From politically naïve to politically mature: conceptualising leaders' political maturation journey

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Biography

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Abstract

This paper contributes to literature on organizational politics and leadership. Current studies of leaders' engagement in politics neglect notions of learning and development. The current paper aims to overcome this shortcoming by providing a developmental perspective on leaders' engagement in organizational politics. Using in-depth qualitative interviews with leaders at different seniority levels, the study examines developmental patterns in leaders' willingness and ability to engage in organizational politics. The inductive findings inform a three-stage model of political maturation, providing insights into the developmental nature of political will and political skill. Drawing on leadership skill and adult development literature, the paper posits that political maturation entails not only changes in leaders' observable skills and behaviours, but also deep-structure changes in mind-sets and cognitive scripts regarding engagement in organizational politics. Furthermore, findings demonstrate the roles of experience and significant others in facilitating learning about organizational politics. The paper discusses theoretical and practical implications of this dynamic, developmental perspective.

Key words: organizational politics, development, political skill, political will, leadership

Introduction

Within the field of organizational politics, increasing attention is devoted to politics in leadership roles. Whilst political behaviour has traditionally been described as self-serving and counter-productive (Ferris and Treadway, 2012), the suggestion that leaders opt out of politics seems unrealistic if one considers organizations as political arenas (Buchanan, 2008; Mintzberg, 1983). Fresh scholarship reconceptualises leader political behaviour and skill as positive in their means and outcomes (Ellen, Ferris and Buckley, 2013; Hochwarter, 2012), resulting in increased leader and team performance (Ahearn et al., 2004; Silvester, Wyatt and Randall, 2014) and effective change management (Buchanan and Badham, 2008; Hope, 2010).

While this growing body of research demonstrates the necessity of political action for leaders, it largely neglects the question of how leaders end up being able and willing to navigate organizational politics. With few exceptions (Ferris, Anthony, Kolodinsky, Gilmore and Harvey, 2002; Silvester and Wyatt, 2016), organizational politics scholarship offers insufficient answers about what learning and development in the political arena might entail. Leadership skills are acquired over the course of people's careers (Mumford et al., 2000) and involve deep-level complex changes in leaders' knowledge, skills and identity (Lord and Hall, 2005). Such long-term developmental processes are under-examined and under-conceptualised in organizational politics literature, creating a severe conceptual limitation of the field. Another shortcoming of this literature lies in its lack of methodological diversity (Lepisto and Pratt, 2012). Micro-perspectives in the field are dominated by a positivist research tradition employing large-scale surveys to test relationships between perceptions of politics, political behaviours / skill, and workplace outcomes. This paradigmatic dominance compounds the conceptual shortcomings outlined above, as it treats political skill and will as static phenomena and, through its deductive logic, privileges further validation of pre-

established concepts at the expense of in-depth exploration of leaders' evolving personal meanings and experience in relation to politics (Buchanan, 2008). Actor-centred perspectives focusing on direct experience can capture learning in the political arena and expand our understanding of micro-foundations of power in organizations (Geppert and Dorrenbacher, 2014).

The current paper aims to address these limitations in micro-level organizational politics research by introducing a developmental perspective on leaders' political behaviour. Drawing on a qualitative exploratory study of 38 leaders, the paper offers an emerging model of how leaders develop in the political arena and extends scholarship in two ways. First, the paper conceptualizes political maturation as encompassing not only visible behavioural and skill-level changes, but also qualitatively different mindsets and deep-structure scripts leaders hold about organizational politics and their role as political actors. Addressing calls for additional inductive research on leaders' political 'logic of action' (Buchanan, 2008) and political scripts (Ammeter et al., 2002), these findings extend our understanding of how individuals make sense of their politicking at work and how time affects experiences with politics (Lepisto and Pratt, 2012). Second, the study identifies on-the-job experiential and relational learning as key drivers of political maturation, responding to Kimura's (2015) call for research that examines whether organizational socialization experiences contribute to political skill development. This study does not test established theories or models in the field, but rather extends theory by offering novel insights into how leaders' meanings and approaches to politics evolve.

The next section reviews literature on politics in leadership roles and highlights an insufficient understanding of leaders' development in the political arena. The paper then explains the qualitative methodology utilised, and presents findings outlining the three stages of political maturation. Finally, theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Organizational politics: controversial yet prevalent in leadership roles

Organizational politics describe the informal exercise of power and influence in the workplace, often occurring in conditions of uncertainty or ambiguity to defend individual or group agendas (Pfeffer, 1992; Mintzberg, 1983). Synthesizing the vast literature on power in organizations, Fleming and Spicer (2014) distinguish between episodic (the direct exercise of power through tactics such as coercion and manipulation) and systemic power (power forms congealed in institutional structures that mobilize ideological and discursive resources, such as domination and subjectification). Akin to micro-level research on organizational politics, this paper engages with the former perspective. Political models of organizations emphasise the pervasiveness of politics in the workplace, challenging the assumption that organizations are rational entities where only organizational interests drive individuals (Buchanan and Badham, 2008). Consequently, there is a persistent call for more politically skilled leaders (Ammeter et al., 2002; Hall et al., 2004; Hartley et al., 2007), and evidence that political skill facilitates leadership effectiveness (Buchanan, 2008).

Politics in leadership roles are explored mostly by examining the nature of political behaviour and political skill (Doldor and Singh, 2008; Ferris et al., 2002; Ferris and Treadway, 2012; Kimura, 2015). Political leadership has both a positive and a Machiavellian dimension (Bass and Bass, 2008), and relies on political tactics ranging from pro-social (coalitions, friendliness, networking, self-promotion) to anti-social (attacking, blaming or exploiting others, coercion, blackmail) (Buchanan and Badham, 2008; Ralston et al., 1994; Zanzi et al., 1991). Critical to leadership effectiveness is not the mere display of political behaviours, but the ability to navigate politics skilfully. Defined as 'the ability to effectively understand others at work, and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal and/or organizational objectives' (Ferris et al., 2005, p. 127), political skill encompasses social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability, and apparent

sincerity (Ferris, Treadway, Perrewe, Brouer, Douglas, and Lux, 2007). Political skill is a strong predictor of leadership effectiveness (Douglas and Ammeter, 2004; Ewen et al., 2013; Treadway et al., 2004), particularly during organizational change (Buchanan & Badham, 2008). Thus, being able to navigate organizational politics is critical to leadership roles.

Some scholars argued however that both political will and political skill are important in understanding how political actors deal with organizational politics (Mintzberg, 1983; Ellen et al., 2013). A precursor of political behaviour, political will refers to 'the propensity to behave politically' (Ferris et al., 1994) and 'willingness to expend energy in pursuit of political goals' (Treadway, Hochwarter, Kacmar and Ferris, 2005). Political will was typically conceptualized by focusing on dispositional antecedents related to political behaviours such as need for power, need for achievement, locus of control, intrinsic motivation, Machiavellianism, affability, or risk-seeking propensity (Porter et al., 1981; Treadway et al., 2005). Doldor, Anderson and Vinnicombe (2013) proposed that leaders' willingness to engage in politics stems from three attitudinal dimensions that convey political will: functional (beliefs about the outcomes of political engagement), ethical (beliefs about the moral implications of political engagement) and emotional (the affective experience of engaging in political acts). They noted that leaders experience tensions and ambivalence on these three dimensions, holding opposing beliefs about politics. While Treadway (2012, p. 533) emphasized the self-serving aspect of political will, defining it as 'motivation to engage in strategic, goal-directed behaviour that advances the personal agenda and objectives of the actor', Kapoutsis et al. (2015) highlight two facets of political will: a benevolent one that benefits the target of influence, and a self-serving one that benefits primarily the self. Therefore, willingness to engage in political behaviour is a multifaceted phenomenon that requires further research.

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Towards a developmental perspective on leaders' engagement in politics

The literature discussed above underscores the importance of both political skill and political will in leadership roles, but fails to explain how exactly leaders become willing to engage in politics and able to do so effectively. By focusing on political skill outcomes, extant scholarship overlooks how individuals progress from being politically unskilled to being astute and effective in handling politics (Kimura, 2015). The notion of political will was similarly treated: research focused on the nature and dimensionality of political will and its outcomes (Treadway et al., 2005; Doldor et al., 2013; Kapoutsis et al., 2015), neglecting how leaders' political will develops with time and experience. These questions are critical to understanding how leaders learn to cope with politics.

Previous studies suggest nevertheless that seniority affects both perceptions and engagement in politics. Gantz and Murray (1980) reported that while MBA students recognized that politics are prevalent at managerial levels and instrumental for executive success, they saw politics as dysfunctional and 'did not feel that this is the way it *ought* to be' (p. 245). Other studies found that hierarchical position shapes individuals' choice of influence tactics (Vechio and Sussmann, 1991; Yukl and Tracey, 1992) and that more senior employees deem political activity both necessary and acceptable (Buchanan, 2008; Madison et al., 1980). Ferris, Treadway, Brouer and Munyon (2012) note that research on the development of political skill is in its infancy, suggesting that mentoring can help protégés develop political astuteness and networking ability. Experiential learning and coaching were also recommended as methods to develop political skill (Ferris et al., 2002; Hartley, 2007), yet research on political learning remains scarce (Silvester and Wyatt, 2016) and would benefit from broader insights from skill development literature.

Performance-based approaches to skill development (Fleishman and Mumford, 1989; Mumford et al., 2000) posit that factors contributing to skill acquisition in early stages of

practice are different to those shaping performance in later stages; this suggests that political skill development triggers might vary across career stages. Cognitive approaches to skill development underscore qualitative changes in the structure of knowledge underpinning the skills, showing that experts differ from novices by using concepts in more flexible, situationally-contingent ways (Mumford et al., 2000; Lord and Hall, 2005); this suggests that learning about politics could entail changes in leaders' cognitive schemas and scripts regarding politics, areas identified as requiring further research in the politics literature (Buchanan, 1999; Ammeter et al., 2002). Thus, the theoretical cost of overlooking political development is that we neglect deeper-level structures that support development in the political arena, leading to overly simplistic assumptions that political learning is based solely on observable, increasingly skilled political behaviours. We also fail to understand what fosters learning about politics at different careers stages.

While organizational politics scholarship fails to capitalise on these theories, Mainiero (1994) introduced the notion that leaders experience learning with regards to politics, noting that overcoming political naïveté and developing awareness of politics and corporate culture enabled women's progression to top executive roles. However, Mainiero did not draw on organizational politics or skill development theories to conceptualise the nature of political maturation, but rather identified broader seasoning lessons critical to executive development (political naiveté, building credibility, refining a style, and shouldering responsibilities), concluding that these lessons "reveal a heightened sensitivity to, and practice of, political skill at a very high and subtle level" (p. 19).

This paper seeks to elucidate what political maturation entails and how it unfolds by drawing on organizational politics literature. The study differs from extant research on leaders' experiences with organizational politics by departing from static assumptions about the nature of political skill and will, tackling the following research questions: How do

leaders develop political will and political skill? What triggers learning about organizational politics?

Method

With few exceptions (Buchanan, 1999; Smith, Plowman, Duchon, and Quinn, 2009), quantitative, survey-based methodologies dominate organizational politics scholarship. These methods provide robust evidence about antecedents and outcomes of leaders' political skill, but are time-insensitive and ill-suited to understand how political processes unfold over time and to examine developmental issues related to politics (Lepisto and Pratt, 2012; McFarland, Van Iddenkinge and Ployhart, 2012). Departing from established trends of investigating organizational politics from a variance perspective, the current study is concerned with the long-term, developmental aspects of leaders' engagement in politics and adopts a processual perspective on political will and skill. Processual phenomena can be examined either by following them into the future (e.g. longitudinal designs) or by tracing them backward (e.g. retrospective interviews) (Langley, 2009); this study adopts the latter strategy (similar to Isabella, 1990; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Plowman et al., 2007; Lutgen-Sandvick, 2008; Howard-Grenville, Metzger and Meyer, 2013). Qualitative methodologies enable exploration of leaders' perceptions, meaning and actions in the political arena (Lepisto and Pratt, 2013) as temporally evolving phenomena (Langley et al., 2013). Inductive designs are methodologically fit for novel and less theoretically mature research areas (Edmondson and McManus, 2007; Neuman, 2006) such as leaders' political development.

Participants and data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 38 leaders in two global UK-based organizations (Org A - hi-tech sector and Org B - fast consumer goods sector). Such

interviews allow "access to the internal life of participants: interpretations, feelings, and beliefs", enabling interviewees to "draw on their memories and link phenomena over time" (Langley, p. 411, 2009), thus being temporally versatile. The sample was not meant to enable statistical generalization, but rather theoretical generalization (Flick, 2005) through exploration of under-examined and theoretically immature constructs (Oppenheim, 2001; Edmondson and McManus, 2007). Participants were purposively selected (Silverman, 2006) to tap into diverse perspectives in terms of seniority and functional role, holding roles in Finance, HR, Marketing, PR, IT, Sales, and Supply Chain. Since tenure or seniority is an indicator of temporal changes in behaviours and attitudes (McGrath, 1988), a mix of seniority across participants was deemed relevant in capturing the development of political will and skill. Seniority was assessed based on participants' job grade, job title, and personal role description, and participants were categorised in three levels: 6 junior leaders (emerging leaders, typically with team/ project management responsibilities), 18 mid-level leaders (typically with department/ programme management responsibilities) and 14 senior leaders (established leaders, typically with division/ country or global management responsibilities). Interviewees' average age was 39.1. Twenty women and 18 men participated in the study.

Interviews lasted approximately 1 hour and explored leaders' current and past attitudes and behaviours related to politics, their personal experiences of political engagement, and how their attitudes and approach changed over time (Appendix 1). Participants were not provided pre-existing academic definitions of concepts, but were asked to focus on 'anchors' such as the role of politics in their job at critical career points, political incidents/ events they experienced, and personal views towards politics and personal engagement in organizational politics.

Data analysis

Interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed. Transcripts were 14 pages long on average, amounting to over 500 pages of interview data. Interviews were coded by aggregating data into conceptual categories, using a template analysis approach (King, 2007) supported by NVivo software. The analysis process began by coding the data against the provisional template, through an iteration of interview transcripts. As suggested by King (2004), the initial template was developed based on the interview guide, and contained five broad categories of codes: (1) personal definitions of politics, (2) the role of politics in participants' job/role and career, (3) personal attitudes toward politics and engagement in politics, (4) experiences with politics and personal political engagement (political behaviors and skill) and (5) learning about organizational politics (Appendix 1). The template was progressively updated and expanded, as nodes become more abstract and interpretive rather than purely descriptive (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This gradual movement from organizing to interpreting data (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003) entailed three data analysis steps:

a) Identifying *first-order themes* that emerged from the raw data, related to the broad categories of the initial template; these summary statements of participants' accounts are highly descriptive and constitute the starting point of the data analysis process.

b) Coding intermediate-level *theoretical categories* by analysing and clustering the first-order themes described, thereby expanding the template; these represent the conceptual dimensions of the key constructs discussed (e.g. awareness as political skill dimension).

c) Extracting higher-level *aggregate theoretical dimensions* that convey an increased level of synthesis and abstraction compared to theoretical categories, leading to key constructs discussed in this paper (e.g. maturation stages).

Figure 1 visually summarizes this data analysis process. First, key dimensions of political will and skill were identified. Second, changes in willingness and ability to engage in politics

conveyed a logical progression, crystallizing into qualitatively distinct patterns of attitudes and behaviours.

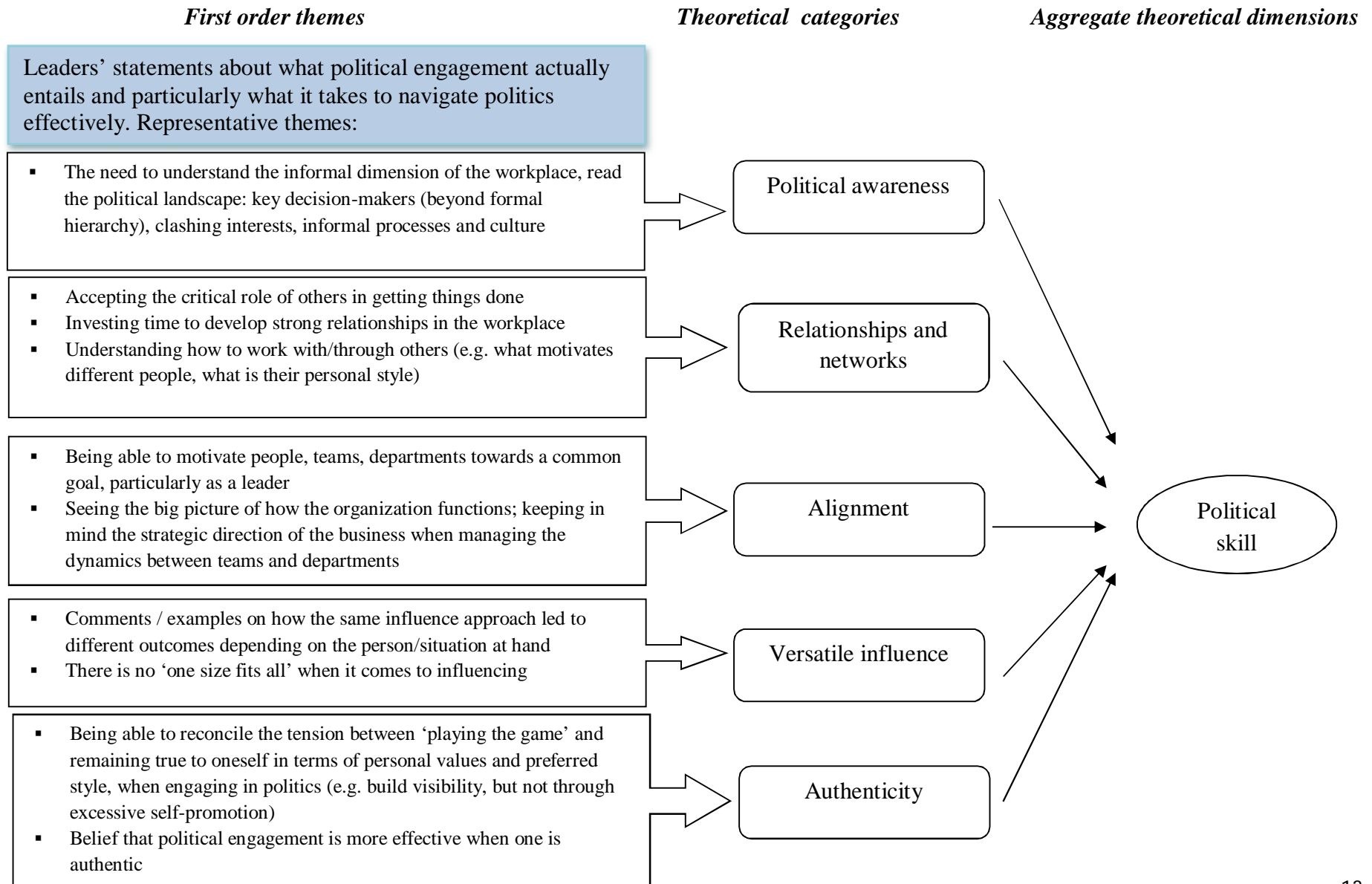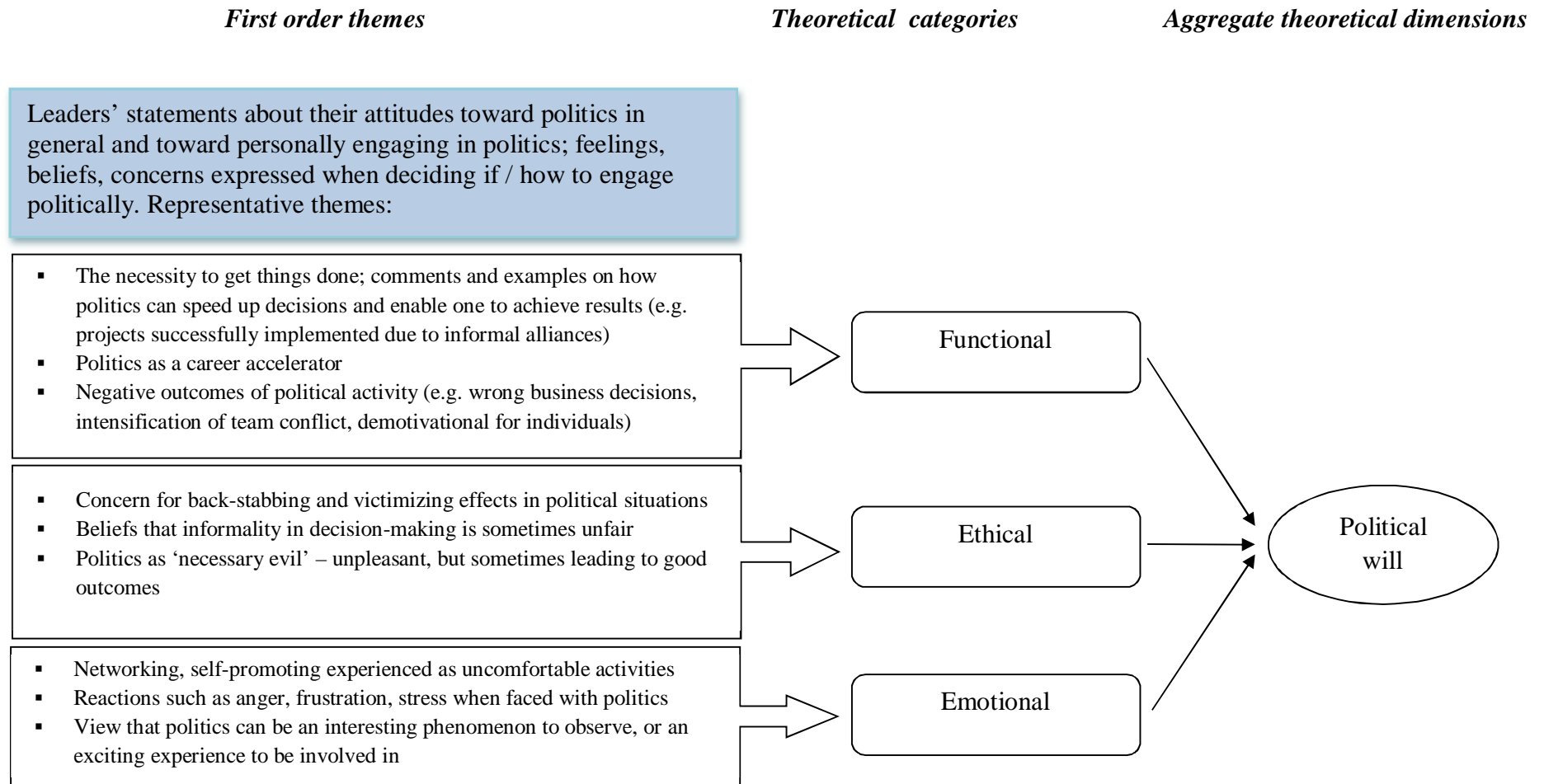**Figure 1. Summary of the data analysis process (political skill)**

| *First order themes* | *Theoretical categories* | *Aggregate theoretical dimensions* |

Leaders' statements about what political engagement actually entails and particularly what it takes to navigate politics effectively. Representative themes:

- The need to understand the informal dimension of the workplace, read the political landscape: key decision-makers (beyond formal hierarchy), clashing interests, informal processes and culture

→ **Political awareness**

- Accepting the critical role of others in getting things done
- Investing time to develop strong relationships in the workplace
- Understanding how to work with/through others (e.g. what motivates different people, what is their personal style)

→ **Relationships and networks**

- Being able to motivate people, teams, departments towards a common goal, particularly as a leader
- Seeing the big picture of how the organization functions; keeping in mind the strategic direction of the business when managing the dynamics between teams and departments

→ **Alignment**

- Comments / examples on how the same influence approach led to different outcomes depending on the person/situation at hand
- There is no 'one size fits all' when it comes to influencing

→ **Versatile influence**

- Being able to reconcile the tension between 'playing the game' and remaining true to oneself in terms of personal values and preferred style, when engaging in politics (e.g. build visibility, but not through excessive self-promotion)
- Belief that political engagement is more effective when one is authentic

→ **Authenticity**

Political skill

Figure 2. Summary of the data analysis process (political will)

First order themes   *Theoretical categories*   *Aggregate theoretical dimensions*

Leaders' statements about their attitudes toward politics in general and toward personally engaging in politics; feelings, beliefs, concerns expressed when deciding if / how to engage politically. Representative themes:

- ▪ The necessity to get things done; comments and examples on how politics can speed up decisions and enable one to achieve results (e.g. projects successfully implemented due to informal alliances)
- ▪ Politics as a career accelerator
- ▪ Negative outcomes of political activity (e.g. wrong business decisions, intensification of team conflict, demotivational for individuals)

Functional

- ▪ Concern for back-stabbing and victimizing effects in political situations
- ▪ Beliefs that informality in decision-making is sometimes unfair
- ▪ Politics as 'necessary evil' – unpleasant, but sometimes leading to good outcomes

Ethical

- ▪ Networking, self-promoting experienced as uncomfortable activities
- ▪ Reactions such as anger, frustration, stress when faced with politics
- ▪ View that politics can be an interesting phenomenon to observe, or an exciting experience to be involved in

Emotional

Political will

Figure 3. Summary of the data analysis process (maturation stages)

First order themes   *Theoretical categories*   *Aggregate theoretical dimensions*

Leaders' statements about how they changed their attitudes and actual approach to politics with time and experience; how they became more willing and more able to engage in politics. Representative themes:

- Participants referring to themselves as 'naive' early in their career; 'blissfully unaware' of the political dimension of the organization
- Once a bit more aware of politics, feeling that it is wrong or unfair
- Accounts of being frustrated or hurt by political situations
- Feeling 'like a pawn' in other people's political games, low self-efficacy
- Politics as disruptions from the actual work
- Sense that the best way to deal with politics is to avoid it; little proactive involvement in politics

Naiveté and Discovery

- Participants commenting on increased recognition that politics can lead to positive outcomes
- Ambivalent feelings and opinions about engagement in politics; recognition of both positive and negative outcomes of political activity
- Increased personal engagement in some political behaviours (e.g. more time building relationships, leveraging on networks)
- Feeling that while political activity is necessary, it sometimes feels inauthentic; a sense that one must 'endure' politics

Coping and Endurance

Political maturation stages

- Shift from ambivalent stance toward politics to a more serene position
- Belief that the usefulness and ethicality of politics must be assessed in each specific situation; no absolute rules, contextual judgements
- Use of a variety of influence tactics, depending on the situation or person (e.g. different ways to build relationships and leverage on them)
- Politics as a critical way of getting work done; an integral part of the job
- More comfort, emotional control, and sense of being true to oneself when dealing with politics

Leveraging and Proficiency

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Findings largely reinforce extant conceptualisations of political will and skill dimensions (Ferris et al., 2007; Doldor et al., 2013) (Appendices 2 and 3 provide additional evidence). An additional theme ('Creating alignment') emerged beyond the conceptualisation of political skill proposed by Ferris et al. (2007), arguably because creating alignment is quintessentially a leadership activity and possibly a dimension unique to leaders' political skill. Development patterns related to political will and skill were clustered into three stages of political maturation, conveying how participants became more willing and more able to engage in organizational politics; rather than being discrete blocks, the stages portray a continuum. Such sequential patterns are critical to the explanatory power of models employing a process perspective (Pentland, 1999). In identifying these patterns and inferring political maturation, two distinct sources of evidence were used: explicit and implicit explanatory accounts (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). Explicit accounts refer to developmental changes identified by participants themselves – i.e. when leaders explicitly acknowledged learning experiences related to politics, and changes in their personal views and approach to political activity. Implicit accounts represent developmental changes identified through coding, interpretation and comparative analysis between individual accounts – i.e. noting that leaders of varying seniority displayed different attitudes toward politics and different political tactics. This last trail of evidence enabled the aggregation of multiple pieces of data (events, attitudes, behaviours) characterizing leaders' experiences, pointing to broader inter-individual patterns with an underlying logic. Pseudonyms were used to preserve confidentiality.

Findings

Participants' evolving behavioural and attitudinal developmental patterns in terms of political will and skill indicated broader mind-sets and approaches regarding political engagement and were classified in three stages of political maturation: Naiveté and

Discovery, Coping and Endurance, and Leveraging and Proficiency (Table 1). These patterns proved related to participants' seniority in leadership role: participants in more senior leadership roles tended to display attitudes and behaviours indicative of matured political will and skill (characteristic for Stage 3), and vice versa. Table 2 charts developmental accounts per participant, according to seniority, conveying a distinction between explicit and implicit accounts of maturation to indicate the nature of the data informing individual-level summaries (see table legend). The table shows whether stage-specific positions and changes were recalled as past experiences or displayed as current stances by each participant, highlighting the following trends:

- Junior leaders (N=6): four in Stage 1, two in Stage 2, none reached Stage 3

- Middle leaders (N=18): six in Stage 2, seven in Stage 3, four transitioning between Stages 2 and 3, one transitioning between Stage 1 and 2

- Senior leaders (N=14): thirteen in Stage 3, one transitioning between Stage 1 and 2

Table 1. Stages and dimensions of political maturation

	Stage 1 Naiveté and discovery	Stage 2 Coping and endurance	Stage 3 Leveraging and proficiency
Political will	• Functional: politics as dysfunctional, mostly related to pursuit of self-interest • Emotional: shock, confusion, distrust when faced with political situations • Ethical: broad-brush labelling of politics as wrong, illegitimate	• Functional: persistent view of dysfunctional sides of politics, but increased recognition of functional benefits of political engagement • Ethical dualism and ambivalence: politics as right or/and wrong • Emotional discomfort, frustration and turmoil	• Functional and ethical: recognition of both functional and dysfunctional, as well as legitimate and illegitimate aspects of political engagement, but ability to make contextual judgements, thus transcending dualisms and ambivalences • Increased comfort, managing one's emotions in political situations
Political skill	• Basic development of political awareness, grasp of certain unwritten rules of organizational life • Political engagement skills: recognition of the necessity or possibility to employ skills like building relationships or exerting versatile influence, but very little actual engagement	• Refined awareness, encompassing ability to read motives and diagnose competing agendas which obstruct personal goals • Practice of political engagement skills, particularly building networks and relationships • Little versatility, resistance to flexing one's approach to influence • Struggle to feel authentic	• Political awareness as perspective-taking and connection • Building relationships beyond transactional • Increased ability to create alignment as core part of one's leadership role • Versatile influence refined • Feeling of authentic engagement
Overall mindset and approach	• Politics as accidental aspects of work, illegitimate and disruptive, to be avoided or contained • Passive: non-involvement, avoidance, containment	• Politics as constant aspects of work, both disruptive and useful, to be coped with • Reactive: resistance/challenge, ambivalence, reluctant or tentative engagement	• Politics as embedded aspects of the work itself, to be leveraged on • Pro-active: anticipation of political threats and opportunities, selective engagement

Table 2 Leaders per maturation stage and seniority

Pseudonym	Seniority	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
1. Gina	JL	D	X	X
2. Robert	JL	R	D	X
3. Carina	JL	D	X	X
4. Emily	JL	R, D	X	X
5. Rob	JL	R	D	X
6. Olivia	JL	D	X	X
Junior Leaders summary		**R=3/6** **D=4/6** **X=0**	**R=0** **D=2/6** **X=4/6**	**R=0** **D=0** **X=4/6**
7. Marvin	ML	R, D	D	X
8. Esther	ML	R	D	X
9. Mike	ML	R	R	D
10. Sandra	ML	R	D	D
11. Henry	ML	R	D	D
12. Rachel	ML	R	R	D
13. Kristy	ML	R	D	X
14. Sally	ML	R	R	D
15. Janice	ML	R	D	X
16. Hugh	ML	R	R	D
17. Chris	ML	X	D	X
18. Carol	ML	R	D	D
19. Aiden	ML	R	R, D	D
20. Peter	ML	R	R	D
21. Cary	ML	R	D	X
22. Amy	ML	R	R	D
23. Sarah	ML	R	X	D
24. Anna	ML	R	D	X
Mid-level Leaders summary		**R=17/18** **D=1/18** **X=0/18**	**R=7/18** **D=9/18** **X=1/18**	**R= 0/18** **D=11/18** **X=7/18**
25. Simon	SL	X	R	D
26. Dana	SL	R	R	D
27. Colin	SL	R	R	D
28. Sam	SL	R	X	D
29. Vincent	SL	R	R	D
30. Corinne	SL	R	R	D
31. Neil	SL	X	R	D
32. Hannah	SL	R	R	D
33. Martin	SL	R	R	D
34. Yvonne	SL	D	D	X
35. Andy	SL	X	R	D
36. Laura	SL	R	X	D
37. Andrea	SL	R	R	D
38. Tom	SL	R	X	D
Senior Leaders summary		**R=10/14** **D=1/14** **X=3/14**	**R=10/14** **D=1/14** **X=3/14**	**R=0/18** **D=13/14** **X=1/14**

Table legend

R=recalled: stage-specific changes/positions described by leaders as attitudes or behaviours defining their *past* stance toward politics (explicit accounts of political maturation provided by participants themselves)

D=displayed: stage-specific changes/positions described by leaders as attitudes or behaviours defining their *current* stance toward politics (implicit accounts of political maturation, inferred by the researcher)

X=no evidence of stage-specific changes/positions

JL=junior leader, **ML**=mid-level leader, **SL**=senior leader

Stage 1: Naiveté and Discovery

The first stage conveyed a transition from obliviousness to politics to a basic political awareness. Participants recalled early experiences of politics as confusing and frustrating, signalling negative attitudes on the emotional dimension of political will (Doldor et al., 2013). Sandra recalls the unsettling exit from a "blissful ignorance of any politics":

> When you're younger, it [politics] can give you a bit of a fraught on occasions because things can happen that you weren't particularly predicting and actually it's all from a political situation that you didn't understand. As you go through your career, those things become more visible to you and you're then able to more easily read what is actually going on, rather than be naive about it. (Sandra, ML)

Typical for this stage was a relatively simplistic construal of political engagement as driven by narrow self-interest (Kapoutsis et al., 2015) and synonymous with backstabbing. There was reluctance to engage in politics and negative attitudes on the ethical dimension of political will (Doldor et al., 2013). Emily (JL) describes getting 'really aggressive and defensive' when faced with politics, because she sees 'people just using politics as a weapon to put people down'. Amy also recalls seeing politics 'in quite a negative way' early on, but gradually realizing that 'it is just part of the everyday job' and not something 'sinister'. Similarly, Sally describes 'a huge shift in thinking' during her career:

When I was more junior, I was like, all politics is bad. I will not engage in it, absolutely, no circumstance. You should just be able to get on and do your job and that's all that should matter. (Sally, ML)

Naive assumptions about meritocracy and rationality in organizational life were gradually dismantled as leaders begun to grasp the unwritten rules of the workplace. Leaders in this stage displayed low willingness to engage in politics, assuming that political engagement has mostly negative outcomes – this suggests that the outcome or functional dimension of political will are critical in individuals' motivation to behave politically (Treadway, 2012; Doldor et al., 2013). Because politics were mostly construed as dysfunctional, illegitimate, and accidental aspects of work, the most frequent engagement strategy was avoidance. For instance, Olivia (JL) suggests that the best way of dealing with 'a political person' is 'to say OK, this is the job I need to do, let's stick to this. Focusing just on the job.' The assumption that politics can be isolated from work was questioned as participants accumulated experiences demonstrating the importance of unwritten and informal rules. Critical eye-opening experiences were key triggers of political maturation at this stage: failure to get endorsement for proposed ideas during meetings due to lack of influencing key stakeholders beforehand; the power of relationships for getting things done; and reluctance to use impression management to gain visibility for promotion.

Irrespective of what I had done, they didn't see it and therefore I didn't get promoted at the time in the way I was expecting. So that's a pretty big wake-up in terms of the downside consequences - even if you do a great job, you're not establishing strong relationships. (Colin, SL)

Increased managerial responsibilities also made participants cognizant that effectiveness requires being attuned to relationships and interdependencies, rather than just

being 'executionally focused'. Senior leaders recalled a similar mind-set, suggesting that their desire to 'get the job done' in the beginning of their leadership journey meant an excessive focus on technical competence and task execution, and a neglect of relationship building:

> I learned a lot of that in politics because we failed a number of times, trying to influence a single point of contact. (Martin, SL)
>
> When I used to work in the African business, it was clearly all down to relationships. The only way to get things done was to ring the general managers and kind of convince them. (Kristy, ML)

Although leaders started to recognize the opportunity to resort to political influence through relationships, networks or versatile influence, there was limited use of political engagement skills such as building networks or exerting influence. Participants felt limited agency in political situations (e.g. Rob recalls feeling 'like a pawn') and more typical for this stage was a passive approach, encompassing attempts to contain or avoid political situations.

Stage 2: Coping and Endurance

This stage involved a diversification and polarization of leaders' attitudes and behaviours towards politics. Following repeated exposure to political situations, leaders began perceiving politics as an enduring element of running organizations, rather than accidental events in the workplace – a shift in perspective described 'like a tsunami, like a revolution' (Rob, JL). Participants became increasingly aware of the functional benefits of political engagement, especially in terms of fulfilling leadership responsibilities:

> When you become a people leader you have to become much more diplomatic and there are politics you have to cope with. But I think if you find out the rationale behind certain things, then it's easier to cope with. (Andrea, SL)

While in Stage 1 politics were perceived as an accidental nuisance to be avoided or contained, in this stage leaders saw politics as pervasive and 'a necessary evil'. The frequent description of politics as 'a necessary evil' signalled incongruence among the dimensions of political will as conceptualized by Doldor et al. (2013): a realization that politics can be useful (functional), and a belief that politics are reprehensible (ethical) or stressful (emotional). There was evidence of dualism and ambivalence along the three dimensions of political will, which meant that politics were perceived as simultaneously functional and/or dysfunctional, right and/or wrong, and pleasant and/or stressful. While most participants spoke about emotional discomfort and turmoil, some became more flexible in their ethical judgments of politics, framing certain political tactics as necessary for the greater good. For instance, Hannah discusses having to ensure that her team gets the credit deserved when other managers claim merit competitively for successful completion of projects:

> Once my point has been made, I know my team's safe. They're protected. They can go and achieve the things they need to without being a part of this. And then I will just back off and say, enough's enough. (Hannah, SL)

Leaders increasingly saw politics as constant aspects of work, fraught with complexities and ambivalences, which needed to be coped with or endured. The typical approach was a reactive one, which entailed sometimes resistance or challenge, sometimes reluctant engagement, and other times tentative engagement in certain political behaviours.

Developmental milestones in political skill entailed a refinement in political awareness and a more deliberate and strategic effort to engage in politics as leaders struggle to position themselves as players in the political landscape. Participants practiced political engagement skills, particularly building networks and relationships. However, leaders in this

stage showed limited versatility and resistance to flexing one's approach to influence, which was seen as inauthentic. For instance, Robert (ML) recalled reluctantly complying with his managers' expectation to reach out to team members more, in order 'to be viewed more as a leader' and described engaging in politics as doing 'things which don't come naturally' but are seen as important by people who affect his career. Sally makes a similar point related to impression management:

> My previous boss told me: 'You should go and present that work to that person,' and I'm like, 'Why?' And they're like, 'Because it'll make you look good.' And I'm like, 'Well, I'm not interested in that. I'm only interested in trying to do my job'. Rightly or wrongly, I'm like 'I will get rewarded for how well my job is done.' (Sally, ML)

Managerial experience emerged as the key trigger throughout this stage, confirming prior findings that on the job experience offers managers opportunities to develop political skill (Hartley et al., 2007). Findings surfaced areas of managerial experience relevant for political maturation: managing conflicts, resource allocation, aligning agendas and influencing behind the scenes.

> I saw a big difference eight months ago when I took this job on. […] You don't realise how much of it goes on, how much fighting there is - fighting for resource, fighting for cash, fighting for territory. You don't realise how much trash there is behind the scenes. (Hannah, SL)

Participants also had a sense of responsibility to engage in politics for the benefit of the team they managed. Vincent explicates how a greater emphasis on managing people has made him more reflective and savvy when assessing political situations:

I have higher responsibilities with seniority. (...) It's upon me to become more reflective, more judging about situations and more listening. Actually listening has helped me navigate, be more savvy in relation to politics. (Vincent, SL)

Mentors and role models also helped participants navigate the political landscape through direct advice, examples of skilful political engagement, enabling self-awareness by 'holding the mirror up', acting like a sounding board, providing specific feedback about how individuals dealt with politics, and sharing of political experience from mentor to protégé. Fewer participants spoke about coaches fulfilling a similar role.

Stage 3: Leveraging and Proficiency

The conflicted and polarized views on politics described above shifted into a sense of appeasement and proficiency in dealing with political situations. Leaders recognized both functional and dysfunctional, as well as legitimate and illegitimate aspects of political engagement, but they transcended the dualisms and ambivalences of the prior stage and developed a more relativistic perspective, making contextual rather than absolute judgements about the nature of political engagement.

Years ago, I might have had a binary view on it [politics]: it's good or it's bad. And then you kind of get to a point where it's actually irrelevant. The point is if you want to get anything done you've got to persuade. (Hugh, SL)

Developmental milestones included the ability to manage emotional reactions, a healthy detachment and a pragmatic acceptance of politics. This conveyed a general sense of composure, after the turmoil of the previous stage.

I'm more mature in the way I handle it. I used to take it very personally. Now there's just a bit more, you know, it's a necessary evil, we're all here doing our day job to

pay our mortgage, just handle it, deal with it, move on. Whereas before I'd sort of let it fester and harbour grudges. (Carol, ML)

With regards to political will, leaders were more accepting of the benefits of political engagement, less radical in their ethical judgements, and experienced less discomfort when having to engage in politics. Participants compared politics to 'energy or money – it depends where you put it' or to 'oxygen; something that exists but isn't necessarily good or bad'. This does not signify a lack of concern about ethical dilemmas of politics. In effect, leaders derived an increased sense of authenticity when engaging in politics, having identified ways of engaging in politics congruent with their values, thereby solving the ethical tensions defining Stage 2.

Several qualitative changes indicated refinement of political skill dimensions. First, political awareness was understood not only as ability to diagnose different agendas in a given situation, but as perspective-taking and deeper connection with the views, needs, and motives of constituencies they led.

Understand what their needs are, what their issues are, why they're against you or why they support you, and then to find the opportunity from it. And that's a really positive skill to learn, to always think about what's the other person thinking, instead of being really single-minded and thinking 'Well, this is what I want to achieve'. (Hannah, SL)

Furthermore, creating alignment was increasingly seen as a core part of one's job.

Over time I've become less judgemental, more understanding and willing to take time to try and understand the other perspective. There's less emphasis on me, more emphasis on how am I going to get the organisation behind some of these transformational initiatives? (Hugh, ML)

Relationships, networks, the ability to work through others were increasingly seen as central aspects of participants' roles and responsibilities. Leaders experimented with different ways of engaging in politics, and became more versatile in their influence skills (e.g. learning to alternate between rational and emotional arguments to persuade others). Unlike Stage 2, versatility was no longer seen at odds with authenticity. For instance, Sam recalls taking over a senior global leadership role in his company's Asian business where his new team resisted his change vision. Having understood their enduring allegiance to his predecessor, now Chairman of the business, Sam used a covert influence strategy. Underpinning his tactic was a sense of being authentic.

> I made sure that I spent a lot of time with the Chairman to align him to what I wanted to do and it became his ideas. Once it became his ideas, and I'm not precious about whose ideas things are, we could move with some pace. You just have to work out what is the most effective way to deal with it, but very authentically. (Sam, SL)

In this final political maturation stage, leaders viewed politics an embedded in leadership work, and discussed the need to strategically manage and leverage on politics, rather than merely cope with it (Stage 2 approach). Participants relinquished the idea of opting out of politics, stressing instead the importance of 'being in the middle of it'. As one participant put it, 'the power is in being in the conversation, not shying away from it.' They saw effective political influence as 'big business acumen', critical to being effective leaders and establishing their leadership credentials. The typical approach to politics was a pro-active one, entailing anticipation of political threats and opportunities and selective and mindful engagement in politics.

I do engage in politics and I'd like to think I do it from more of a navigation point rather than actually being passive in the political landscape. (…) I tend to try to be proactive about politics. (Sandra, ML)

Discussion

Implications for organizational politics research

This paper began by noting that despite increased recognition that leaders need to *be* able and prepared to navigate politics, scant research explains how leaders *become* skilled and willing to navigate the political dimension of organizations. Addressing calls for further research into leaders' subjective experiences with organizational politics (Buchanan, 1999; 2007) and into developmental aspects related to politics (Kimura, 2015; Lepisto and Pratt, 2012; McFarland et al., 2012), this qualitative study extends organizational politics scholarship in two main ways.

First, this article identifies and explicates three stages of political maturation (Naivete and Discovery, Coping and Endurance, Leveraging and Proficiency – Figure 4) that convey leaders' learning in the political arena. Drawing on skill development theories (Mumford et al., 2000; Lord and Hall, 2005), the paper conceptualises political maturation as deep-structure changes encompassing not only behavioural and skill-level changes in the way leaders handle politics, but also qualitatively different mindsets and cognitive scripts about political engagement. This study provides empirical evidence of evolving mind-sets and scripts that help leaders make sense of the political landscape and their agency within it, addressing calls for further research into the cognitive structures underpinning leaders' political behaviour (Ammeter et al., 2002; Buchanan, 1999; 2008) and political learning (Silvester and Wyatt; 2016). Specifically, findings extend Buchanan's (2008) work on managers' political 'logic of action', who found widespread use of politics in senior roles,

concluding that prior literature underestimated managers' readiness to overcome ambivalence towards politics. This study documented leaders' subjective perceptions of politics across a wider range of seniority levels, showing that politics are perceived as necessary and useful among senior leaders, but that junior leaders do not share this view. Indeed, (mostly junior) leaders in the 'Naivete and Discovery' stage did not embrace the neutral stance on politics proffered Ammeter et al. (2002), who claimed that politically engaged leaders are not necessarily personally ambitious or manipulative; instead, they construed political action as mostly self-interested and divorced from 'real work'. Conversely, senior leaders embraced a more neutral stance and understood politics as the very essence of leadership work. As one interviewee explained: 'This *is* my job'. Unlike Mainiero's (1994) executives who described themselves as apolitical, study participants in Stages 2 and 3 were not hesitant to describe themselves as political, incorporating in their political scripts broader, more positive meanings ascribed to political engagement. Thus, findings indicate that the attitudinal ambivalences toward political engagement identified by Doldor et al. (2013) are ultimately resolved in a longer-term maturation process. Additionally, while Kapoutsis et al. (2015) argued that political will has both instrumental and benevolent components, findings show that junior leaders tend to understand political engagement largely through its instrumental facet (e.g. career progression - Stage 1 and 2), while the benevolent facet is construed later, with seniority, as linked to leadership responsibilities (e.g. accomplishing collective goals - Stage 3). Leaders' evolving interpretation of political situations as 'distractions from real work' (Stage 1), 'necessary evil' (Stage 2), and then 'integral to one's role' (Stage 3) clarify seemingly contradictory and fragmented findings in organizational politics scholarship, which documents both strong distaste for politics and willingness to engage in it among leaders (Buchanan, 2008).

Cognitive perspectives on skill development emphasize the role of evolving mental structures underpinning leader performance in specific domains, providing insights about the theoretical significance of these scripts. Lord and Hall (2005) posit that leader development theorizing should go beyond surface features like observable behaviour and unearth deeper structures involving abstract principles that support skill development, arguing that surface-level leadership skills are gradually organized into deeper structures relying on broader, more abstract systems that guide perception and behaviour. Indeed, while political maturation relied on political skill increases (from foundational political awareness in Stage 1 to higher-level dimensions like versatility and authenticity, fully realized in Stage 3), the cognitive scripts underpinning how political skill was deployed emerged as critical to the transition between stages. Expert-level performance requires qualitative changes in the knowledge structures underpinning skills (Ericsson and Charness, 1994). Experts frame problems differently compared to novices, spending more time interpreting situations (Isenberg, 1986) and drawing on underlying principles and situational contingencies rather than surface features to define problems (Lord and Hall, 2005). Interpretive tasks are thus critical for expert performance and for the development of deep structures, and they appear critical in leaders' political maturation. These deep structures and political scripts also signal the importance of time in understanding how leader political cognition evolves, highlighting not only episodic sense-making related to specific political incidents, but also longer-term political learning based on procedural knowledge and cognitive scripts that store individuals' political expertize in long-term memory (Silvester and Wyatt, 2016). Findings demonstrate that leaders constantly revisit political scripts and develop new political strategies (Ammeter et al., 2002), reframing existing knowledge about politics by synthesizing new experiences and interpretations (Coopey and Burgoyne, 2000).

Such reframing underpins evolving cognitive scripts about politics and suggests a nesting of political maturation stages within broader patterns of adult development. Constructive developmental theorists posit that individuals' construals of the self and the world evolve in a sequence of orders and become increasingly complex across one's lifespan such that "the world is viewed less in terms of dichotomies or polarities and more in terms of dynamic, mutually-transforming systems" (McCauley et al., 2006, p. 638). Maturity is associated with increased tolerance to ambiguity (Merriam and Clark, 2006), complexity and self-regulation (Staundinger and Kessler, 2009), more sophisticated problem-solving and better integration of cognitive and affective spheres (Blanchard-Fields and Kalinauskas, 2009). The third stage of the political maturation journey reflects these adult development patterns in the political domain, capturing a transcendence of the dichotomous, 'black-and-white' thinking about politics and an enhanced ability to make contextual ethical judgements about politics. Adults and experts also have greater behavioural flexibility (Lord and Hall, 2003). Leaders in Stage 3 utilized a wider range of political tactics, emphasizing versatility and a sense of authenticity in political engagement. Arguably, leaders' enhanced ease in navigating politics is afforded by power and seniority, as power enhances positive affect, attention to rewards as opposed to threats, and disinhibited social behaviour (Keltner, Gruenfield and Anderson, 2003). Senior leaders' (re)framing of politics as constructive may obscure structural power differences and other players' experience of the same political situations. Knights and McCabe (1998) warn of managerialist bias in accounts of politics, noting that many scholars conceptualise politics as legitimate only when it serves management's goals. As this study examines leaders' subjective experience of politics, it does not capture the subjective meanings and experience of other players, or the impact of politics on broader processes such as organizational learning (Coopey and Burgoyne, 2000). Thus, the political scripts identified are inherently subjective and leader-centred.

Figure 4. Stages and triggers of political maturation

Political will
- Negative emotional experience
- Politics as dysfunctional and unethical

Political skill
- Development of awareness
- Little deliberate engagement

Critical political experiences

Managerial role demands

Mentors & role models

- Duality and ambivalence in emotional reactions and functional and ethical beliefs

- Refinement of awareness
- Building networks & relations
- Creating alignment

Critical political experiences

Managerial role demands

Mentors & role models

- Ethical and functional contextual judgments
- Management of emotions

- Versatility and authenticity in political engagement

Stage 1
Naiveté and Discovery

Stage 2
Coping and Endurance

Stage 3
Leveraging and Proficiency

A second contribution of this study is to identify experiential and relational learning as key drivers of political maturation and to provide insights into the relative importance of certain triggers across maturation stages. Some commentators claimed that political skill should be tackled in formal management training and education (Baddley and James, 1987; Butcher and Clarke, 1999). Ferris et al. (2007) propose that executive coaching is the most suitable approach to help leaders become more aware of their political environments and equipped to navigate them. Conversely, in line with literature on leadership learning (Bennis and Thomas, 2002; Conger, 2004; Cox and Cooper, 1989; Davies and Easterby-Smith, 1984; McCall et al., 1988), current findings demonstrate that leaders learn to navigate organizational politics mostly through naturalistic and haphazard on-the-job experiences, rather than through deliberate and formal leadership development initiatives. Oerder et al. (2014) recently established that political skill can be developed through situational job factors outside formal training and mentoring, demonstrating that hierarchical position and increased time involvement in work predict political skill increases. The current study extends their work by identifying specific learning triggers that explain how time and seniority foster political skill development. Participants stressed experience with (often painful) critical political incidents as a primary source of political maturation in stage 1, while in stage 2 they emphasized managerial responsibilities. This confirms Mainiero's (1994) finding that 'political blunders' are key to exiting political naiveté at early leadership stages, but also demonstrates that on-the job learning (McCall, Lombardo, and Morrison, 1988; McCauley et al., 1994) is a key driver of political maturation later on. Leadership responsibilities changed the perceived centrality of politics in participants' jobs and shaped subjective understandings of the antecedents, behaviours and consequences of political engagement (Buchanan, 2007). It thus appears that notions of 'situated learning' and 'learning through doing' are better placed to understand how leaders learn to navigate politics, as they emphasize the pervasive,

naturally occurring, 'everyday' learning, as opposed to formalised leadership training and development (Davies and Easterby-Smith, 1984; Fox, 1994; Lawe & Wenger, 1991). It is important to consider that managerial experience varies across seniority levels and that the usefulness of certain experiences depends on leaders' career phase, as outlined by performance-based skill development theories (Mumford et al., 2000, p.89) and evidenced by participants' accounts: junior leaders face relatively structured problems, primary supervisory responsibilities, and limited decision-making discretion; mid-level leaders face novel problems and increased working with others; and senior leaders face ill-defined problems requiring risk-taking, ongoing environmental assessment and long-term solutions of multiple sub-systems (Mumford et al. 2000), enabling them to develop more complex mental models and system skills. At this last level, mentoring by more senior leaders is crucial (Mumford et al. 2000).

A second learning trigger identified was relational learning, particularly important throughout stages 2 and 3 of the political maturation process. Notions of learning through and from others are not new in leadership research (Fox, 1994; Kempster, 2009; McCall et al., 1988), but have been under-explored in organizational politics research. In a theoretical chapter, Ferris et al. (2002) explain that mentors help individuals develop political skill as they "model effective influence behaviors so that protégés learn by observation, but also take time to discuss various social interactions so that protégés can more fully understand how and why mentors acted in such a manner" (p. 21). Mentoring enhances the understanding of political dynamics at work by providing employees with information about formal and informal power structures within the workplace (Chao et al., 1994; Ferris et al., 2008). Current findings extend this scarce research by demonstrating that political maturation is facilitated by relational learning more broadly, as opposed to mentoring only. Informal conversations with mentors and peers helped leaders make sense of political situations, but

relational learning also encompassed observation of positive and negative examples of political engagement. Drawing on Kempster (2009) and McCall et al. (1988), 'notable people' (i.e. 'reported influence of good and bad individuals on leadership learning' Kempster, 2009, p. 440) emerged as central to leadership learning about politics by giving participants the opportunity to observe various political tactics. This confirms Hartley et al.'s (2007) findings that managers consider 'observing role models' key to developing political skill. Kempster and Parry (2014) argue that observational learning pertaining to leadership becomes more specific over the course of one's career, as leader significant others become more conspicuous and individuals have increased motivation to observe them – an assertion accounting for the increased importance of relational learning in Stages 2 and 3.

In conclusion, this paper extends organizational politics scholarship by drawing on leadership and adult development literature (a) to conceptualize political maturation as encompassing deep-structure changes in leaders' political cognitive scripts, and not only in their observable behaviours, and (b) to identify experiential and relational learning as critical developmental triggers.

Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations. Models involving stages or phases organize complex individual experiences or organizational processes, but inevitably do so by glossing over some individual differences and losing some detail (Langley et al., 2013; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008). Therefore, the model proposed is not exhaustive; it does not suggest that stages are universal, nor does it aim to delve into the specific developmental journeys of each leader (whose political will vs skill development might be occasionally disjointed). This emergent model aims to sketch broad evolving patterns in the development of political will and skill, substantiating empirically the concept of political maturation. Future research is

needed to validate this order and disentangle in further detail the developmental connections between political will and skill.

A longitudinal design would be ideal to track political maturation experiences over time. This study used a cross-sectional design and political maturation was partially inferred based on leaders' retrospective accounts about changes in their approach to politics, due to practical constraints (e.g. due to confidentiality and resources, it would be difficult to shadow senior leaders for several years, as they navigate the politics of their jobs 'live'). This is not uncommon in retrospective process studies (Langley, 2009) and retrospective interviews are powerful in understanding participants' lived experience with politics; however, they do not render 'objective truths' and inevitably bear the question of selective recall or rationalization. Such limitations were mitigated by focusing the interview protocol on events and people, rendering episodic memory more readily accessible (Kempster, 2009; Slurr and Wyer, 1989), but should nevertheless be considered when interpreting this study's claims as the model presented relies on subjective sense-making. Many process studies focus on organizational-level phenomena and use action-focused data collected through observational and historical methods. In contrast, this study responds to calls for more individual-level process research (Langley et al., 2013) and utilizes interviews to enable 'deep dives' into participant's experiences, emotions and cognitive scripts (Howard-Grenville et al., 2013), thus warranting a reliance on retrospective interviews. Additionally, reflective distance granted by time is valuable in interviews, allowing individuals to understand more fully the issues at stake, their personal responses and development (Mann, 2016).

Findings have limited statistical generalizability as the inductive research design aimed to extend rather than test theory, offering a 'suggestive model' (Edmondson and McManus, 2007) and analytical generalizability (Langley et al., 2013). Access constraints led to uneven sampling across seniority categories. This study draws on empirical data only from

leaders, so the maturation patterns described are intrinsically linked to leadership experiences, and the transferability of the proposed model is limited beyond these roles. Arguably the model is most relevant to those who 'survived' the road to top organizational echelons. Employees who advance hierarchically have more opportunities to develop political skill, as progression requires investing time and effort into developing relationships, influencing stakeholders and mobilizing resources (Finkelstein, Hambrick, and Cannella, 2009). Maturation triggers might operate differently for non-leaders; further research should explore how employees without leadership roles learn to navigate the political dimension of their workplaces, as they are also affected by organizational politics (e.g. promotions - Perrewe and Nelson, 2004; or occupational stress - Perrewe et al., 2004).

Finally, future research should examine the role of gender in leaders' political maturation experiences, a neglected topic in organizational politics scholarship (Doldor et al., 2013; Perrewe and Nelson, 2004). The maturation model revealed that feeling inauthentic when engaging in politics was a critical struggle in Stage 2. Authenticity is challenging for female leaders (Eagly, 2005) and the perceived incompatibility between being authentic and engaging in politics (Mackenzie-Davey, 2008) might disproportionally obstruct women's maturation journey.

Practical implications

Interviewees deplored the lack of education focused on the political complexities of their role, a practice gap also discussed by scholars (Buchanan, 2008; Hartley, 2007). Advice about how to handle politics is abundant on leadership blogs across the Internet and leadership development providers offer programmes emphasizing political skill development. Current findings indicate that such a focus is too narrow and that leadership development programmes should also tackle leaders' negative attitudes and mind-sets about politics by

unearthing the ethical tensions leaders face when engaging in politics, and helping them manage the emotional experience of politics. The maturation process can demystify organizational politics for individuals on a leadership path and provide a roadmap for personalised training and development, by taking into account leaders' current position in the maturation journey as a starting point. The model highlights developmental milestones and critical junctions to be considered in helping leaders' development in the political arena.

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Appendix 1. The initial coding template based on the interview guide

Initial template themes	Illustrative interview questions and probes
1. Definitions of organizational politics	- What do you think about when I say 'organizational politics'? What is your understanding of the term?
2. The role of organizational politics in job/role and career	- Could you tell me about your role in the organization? – Could you tell about your career history prior to joining this organization? - What are 'political issues' in your workplace? Could you give me a few examples of situations when you have experienced politics? - What is the role of organizational politics [as you defined it earlier] in your job / current role? - What has been the role of organizational politics [as you defined it earlier] in your career? Can you give me some examples?
3. Attitudes toward organizational politics and political engagement	- How do you react when faced with politics? Could give me some examples? - How would you describe your attitude towards politics? - How do you feel about engaging in organizational politics? What matters to you in deciding if / how to engage in organizational politics? Could give me some examples?
4. Experiences with organizational politics and personal political engagement (behaviours, skill)	- How do you typically handle politics/political issues? Could you give me some examples of political events/incidents you have experienced / been part of? How did you react? What did you do? - In your view, what are effective ways to navigate such political situations?
5. Learning about organizational politics	- How has your view on organizational politics changed over time? What prompted the change? Could you give me some examples of events or people that prompted this change? - How has your ability to manage politics changed over time? What do you do differently now? What prompted the change? - What lessons have you learnt about politics? - What do you wish you had known about politics at an earlier stage of your career?

Appendix 2. Dimensions of political skill as defined by leaders – Illustrative data

Dimensions	Explanation	Illustrative quotes
Political awareness	Ability to read the political landscape, understanding individual motives, mapping out conflicting agendas, reading the informal power web, identifying key stakeholders	You need to understand the different networks, who's reporting to whom, who is working with whom, who has [what] power base. (Cary, ML) Organisational awareness [is] about understanding what the informal decision-making networks are. (Sam, SL) I also am aware of how the organisation operates, informally as much as formally. (Sally, ML)
Developing networks and relationships	Ability to build social networks and strong interpersonal relationships, particularly with key stakeholders. Informed by political awareness skills.	I would try in any role that I do to have very clearly who are the key stakeholders that I need to work with and build those relationships. (Janice, ML) When you become more senior you have to deliver through others. Therefore it means that you have to develop the skill more and more. (Sam, SL) I probably have a very good network. (Sarah, ML)
Creating alignment	Ability to find common ground among competing agendas and interests through alliances, coalitions, sponsorship. Requires leveraging on relationships and networks.	My role is to make sure that the business is aligned behind the strategy of what we're trying to do […], and if they're not, then having the right conversations to make sure they are (Janice, SL) In order to be successful in the organization, creating alignment, strategy and execution of my area of accountability, competing parties and multiple stakeholders are a critical ingredient of that (Vincent, ML)
Versatile influence	Ability to adapt one's influence behaviour to different individuals and situations. Builds on prior dimensions.	If you understand somebody's modus operandi or what they're striving to do, you can flex your approach to accommodate that. (Peter, ML) I try and completely change my style based on the person. So sometimes I'll try and be more rational and fact based if I think they're more rational and fact based. Other times, I'll be more emotional if I think they're more emotionally driven. (Sally, ML)
Authenticity	Ability to engage in politics in a way that feels genuine and consistent with personal values/styles. Entails honesty, openness. Supports the other engagement skills.	You just have to work out what is the most effective way to deal with it [politics] but very authentically. (Sam, SL) For me, a politician, somebody that's able to manage that [politics], is somebody that isn't trying to schmooze you. (Sarah, ML)

Appendix 3. Dimensions of political will as defined by leaders – Illustrative data

Dimension	Explanation	Illustrative quotes
Functional	Beliefs about the functional and dysfunctional outcomes of politics and political engagement (benefits and downsides)	You've got to work through people. I can deliver nothing on my own. In fact, I can be ignored completely. So that's not very successful. (Hugh, ML) Politics can speed up decision-making and what you're trying to achieve. (Corinne, SL) In order to get support [from others], you quickly learn that you have to be doing something that meets their personal objectives or their agendas. (Sandra, ML) Bad politics is people spending all their time focused on their own career and self-development rather than the greater good of the organisation. (Sam, SL)
Ethical	Beliefs about the moral aspects of politics and political engagement ('right' and 'wrong')	I don't have ethical issues using office politics as long as it helps the group or the overall company or our sales and marketing group to win, to get ahead. The more it goes to the individual win, then I'm a little bit more sceptical or I try to stay away from it. (Cary, ML) Politics is like energy or money - it depends where you put it. You either have good results or bad results. So politics itself cannot be good or bad. It really depends how you are using it. (Andy, SL)
Emotional	The affective experience of politics, emotional reactions associated with engagement in politics (frustrating and interesting)	I'm fed up with it. I'm fed up that everywhere I go, in any firm, there is politics. (Gina, JL) I get really defensive (...) it makes me so mad, that people think about their own guts and using people to do what they don't want to do (Emily, JL) I like the challenge of it. (Hannah, SL) It [engaging in politics] creates an element of anxiety and tension. (Vincent, SL) Underneath I'll be slightly annoyed and exasperated. Sometimes I'll feel unsettled. But my style is probably to listen calmly and in some ways to play the game.[…] I find it emotionally draining. (Carol, ML)