
Scanning factors in external environment that the organisation needs to consider	49
Ways in which different interests are reconciled	44
People 'protecting their turf'	19
Pursuit of personal advantage	10

*Participants were invited to tick up to three options. Results are ordered from most to least popular.

Furthermore, we undertook t-tests (independent means), which showed that those who had a 'negative' view of politics (self-interest or turf protection) reported significantly lower political astuteness than those who had a 'constructive' view of politics. For example, those who selected 'pursuit of personal advantage' averaged a self-rating of 3.9 (out of 6), whereas those who did not averaged 4.19 ($t = -3.492$; $p = .001$).

Senior managers were more likely than middle managers to hold the positive rather than negative view of politics and this was statistically significant (19% of middle managers selected 'pursuit of personal advantage', whereas only 7% of senior and 10% of very senior managers did; chi square = 21.84, $p < .001$). Also, the greater the seniority, the more likely that managers report having higher political astuteness skills (the mean overall score for very senior managers was 4.33, for senior managers 4.19, and for middle managers 3.89). Again an ANOVA with post-hoc Bonferroni showed that this finding was statistically significant ($f = 29.738$; $p < .001$). Thus, political astuteness is linked to higher rank, and skills are higher with a more constructive view of politics.

The interviews reinforced these survey data: a majority saw no clear line between politics and administration. Some thought that there was a 'zone' (also described as a '*no man's land*' – P11, AU). Others saw it as a shifting line, incorporating either more politics or more administration at different times, while others saw a gap between rhetoric and reality:

> P11 (AU): *I think there's a clear line formally, I think informally there's a little bit of overlap.*

> P07 (AU): *Look I think over the years it's become more and more unclear, you know the whole Westminster principles and the Westminster system and the stuff that you sort of learn in government 101 when you first start, has got very blurry.*

There were varying views as to whether 'breaches' of the line were a matter of public servants straying too far into politics:

> P23 (NZ): *I have every now and then crossed the line, and...I remember I did it once in my less experienced days... I said something like if you do that it's probably not consistent with your policies or your values, your politics basically, and I remember the Chief of Staff then... said to me "oh that's a judgement that we'll make thank you".*

In general, however, the bureaucracy's perceived politicisation loomed as the greater problem. This sometimes placed public servants in the difficult position of having to determine whether to '*give ministers responses that they don't particularly like, where it's not the answer that they want to hear, and sometimes they'll push back a little*' (P20, AU). As another put it, '*frank and fearless* [advice] *has taken a few body blows in recent years*' (P03, AU).

One consequence of this was having to make delicate judgements about when to deliver what the minister wants – even if it is sub-optimal – and when to push for a better policy:

> P18 (AU): *I'm on the line, am I going to cross it? Am I going to stay on the line and be ineffective? Or am I going to stay on the safe side of the line and be nice?*

A further complication was that politicians sometimes did not know exactly what they wanted. Related to this was the complexity of the issue, calling for expert knowledge as well as political judgement, and the politician's personality. Whatever the cause, the elected politician's unclear position typically dictated that the public manager exercise political astuteness about how to arrive at a reasonable decision.

Discussion

Public value has engendered vigorous debate about the politics/administration dichotomy but until recently, there have been more words than evidence in framing the issues. In this paper, we have proposed the linking of public value to political astuteness to explore two issues: (1) whether public managers are political; and (2) the extent to which it is legitimate that they are.

Are managers political? The evidence suggests that they are and that they find political skills necessary to do their jobs. Furthermore, they tend to have a constructive view of politics rather than a dastardly one, seeing it more as being about working with stakeholders to get things done than about self-interest. In both the survey and the interviews, public managers indicate that they are 'political' in that they find political skills valuable in various situations involving not only elected politicians but also in dealing with the public, as well as internal and external stakeholders.

As a practical matter, then, public managers have to exercise political skills to be able to discern the potential for public value. This is because views about what is valuable come not only from politicians but from a range of stakeholders, both inside and outside the organization. Finally, while enlisting operational capacity is of course a legitimate role of

public managers, challenged by neither side of the dichotomy debate, our research shows that even here managers have to cross that divide simply in order to do their jobs. Not only do they need to garner permission and resources; just as important is the need to induce contributions of time and effort from people outside their own organizations. Without them, they find at best that they lack the means to achieve their purposes, or at worst that powerful others block them from their task.

The fact that simply to accomplish their tasks, public managers *have* to be political, puts them in conflict with the principles enshrined in the dichotomy. Indeed, there is increasing evidence of overlapping roles between politicians and public managers in the literature, and our evidence confirms the work of Svara (2001), Page (2012), and Kingdon (2011) among others, though none have used the public value framework. It is particularly interesting that the three countries are all Westminster systems where public servants are expected to be politically neutral and yet even they necessitate the use of political skills.

How then to deal with the tension that exists between the traditional strictures against political involvement by public managers and the 'facts on the ground' which require public managers to engage in political behaviours and deploy political skills?

This takes us to the second question, at the heart of the politics/administration debate: whether it is legitimate for public managers to engage in political behaviours. Some argue that it is not legitimate, although now the mainstream literature's recognition of overlapping roles (Svara 2001) and a continuum of political behaviours means that the question has to be reframed – *how far* is it legitimate for public managers to engage in political activities?

This research provides evidence that it is precisely *because* public managers have political astuteness that they are able to come to judgements about how far to go across 'the line'. Knowing where the line is turns out to be an important skill, of which our interviewees are well aware. In fact, they do not see 'a line' but rather a zone, which is dynamic and may change according to situation, history, issues and personalities. Political astuteness helps them navigate this. It may also help them navigate the 'convenient fiction' (Kernaghan 1968) that politicians are in charge.

The theory and evidence presented here advances the debate about the politics/administration dichotomy. It offers a more nuanced understanding of 'politics' which recognizes that managers engage in political activities and behaviours, both informal and formal. Where public managers have an outward facing role, not just an internal bureaucratic one, then politics appears to be a valuable part of being effective. In a network governance context (Sørensen and Torfing 2009), it is no longer possible to perpetuate the dichotomy as though it were simply a dyadic relationship taking place entirely internally to the public service organization. The public value framework helps to bring other stakeholders into focus, and shifts attention towards the concurrent existence of multiple relationships.

The concept of political astuteness is particularly pertinent to understanding the roles and the capabilities required by public managers. We need more rigorously conceptualised terms than 'political savvy', 'political sensitivity' or other loose concepts. By examining the five dimensions of skill in political astuteness we can start to understand better the roles of public managers and where and how they deploy their astuteness.

Although this research opens up new ground in the interdisciplinary area of politics and public management, it also has some limitations, suggesting opportunities for further research. First, its basis on self-report by managers has both strengths and weaknesses. It enables understanding of politics from their own perspective, but we cannot rule out a rose-tinted view of the world (though this applies to all research based on self-report and thus affects the whole politics/administration debate). There are some statistically significant differences between countries and groups (not reported here), which indicate that methodologically, there is variation in self-assessments – so the public managers are not just describing themselves in lofty terms.

The study may be generalizable in its large-scale and in its triangulation of data across different types (survey and interview). It is based on aggregated data not just for a single country but across three countries (Australia, New Zealand and United Kingdom), all of which have Westminster systems of government, and thus the findings may be less pertinent to, say, presidential systems. On the other hand, Westminster systems offer a tough test of the public value framework because of the expectations on public servants to serve the government of the day with complete impartiality. Given that we find widespread evidence of political (though not necessarily party political) behaviours and activities in this system, it is reasonable to assume that such behaviours and activities may be even more prevalent in systems that appoint officials to serve particular governments.

Finally, more research would help to develop the field. Other studies might replicate our measure of political astuteness or use it in studies that directly link political astuteness to: individual or organizational performance; relations between politicians and managers; or other stakeholders. Alternatively, other measures or assessments of political astuteness or of public value might be undertaken in order to unpack and analyse the capabilities that underlie the activities that public managers undertake.

Conclusions

The public value framework calls for public managers to be entrepreneurial in their work, helping to discern and create what is valuable for the citizenry. Our research shows that political astuteness can enable them to do this better, in reading collective aspirations, securing a mandate, and enlisting capabilities. But even though public value theorists insist that public managers need a mandate from elected politicians, in a democracy the prospect of public servants exercising political astuteness makes us nervous. It feels like bureaucrats engaging in Machiavellian manoeuvres, manipulating the government and perhaps pursuing their own agendas at the expense of the public.

However, in addition to the usefulness of political astuteness in generating public value, our research leads to two other conclusions that may be reassuring. One is that most public managers report subscribing to a constructive view of politics rather than a self-aggrandizing conception. They see politics (and employ political skills) in either constructive terms – building alliances to get things done; reconciling differences – or in neutral ones – serving those with formal political authority. Thus their principles, on the whole, tend to be inimical to misusing their political skills – and this is even more true of *senior* public managers. But principles in themselves are not a robust bulwark against encroachment into the prerogatives of elected politicians. Something else is needed, and this brings us to the other finding in our research: that the very same political astuteness that might worry us also enhances the ability of public managers to 'read' how far it is appropriate for them to intrude into or beyond the 'zone' where politics and administration meet. They are generally well placed to be sensitive to politicians' prerogatives – and again, the more senior they are, the more they possess this skill. In the main, the possession of political astuteness means that they have both the willingness and the ability to understand the respective domains and their place in them.

Thus, public managers need to be doubly adept in dealing with their political environments – engaging in politics, but simultaneously not crossing the line too far into overtly partisan behaviour. Our research suggests that the more politically astute among them are well placed to perform this difficult balancing act.

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