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Assessing the Authority of Political Office-Holders: The Leadership Capital Index

MARK BENNISTER, PAUL 'T HART and BEN WORTHY

This article argues that the extent to which political office-holders can effectively attain and wield authority is a function of the stock of 'leadership capital'. Drawing on the concept of political capital, the article defines leadership capital as aggregate authority composed of three dimensions: skills, relations and reputation of a leader. Leadership capital ebbs and flows over time within a trajectory of acquisition, expenditure and inevitable depreciation. The article presents a Leadership Capital Index (LCI) that systematically maps out the three broad areas combining concrete measures with interpretive aspects. This can be used as a tool for systematically tracking and comparing the political fortunes of leaders in a way that is both more nuanced and robust than exclusive reliance on the latest approval ratings. An illustrative case study of Tony Blair is used to demonstrate the LCI. The article concludes by discerning several promising paths for future development of the LCI.

Political commentators routinely refer to political capital as the degree of popularity (measured usually through opinion polls or votes), mandate or momentum enjoyed by professional politicians and leaders. Politicians themselves often refer to political capital when comparing their capacity to mobilise people with others (Schier 2009; Schugurensky 2000: 5). At a basic heuristic level the capital analogy allows us to understand the fundamental, but often overlooked, difference between office-holding and exercising leadership. Office-holding is about gathering and conserving leadership capital; leading is about spending it purposefully whilst retaining enough to survive, recharge and continue. Exercising leadership involves laying one's authority on the line to 'teach reality' (Hargrove 1998: 45), to 'disappoint followers at a rate they can stand' (Heifetz 1994: 40, 128), to 'regulate distress' among stakeholders and publics in order to get them to do the often painful 'adaptive work' involved in coping with complex changes and wicked problems, for which no leader or government can devise and impose ready-made

solutions (Heifetz *et al*. 2009: 3–4). What really counts is not one's formal position but the informal authority one is granted.

With so much riding on it, it becomes relevant to be able to assess the state of a leader's authority in a way that is valid and parsimonious and yet sensitive to its socially constructed and often fluid character. In this article we deploy an analogy from the world of finance and economics and conceive of political authority as 'capital', thus opening a different set of connotations and methodologies. Leadership capital is taken to be the aggregate of a leader's political resources: skills (both 'hard' and 'soft' – see Nye 2008), relations and reputation. We first examine the theoretical roots of the concept. We then present three main forms of leadership capital, before introducing the Leadership Capital Index (LCI), discussing its use and demonstrating its application through an illustrative case study of Tony Blair's second term in office. We conclude by outlining avenues for further application and development of the LCI.

Varieties of Capital

Capital is recognised as 'a surplus, something that you have beyond sufficiency that enables you to do something else of value' (Renshon 2000: 203). Pierre Bourdieu conceptualised three fundamental guises of capital as: *economic* (money and property), *cultural* (cultural goods and services including educational credentials) and *social* (acquaintances and networks) (Bourdieu 1986: 242). The latter has spawned more than 4,000 academic studies, largely on the back of Robert Putnam's influential works, examining its measurement and effects (Campbell 2013: 29).

Bourdieu (1986, 2005) also discerned *political* capital, a manifestation less developed than the other three forms of 'capital' he had initially presented. He described it as:

> A form of symbolic capital, credit founded on credence or belief and recognition or, more precisely, on the innumerable operations of credit by which agents confer on a person (or on an object) the very powers that they recognize in him (or it). (In Schugurensky 2000: 4)

To Bourdieu (2005: 39), the aim of political power is to 'impose beliefs' and 'recognized principles'. To do so, he explained, 'one needs to be credible, to command credit, to have accumulated a capital of belief, of specific *authority*' (Bourdieu 2005: 39, emphasis added). It also requires differentiation, to create a 'distinctive, differential capital' that allows the politician to stand out (Bourdieu 2005: 39). To understand a politician's position requires analysis of their background, their 'relations of dependence' with other powerful actors or groups and their 'position in the political game', whether a purist political actor, remote from the world, or one connected to other 'fields' (Bourdieu 2005: 34). Bourdieu highlights the ambiguous position of political capital as

both symbolic and concrete power. Sometimes political capital is 'symbolic power … an aggregate reflection of other capital forms possessed by powerful institutions and actors (meta-capital)', while 'elsewhere … it becomes something to be accumulated as a capital form' (Davis and Seymour 2010: 741). Notwithstanding this ambiguity, what is essential is that political capital is in part self-reinforcing (or self-destructing) as 'authority … comes in part from the effect that it produces' (Bourdieu 2005: 39).

Bourdieu's ideas enable us to identify three key points about the nature of political capital. First, having *skills* to become and remain a political leader is crucial. The process of leadership ascendancy begins as 'individual politicians make use of their capital forms in order to win … struggles and progress within political hierarchies' to achieve power, creating a 'distinctive' image and path (Davis and Seymour 2010: 742; see also Bourdieu 2005: 39). It then follows that leadership consists of a 'continuous … struggle' to 'maintain ascendancy' (Davis and Seymour 2010: 741).

Second, political capital is *relational*. Bourdieu saw 'political power' as being 'derived by politicians from trust (expressed in a form of credit)' from the public, though he viewed it as a capacity 'to mobilise' (Schugurensky 2000: 4). This connects political capital to public perceptions, with the media being a crucial linchpin between the two (Davis and Seymour 2010: 742). Here a comparison can again be drawn with social capital, which is seen as a dense network of 'credit' (Coleman 1988: s102), not unlike what novelist Tom Wolfe (1987: 418–19) famously described as the 'favor bank':

> Well, everything in this building ... operates on favors. Everybody does favors for everybody else. Every chance they get, they make deposits in the Favor Bank. A deposit in the Favor Bank is not a quid pro quo. It's saving up for a rainy day.

So, relations and networks matter in the generation of political capital.

Third, to Bourdieu low levels of public interest in the political process mean that political capital becomes an elite-, leader- and party-centred pursuit with 'politics … concentrated in the hands of professional politicians and bureaucrats, lead[ing] him to identify political capital only among political leaders or parties' (Schugurensky 2000: 4). Once it is acquired, capital becomes part of a *reputational* cycle, a reciprocal process of leaders presenting ideas, undertaking actions and 'getting things done'. Political capital is thus continually 'contested' and fought over by the media, public and politicians. Political capital is dynamic and contingent and can 'be conserved only at the cost of unceasing work which is necessary both to accumulate credit and to avoid discredit … before the tribunal of public opinion' (Bourdieu, in Schugurensky 2000: 5; Davis and Seymour 2010: 742).

Various interpretations of political capital have been offered. It has been theorised as a 'vertical' version of 'horizontal' social capital or as a developing

and dynamic relationship between politician and citizen (see Novicevic and Harvey 2004; Sørensen and Torfing 2003; Whiteley and Syed 1997: 127–8). We present a systemic tool drawn from such theoretical approaches.

Leadership Capital

It is important to differentiate between *political* capital and *leadership* capital. Political capital (as Bourdieu conceptualises above) is associated with horizontal bonds of networks, relations and trust that are inherited, hoarded and often cultivated to gain vertical political credit. Leadership capital may draw on such horizontal foundations but it only applies to those in leadership positions. It is more focused on how constituents confer authority on a particular office-holder who then uses it. It evolves from and parallel with attributions associated with the personal qualities of these office-holders, i.e. their perceived 'competence, integrity and capacities for leadership' (Renshon 2000: 200). Depending on how firmly and widely such perceptions are shared in a polity; the leadership capital of an office-holder can be 'accumulated or depleted' (Renshon 2000: 200). As such, it is not a personal attribute of a leader, but a socially granted zone in which they can exercise leadership as defined above. John Kane (2001), for example, has tied a leader's capital to the establishment of moral authority. In examining the political capital of George W. Bush, Schier (2009: 5) defined capital as a combination of formal and informal power, a mix of 'party support of the president in Congress, public approval of the president's conduct of his job, the president's electoral margin and patronage appointments'.

The notion of leadership capital allows us to see the difference between being in office and being in power. In contemporary politics, leaders are held to be ever more centre stage, but also more constrained and vulnerable (Helms 2012b: 660). Executive leadership studies have tended to focus on the power mechanisms that structure the governance environment within which leaders operate (Heffernan 2014). Such formal mechanisms may include the ability to hire and fire, formal constitutional powers, the capacity to organise at the centre and the level of administrative support (Peters and Helms 2012; Rockman 1997, 2003; Rose 1980, 2005). The institutional context will differ and be dependent on the type of system. Presidents may have extensive patronage powers, but as in the United States they have to compete with a well-funded and autonomous legislature. Prime ministers in coalition may be constrained by electoral mechanisms and power-sharing agreements, as in most West European countries.

Studying political leadership through the lens of leadership capital presumes that it is the dynamic interplay between individual capabilities and contextual conditions that shapes leaders' ability to act and determines their legacies (Hargrove 2002: 199; Hargrove and Owen 2002). Also, political psychologists have discovered that some leaders' personality characteristics predispose them to accept contextual constraints as given, whereas others are more

predisposed to challenge them (Antonakis 2011; Davis and Gardner 2012; Keller 2005). Yet situations are never a given. Things happening 'out there' are perceived and understood differently by political actors: 'the economy', 'the Zeitgeist' or 'the geostrategic situations' are assigned meaning in media stories which are framed in particular ways – often with strategic intent. Such meaning-making contests are pivotal in mediating the effects of situations upon leaders' capital (see Laing and McCaffrie 2013; Skowronek 1993, 2010; 't Hart 2014; 't Hart and Uhr 2011). The view of these narratives themselves may also shift over time: Thatcher and Reagan's 'pro-free market small state' narrative is viewed differently post-2007 crash than it was in the boom years of the late 1990s. The combination of skills, relations and reputation offers a way into understanding this.

Institutional parameters vary, as can the situational context within which the leader must operate. Elgie (1995: 7) sensibly proposed an interactionist approach, combining the personal and systemic aspects of the leadership process, whereby political leaders operate within an environment 'which will both structure their behaviour and constrain their freedom of action'. This implies that 'political leaders do have the opportunity to shape the environment in which they operate' (Helms 2005: 20), or, as Riker (1986: ix), put it, 'structuring situations so you can win' only when the leadership environment actually allows such restructuring (see Greenstein 1969; Hargrove and Owens 2002; Helms 2005). But to do so, they need not just skills but authority, conceived of here as a warrant to challenge and alter institutional traditions and path dependencies. Leadership capital provides a measure for what one might call the 'aggregate authorisation' a political actor enjoys from his environment (Moore 1995); in other words, a composite measure of their warrant to lead. Having a healthy 'stock' of leadership capital confers on leaders the power to sway decision-making processes, to persuade publics and to convene stakeholders otherwise reluctant to engage in dialogue. In short, it enhances their ability to confront and resolve dilemmas (Renshon 2000: 223).

Figure 1 offers a breakdown of the constituent parts of leadership capital. *Skills capital* refers to the perceived personal competences of a leader, e.g. their cognitive, physical, communicative and managerial capacity. Political psychologists who study the impact of personality on leadership remind us that 'who leads matters'. For example, US presidential scholar Fred Greenstein (2010) distinguished six key skill areas of leadership style to describe and diagnose the performance of the holders of that office. Greenstein's categories provide useful shorthand for comparing and contrasting the personal styles of different political leaders, and not just US presidents (Daleus 2012). His effort is just one among many who have tried to capture key dimensions of politicians' leadership styles and skills and to develop them into predictive and/or evaluative performance assessment instruments (Cronin 2008; Hermann 2014; Kaarbo 1997; Post 2005; Preston 2001; see also Nye 2008).

What really matters is the competencies that are *projected onto* leaders by their authorising environment: the actors and institutions whose support is

FIGURE 1
COMPONENTS OF LEADERSHIP CAPITAL
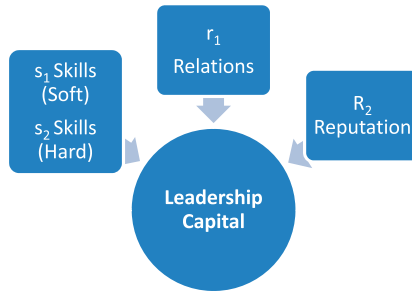
essential for them to maintain the ability to lead. The nature and scope of these authorising environments varies across political systems and situations (Kane and Patapan 2012). It may include any or all of the following: the armed forces, media owners and editors, party barons, key industrialists, trade union elites, voters in marginal seats, celebrity endorsers, and so on. The nature of the mix varies across time and space. What is crucial for reaching and consolidating leadership positions are *perceptions* of a leader's skills, here pragmatically separated into 'hard' (unilateral and transactional) and 'soft' (persuasive and inspirational) skills (Nye 2008: 83).

Relational capital refers to the loyalties that leaders mobilise. Why people follow, or at least accept leaders, matters a great deal in shaping leadership authority and influence. Some leader–constituent relationships are characterised by fierce, unconditional and enduring loyalty. In cases of charismatic leadership, constituents become fully formed followers whose loyalty is unconditional, indeed blind (Aviolo and Yammarino 2013; Davis and Gardner 2012). Other leader–follower relationships are much more cerebral, contingent and ephemeral. Understanding leadership, in other words, involves grasping the 'dynamic interplay of wants, needs, motives, values, and capacities of both would-be leaders and their potential followers' (Burns 2003: 16). Social psychology and sociology provide a rich reservoir of insights about the composition, social categorisations and identifications, and leadership expectations of followers and constituents. These are key to understanding the nature of the psychological contract that develops between them and their representatives (Cronin 2008; Reicher *et al*. 2010). This contract extends beyond the circle of party members or movement followers. It can also be usefully applied to capture the relations between leaders and the media and the wider electorate (Davis and Seymour 2010).

Leadership relations differ in the *kind* of psychological contract that underpins them. Burns (1978) picked up on this in making his classic distinction between transformational and transactional leaders, but by now there are many other salient distinctions (Brett 2009; Reicher *et al*. 2014). The 'visionary',

transformational leader first and foremost hopes to gather capital through a mobilising story of ideals and aspirations, and is prepared to risk the political costs of ideological opposition to it and of delivered realities falling short of evoked expectations. In contrast, pragmatic, transactional leaders bank primarily on acquiring capital through technical competence and tangible achievements at the risk of leaving a vacuum of meaning and identification for their political competitors to fill. This stylistic divide cuts across holders of the same political office.

Each type of leadership claim sets up its own performance test. Moralising leaders need 'to walk their talk'. Idealist leaders need to be seen to be taking risks and making sacrifices for the values they believe in. Pragmatists need to demonstrate competence and 'bring home the bacon'. This brings us to the third component: *reputational capital*. Leaders' words and deeds are constantly monitored and assessed. Followers, observers and critics alike all try to distil a 'narrative' about what a leader 'is really like' from the pattern of that leader's behaviour and its observable impact. For each leader such a narrative emerges. Though only partially shaped and controlled by the leader, this narrative forms the core of a leader's reputation. A leader's reputation increases leadership capital when it meets two conditions: its normative core is seen by the observer as appropriate for the times; and the gap between perceived promise and observed performance is seen as limited or caused by exogenous, temporary circumstances. Effective reputations are coherent, believable narratives in which a leader's life story, espoused philosophy and observable in-office behaviour are widely deemed to be in alignment.

The Leadership Capital Index

The LCI is a diagnostic 'checklist' tool for assessing a political leader's 'stock' of authority. It is designed to help us spot key variations in the nature and aggregate volume of leadership capital. It can be applied to discrete leaders, but also in a comparative, 'league table' fashion. It offers a 'snapshot' at a particular point or period, but when applied repeatedly over the course of a leader's tenure, it helps document the ebb and flow of their authority over time. The index is conceptualised as the sum of the 'scores' leaders achieve on the three elements presented above: skills, relations and reputation. The LCI merges perceptual categories with observable performance data (e.g. electoral and legislative record).

The LCI assesses leadership authority as an aggregate of (perceived) skills, relations and reputation. The point of the exercise is that the LCI has the potential to generate a more nuanced picture of a leader's 'licence to operate', both in time and over time, than the common job approval and poll ratings are able to provide. Users of the index can decide whether and how to accord weights to each of these three criteria sets. Table 1 offers one way of operationalising the LCI. The indicators were chosen by a process of reduction, distilling a vast array of variables often used to assess political leadership down

TABLE 1
THE LEADERSHIP CAPITAL INDEX OF A POLITICAL PARTY LEADER

Criteria	Indicators	Measurements	
S1	01 Political/policy vision	(1)	Completely absent
		(2)	Unclear/inconsistent
		(3)	Moderately clear/consistent
		(4)	Clear/consistent
		(5)	Very clear/consistent
S1	02 Communicative performance	(1)	Very poor
		(2)	Poor
		(3)	Average
		(4)	Good
		(5)	Very good
S2	03 Personal poll rating relative to rating at most recent election	(1)	Very low (<−15%)
		(2)	Low (−5 to −15%)
		(3)	Moderate (−5% to 5%)
		(4)	High (5% to 15%)
		(5)	Very high (>15%)
S2	04 Longevity: time in office	(1)	<1 year
		(2)	1–2 years
		(3)	2–3 years
		(4)	3–4 years
		(5)	>4 years
S2	05 (Re-)election margin for the party leadership	(1)	Very small (<1% of relevant electors, i.e. caucus, party members)
		(2)	Small (1–5%)
		(3)	Moderate (5–10%)
		(4)	Large (10–15%)
		(5)	Very large (>15%)
R1	06 Party polling relative to most recent election result	(1)	<−10%
		(2)	−10% to −2.5%
		(3)	−2.5% to 2.5%
		(4)	2.5% to 10%
		(5)	>10%
R1	07 Levels of public trust in leader	(1)	0–20%
		(2)	20–40%
		(3)	40–60%
		(4)	60–80%
		(5)	80–100%
R1	08 Likelihood of credible leadership challenge within next six months	(1)	Very low
		(2)	Low
		(3)	Moderate
		(4)	High
		(5)	Very high

TABLE 1
(*Continued*)

Criteria	Indicators	Measurements	
R2	09 Perceived ability to shape party's policy platform	(1) (2) (3) (4) (5)	Very low Low Moderate High Very high
R2	10 Perceived parliamentary effectiveness	(1) (2) (3) (4) (5)	Very low Low Moderate High Very high

to a manageable number of 10 core indicators. The variables relate to the three aspects of leadership capital defined above. Some act as 'proxies' to assess electoral skill. This underpins the Index with a level of coherence and parsimony. Most indicators relate to a perceptual element and thus involve either public opinion/constituent data, or require some form of intersubjective agreement among analysts (e.g. by using expert panels or parallel coding).

Where data is limited or unavailable, it may be that other proxies are used such as approval rating for trust. Once the analysis is undertaken, the data can then be 'scored' to allow a rating of a leader on the LCI. A provisional overall interpretive assessment is given in Table 2 with illustrative examples of leaders arguably fitting into the various categories.

TABLE 2
AGGREGATING AND INTERPRETING LCI SCORES

Ratings	Description	Examples
0–10	Depleted capital: edge of removal or 'lame duck'	Australian Labor Party leader and prime minister Julia Gillard (2010–2013) in the ninemonths prior to her removal
11–20	Low capital: 'politically weakened' but still capable of some action	British PM John Major (1990–1997) in face of intraparty rebellion over EU policy following the 1992 election
21–30	Medium capital: 'muddling through' in the face of significant obstacles and divisions, yet with provisional licence to operate from (a small majority within) the authorising environment	Swedish social democratic party leader and prime minister Goran Persson Sweden (1996–2006)
31–40	High capital: 'momentum' derived from robust political performance and party cohesion	Spanish social democratic leader and prime minister Felipe Gonzalez (1982–1996), particularly in his first two terms
41–50	Exceptional capital: 'political weather maker' boosted by electoral landslide, and/or personal dominance and/or 'good crises to have'	US Republican Party leader and president George W. Bush (2001–2008) following the 11 September 2001 attacks, until a few months into the 2003 invasion of Iraq

The LCI is not a panacea for the chronic problems of 'measuring' something so complex and contingent as authority. It involves trade-offs in several areas. First, between ease of use and comprehensiveness and, second, between the measurement of 'hard' empirical (often polling) and 'soft' interpretive (often expert) assessment (see Greenstein 2010). The LCI takes a mixed methods approach, blending the two types of measures and merging the five 'hard' empirical measures based on empirical data with five more 'soft' or interpretive assessments based on expert opinion (see Table 3). Mixed methods continue to be utilised as an emerging approach or paradigm (Bergman 2010; Hesse-Biber and Johnson 2013). Read and Marsh (2002) in particular point out the requirement for a clear 'lead' between the two types when using mixed methods; the LCI offers an index driven by the *hard* measures impacting on the *soft*. The cycle is then reciprocal as positive outcomes are in turn led by the *soft* analysis (see discussion below). Moreover, measures can be combined as, for example, parliamentary rebellions require reading beyond the numbers.

While Bourdieu pointed out that it is skills that allow politicians to rise, it is only through the 'hard' results of elections won and opinion leads that leaders can fully deploy their skills, use their relations and build their reputation. The case study of Tony Blair that follows was chosen as a starting point to test and develop the theory. While Blair is in some senses atypical, as a very long-serving prime minister within a strongly leader-centric system, his case offers the chance to explore and develop the LCI through a series of snapshots of his second term. The case is used in an exploratory sense to test and develop the LCI and accompanying theory (Gerring 2004).

As with the 'natural rate of governability', some of the subjective measures are context-dependent (Buller and James 2012; Bulpitt 1988: 185). What are considered assets (skills, achievements or victories) in one setting may not be in another setting. This may vary from person to person or group to group: Renshon (2000: 208) speaks of there being not one but 'several' public

TABLE 3
SOURCES OF LCI MEASUREMENT

Criteria	Indicators	Measure
S1	01 Political/policy vision	Soft (expert)
S1	02 Communicative performance	Soft (expert)
S2	03 Personal poll rating relative to rating at most recent election	Hard (polling)
S2	04 Longevity: time in office	Hard (chronology)
S2	05 (Re-)election margin for the party leadership	Hard (vote count)
R1	06 Party polling relative to most recent election result	Hard (polling)
R1	07 Levels of public trust in leader	Hard (polling)
R1	08 Likelihood of credible leadership challenge within next six months	Soft (expert)
R2	09 Perceived ability to shape party's policy platform	Soft (expert)
R2	10 Perceived parliamentary effectiveness	Soft (expert)

'psychologies' assessing leaders. Renshon (2000: 207) argues that building capital is not just a catch-all race for the widest support: one leader as a unifier (a Churchill) may build capital through widening 'national' support; others (a Thatcher) may do so through division and strengthening a 'core' support of particular groups.

Utilising and Interpreting the Leadership Capital Index

Much work is still required to develop alternative and complementary operationalisations of the LCI for different classes of political office-holders (heads of government, ministers, opposition leaders, senior legislators). Whilst the LCI presents a potential starting point for new approaches to understanding and evaluating political leadership, it is worth reflecting a little more on the potential applications of LCI-based analyses in the study of political leadership.

The Trajectory of Leadership Capital

Leadership capital can be assessed as a snapshot (at time T) or as a film (trajectory T1–>Tx with various markers in between T2, T3, T4 etc.). The latter opens up the opportunity for empirical testing of the long-established assertion that leadership tenures follow roughly three developmental stages: acquiring, managing and losing leadership capital (Breslauer 2002: 13). Each leadership trajectory is said to evolve through these stages, though not necessarily in linear or predictable fashion. Leadership capital gathering requires a struggle to the top, as with Bourdieu's political capital. Acquiring enough leadership capital to obtain high office is just the start. Capital must thus be leveraged to 'make a difference' in public policy while one can. It takes time, skill and luck to accumulate (Davis and Seymour 2010). That being the case, leaders can only spend it every so often. However, unlike financial capital, which prudent managers can sustain over very long periods of time, political leaders experience growing tension between their desire to lead and the near-inevitable growing downward pressure on their capital.

Leaders may score highly in the daily battle, but lose in the long term: Gordon Brown was famously a tactician, spending capital day-to-day to 'win' but failed to deploy it strategically (Seldon and Lodge 2010). Australian Labor Prime Minister Gough Whitlam articulated one of the most ambitious and far-reaching policy visions in recent memory for his 1972 government, but squandered the capital it conferred in three years through inept management of the day-to-day governmental process (Walter 1980). Time has a way of dumping the occasional fiasco, scandal or external crisis on a leader's doorstep. These provide high-stakes performance tests and 'blame games' at an altogether different level of intensity, which will see some leaders thrive and others flounder (Boin *et al*. 2005, 2008).

Nuances aside, the iron law of democratic politics is that even great political skills and propitious political and economic contexts cannot halt the inevitable (though not monotonous or steep) decline of a leader's authority. The natural 'trajectory' of leadership capital is one of eventual deprecation: even those office-holders who seek to hoard it tend to see it severely diminished in the end – with media, former allies, party barons, organised interests and voters deciding the time has come for them to move on. The tension between hoarding and spending capital and the impact of what one might call the natural rate of capital attrition over time becomes progressively more difficult to manage, to the point that a very large percentage of all democratic party and government leaders are forced one way or the other to leave office before they themselves feel ready (Laing and 't Hart 2011). Denver and Garnett's (2012: 71) meta-analysis of opinion polling data found 'it is certainly the case that all prime ministers leave office less popular then when they began. Most have ups and downs … but in the end the trend is inexorably downwards'. An ideal-typical depiction of this trajectory would present an arc of leadership capital, within which the LCI may be plotted over the leadership tenure, as ascendance precedes performance, and eventual political decline. The evolution of leadership capital can be identified along the lines therefore of an inverted U trajectory ('t Hart and Bynander 2006: 722).

As noted above, the LCI can be utilised to plot the diachronic trajectory of various leader to test whether this general assertion is correct, who might be exempt from it, as well as to explore if there are typical patterns of leadership capital evolution. The next step in the analysis is then to explore the correlates or ideally the causes of such variations. From a short-term perspective strong leadership capital should enable leaders both to momentarily survive in office *and* exercise effective leadership (i.e. putting hitherto neglected issues on the political agenda, getting major policy changes adopted or delivering institutional reforms). From a long-term perspective on office-holding, high levels of leadership capital should be associated with a lack of internal competitors, low levels of intraparty factionalism, stable and robust legislative majorities, successful re-election and thus long-lasting leadership tenures.

Using the LCI: The Example of Tony Blair, June 2001–May 2005

To demonstrate the applicability of the LCI, the following analysis examines Tony Blair as prime minister in his second term between June 2001 and May 2005 (see Tables 4 and 5). The work uses hard data combined with insights from biography and autobiography.

Blair regarded his first term from 1997 to 2001 as 'wasted' and the second as his chance to radically reform Britain (Kavanagh 2005: 3). He began with a second landslide of 167 seats, very high poll ratings, economic stability and large amounts of 'goodwill' (Kavanagh 2005: 19). The LCI measures Blair's capital in 2001, 2003 and 2005 to cover a series of snapshots of his position and explain his successes and failures over this time (see Table 5).

TABLE 4
LCI MEASURE OF TONY BLAIR 2001–2005

Criteria	Indicators	Measurements		Sources and summary
S1	01 Political/policy vision	(1)	Completely absent	Blair's 'radical' reforming vision was disrupted by Iraq in 2003 but gained clarity in 2004–2005
		(2)	Unclear/inconsistent	
		(3)	Moderately clear/ consistent	2001 4
		(4)	Clear/consistent	2003 3
		(5)	Very clear/ consistent	2005 3
S1	02 Communicative performance	(1)	Very poor	Blair remained a very strong communicator but the effect of his performances lost traction with the decline in trust and credibility
		(2)	Poor	
		(3)	Average	
		(4)	Good	2001 5
		(5)	Very good	2003 4
				2005 4
S2	03 Personal poll rating relative to opposition leader	(1)	Very low (<−15%)	Blair's poll rating began high and declined sharply over Iraq. Despite the drop Blair remained ahead of his three successive opposition rivals
		(2)	Low (−5 to −15%)	
		(3)	Moderate (−5% to 5%)	
		(4)	High (5% to 15%)	2001 5
		(5)	Very high (>15%)	2003 2
				2005 3
S2	04 Longevity: time in office	(1)	<1year	Blair's time in office 1997–2001 gave him experience and a 'stronger centre'
		(2)	1–2years	
		(3)	2–3years	
		(4)	3–4years	All 5
		(5)	>4years	
S2	05 (Re-)election margin for the party leadership	(1)	Very small (<1% of relevant electors, i.e. caucus, party members)	Election margin from 1994 was strong but increasingly irrelevant All 5
		(2)	Small (1–5%)	
		(3)	Moderate (5–10%)	
		(4)	Large (10–15%)	
		(5)	Very large (>15%)	
R1	06 Party polling relative to most recent election result	(1)	<−10%	The Labour party lost support but remained ahead of the Conservatives for most of the time
		(2)	−10% to −2.5%	
		(3)	−2.5% to 2.5%	
		(4)	2.5% to 10%	All 2
		(5)	>10%	
R1	07 Levels of public trust in leader	(1)	0–20%	Though beginning with high levels of trust, Blair faced a crisis of personal trust/credibility by 2003, stemming from Iraq, that worsened by 2005
		(2)	20–40%	
		(3)	40–60%	
		(4)	60–80%	
		(5)	80–100%	2001 3
				2003 2
				2005 2

(*Continued*)

TABLE 4
(*Continued*)

Criteria	Indicators	Measurements		Sources and summary
R1	08 Likelihood of credible leadership challenge within next sixmonths	(1) (2) (3) (4) (5)	Very high High Moderate Low Very Low	The 'duarchy' with Brown grew increasingly acrimonious, creating a dysfunctional and factionalised government and divided party. This limited Blair's control of his party and policy 2001 2 2003 1 2005 1
R2	09 Perceived ability to shape party's policy	(1) (2) (3) (4) (5)	Very low Low Moderate High Very high	Blair's 'radical' aims translated into concrete but underwhelming achievements. By 2003 Iraq undermined other domestic and foreign initiatives while Brown effectively vetoed Blair's wish to join the Euro. Blair began to develop a clearer policy agenda in 2004–2005 2001 5 2003 2 2005 3
R2	10 Perceived parliamentary effectiveness	(1) (2) (3) (4) (5)	Very low Low Moderate High Very high	Despite his majority of 167 seats Blair found it increasingly difficult to control his rebellious party from 2002–2003 onwards, culminating in a series of rebellions including the largest in modern times over Iraq 2001 5 2003 2 2005 2

Blair offers a particularly fruitful area. Not only is there voluminous assessment of his time in office and legacy but also detailed studies of his parliamentary party (Cowley 2005), media perceptions and trust (Karp and Stevens 2012), his own autobiography (Blair 2010) and academic and popular research into his legacy (Bennister 2009, 2012; Theakston 2013). The approach taken here is not intended to be prescriptive, but offers an example of a way in which it can be done.

TABLE 5
A SNAPSHOT OF BLAIR'S LEADERSHIP CAPITAL JUNE 2001, JUNE 2003 AND MAY 2005

	LCI score
2001	41
2003	28
2005	30

S1 Vision and Communication

Blair was widely recognised during his premiership as a 'transformist' in vision (Seldon 2005: 415–6; see also Hennessy 2001). In 2001, Blair promised a 'radical' second term that included far-reaching public service reform, democratic renewal and taking the UK into the euro (Seldon 2005: 466–67). It became clear that Blair lacked a 'concise agenda' and had a tendency to become a 'crisis manager and headline seeker' (Kavanagh 2005: 16). Moreover, Blair was also blown off-course by the War on Terror and, ultimately, Iraq, the event that 'overshadowed and distracted' his vision and estranged him from his own party and the public (seeBuller and James 2012; Hill 2005: 408). However, he began to develop a more distinct 'choice and diversity' agenda across public services in 2004–2005 (Seldon 2005: 424). His late commitment to a referendum (without consulting colleagues) on the EU treaty can be seen as a final attempt to wrest the initiative and push bold policy (Buller 2014; Riddell 2006).

Blair retained a 'remarkable capacity to communicate' (Kavanagh 2005: 18) in set pieces and in impromptu settings, using his skills to build narratives on public service reform in 2002 or foreign aid in 2005. His skills were most in evidence in his attempt to persuade the party and public over the War in Iraq in 2002–2003 (Bennister 2012; Seldon 2005: 698). However, his abilities may have acted to over-inflate his self-belief – even in 2005 Blair felt, against polling evidence, he could 'persuade' the electorate on an EU referendum (Riddell 2006).

S2 Polling, Longevity and Election

In polling terms both Blair and his party experienced a 'long, slow but seemingly inexorable slide into unpopularity' (Powell 2010: 139; see also Bennister 2012: 174). The crucial period was 2003–2004 when the deteriorating situation in Iraq dragged down both Blair and the party. However, the poor ratings of the Conservative opposition leaders, William Hague, Iain Duncan Smith and then Michael Howard, meant Blair remained consistently ahead of his opponents – he outpolled them by an average of 14.2 points with his highest 32-point lead in 2001 and lowest of 3 in 2005 (UK Polling Report 2011). At the start of his second term Blair had 'learned much' in his first five years and he and his team were 'seasoned', aided by a 'stronger centre' and growing institutional capacity (Seldon 2005: 415). Yet his 'lack of strategy', informal decision-making habits and conflict with Brown were also set as dysfunctional patterns (Seldon 2005: 425–6). His election as party leader was 11 years in the past and largely irrelevant, especially given the growing challenge from Brown (Kelly and Durkin 2010).

R1 Polling, Trust and Challenge

The Labour party dropped an average of around 10 points between the general elections of 2001 and 2005. However, the Conservative opposition remained

behind by an average of 6 percentage points, only pulling ahead briefly to +4 in the 'nadir' of 2004 (UK Polling Report 2005).

Iraq was central to the decline of Blair's personal credibility, which bled away from 2003 onwards (Hill 2005). As of 2004 more than 50 per cent of polled respondents were against continued military action (YouGov 2013). By 2005 65 per cent of the public did not trust Blair to tell the truth, with 72 per cent citing the fact he 'spins too much' and 54 per cent that he lied to take Britain into the war in Iraq (YouGov 2005). Blair's integrity was continuously questioned by the Conservative press from 2003 onwards (see Stevens and Karp 2012). Yet his opponents fared little better – while 54 per cent distrusted Blair in 2003, 40 per cent distrusted Conservative leader Iain Duncan Smith (Populus 2003).

One of the essential components of any assessment of Blair's capital is the strength of an alternate challenger. Chancellor Gordon Brown 'agreed' in 1994 to stand aside from the leadership contest in exchange for the premiership after Blair, which Brown believed would be sometime in the second term (Kavanagh 2005). Between 2001 and 2005 the two men effectively ran the government as a 'joint premiership' or duarchy, with Brown holding sway over domestic policy (Hennessy 2005: 10; see also Seldon *et al*. 2007: 337; Kavanagh 2005). Relations deteriorated severely in the second term, creating a deeply divided government, fragmented into warring factions and party loyalty moving to Brown (Kavanagh 2005). By 2004–2005 Blair (2010: 510–11) felt that the Labour Party saw him as an 'albatross' and felt they could 'renew under Brown'. Blair's promise in September 2004 not to challenge another election after 2005 was intended to create space for his own achievements (Blair 2010).

R2 Policy and Parliament

Blair's promises of radicalism were seen to fall short. Although manifesto commitments were met and NHS and higher education reforms and poverty reduction were clear markers of success, much of the responsibility lay with Brown (Buller and James 2012: 18). Promised democratic renewal was undermined by 'muddy planning' and 'poor execution' of constitutional reform (Seldon 2005: 421). Significantly, Brown effectively vetoed Blair's central aim of UK entry into the euro in 2003 (Buller 2014; Riddell 2006).

The invasion of Iraq in 2003 was the defining moment of Blair's loss of capital, as Blair placed a series of 'bets' that went 'wrong' (Hill 2005: 296). The invasion and subsequent violence fed back negatively into Blair's personal credibility, party relations and policy influence. His subsequent attempts to advance action on climate change, Middle East peace and develop a stronger influence in the EU were all undermined by his diminished reputation and over-reliance on the US (Hill 2005).

Despite Blair's 167-seat majority, his control of parliament also slipped away from 2003 onwards. Labour MPs rebelled in the House of Commons

259 times in 20.8 per cent of votes, culminating in the largest rebellion in modern history over military action in Iraq in March 2003, an event dangerous enough for Blair to draft a resignation statement (Cowley 2005: 23). These rebellions continued and, indeed, intensified towards 2004–2005 (Cowley 2005). In an interesting case of unintended consequences, the unelected House of Lords, empowered by Blair's removal of its hereditary element in 1999, defeated the government twice as often as in the first term on a range of important issues from the judiciary to NHS reform, immigration and anti-terrorism powers (Cowley 2005: 39). Although the defeats rarely seriously hampered the government, they led to policy shifts and were 'politically costly' in symbolic terms and 'self-perpetuating' in encouraging further rebellions (Cowley 2005: 41).

Blair: The Analysis

Few second-term governments 'enhance their reputation' as support becomes 'stale' and opposition increases (Kavanagh 2005: 3; Norris 2005: 44). Nevertheless, Blair began his term with almost perfect conditions for a 'weather-making' premiership with a 'large majority, goodwill, economic stability and a feeble opposition': few leaders have had a more 'favourable context' (Kavanagh 2005: 19; also see Buller and James 2012: 18). Yet Blair's capital declined sharply in 2003 and only slightly revived.

The LCI helps to demonstrate the pattern of Blair's loss. He begins on 41 with 'exceptional' amounts of capital and then suffers a deep loss to a medium 'muddling through' level. He then recovers slightly to the border of 'medium' and 'high'. Blair's lowest point came in 2003, with Brown's euro 'veto' and the series of rebellions on Iraq apparently removing Blair's control of his party and policy.

In examining the loss of leadership capital, it is clear that Iraq is the key event, comparable with Thatcher's poll tax. Iraq undermined Blair's skills, meaning his strong communicative skills had a declining effect on a sceptical public and unhappy party. It also strengthened his restive challenger. Blair's weakness over Iraq was intertwined with the 'Blair/Brown division' which split policy into 'fiefdoms' and had a 'fundamental impact' on Blair's ability to govern (Richards 2011: 35–36). Brown's challenge and status as 'leader-in-waiting' was strengthened by Iraq, as Blair (2010: 511) admitted.

The loss was also down to Blair himself. Blair believed he retained more power than he did: Barber (2007: 305) claimed that Blair felt that 'through the exercise of his own formidable powers of persuasion, he could achieve almost anything'. His poor strategy and lack of detailed planning further limited his ability to reform: he had 'failed to work out what to do' with his second term until late (Seldon 2005: 423–24; also see Kavanagh 2005). His choices of supporters and allies also worked against him – domestically by 2005 there were only two 'Blairites' in cabinet, and on foreign policy he relied on the US and

Israel to move forward peace negotiations or climate change (Seldon *et al*. 2007).

A more difficult question is how Blair regained parts of his capital towards 2005. Blair undoubtedly became more focused later in the second term and, as a consequence, pushed a series of, at least partially successful, bold domestic and foreign policy initiatives late in 2004–2005 from action on climate change to the creation of a Supreme Court (Cowley 2005). Yet Blair's key 'strength' was one of fortune: the weakness of the Conservative opposition, which had 'flat-lined' and remained in 'disarray' throughout the second term (Norris 2005: 45). More effective opposition leaders could have offered an alternative narrative and better exploited Blair's weaknesses: both the Iraq rebellion and euro U-turn, instead of offering a chance to severely 'damage' Blair, also exposed Conservative divisions (Cowley 2005).

While academics agree Iraq undermined Blair's leadership, the LCI demonstrates how. It triggered a self-reinforcing 'chain reaction' across Blair's skills, relations and reputation. Blair himself acknowledges that the party was rebellious partly because of the strength of his rival and partly because of Iraq (Blair 2010). Blair's policy-making was then hampered both domestically and abroad by the growing dysfunction and in-fighting and the deteriorating situation in the Middle East, weakening Blair's control and reputation among his own party, colleagues and internationally (Hill 2005). Distrust among the public then fed back into party unhappiness. This 'negative' capital cycle created diminishing forces which locked into and reinforced one another.

So what kept Blair in power? He retained his personal communication skills, the structural advantage of incumbency and still faced a weak opposition party. His personal skills remained, though they diminished because they lacked traction among a sceptical public and party. Blair's majority was a great structural advantage, though also subject to diminishing returns due to rebellion. Most importantly, Blair was sustained by an ineffective and less popular opposition. It was perhaps the latter factor that allowed Blair to regain capital – giving him the space to lose popularity, weather rebellions and the opportunity to 'promise' to 'stand down', that gave him the time and space to push a new agenda and seek, with some success, to pass new policies. Seldon *et al*. (2007: xiv) claim that Blair was a 'late developer', who 'bucked the trend' of prime ministers in early achievement and late decay, is only partially true. In fact, the LCI shows that Blair's second term is more nuanced and interesting, moving from huge (unspent) credit to steep loss and partial regain.

Conclusions

The LCI opens up several promising research opportunities. First, the various components of the framework need to be tested and extended. For example, there could be closer study of aspects of perceptions of political skills or trust and how they link to other parts of the LCI: the case of Blair showed an

interesting 'chain reaction' of one shift of the LCI impacting upon the other (Brown as rival triggered rebellions and disloyalty, further weakening Blair's ability to 'get things done'). Existing data sources on political leadership need to be mined and new ones established where necessary. Furthermore, the LCI provokes the question of how capital is acquired and how it is then translated into performative capital once in office. There is also the issue of levels of leadership capital: how much capital is enough for a leader to survive, and become a consequential leader? There is a finite amount of capital that any leader is granted, but is there a tipping point – a point of no return? This further begs the question: in what situations can it be spent and how? If leadership capital can be indexed, to what extent does it behave as financial capital does? There may be an analogous aspect to capital acquisition, but leadership capital cannot be hoarded. Capital maintenance is a constant struggle and one 'locked in' to an arc of decreasing power and authority. There may therefore be a case for looking at the idea of 'investing capital' in the long term into particular projects, drawing on recent work on 'political investments' (see Bertelli and John 2011: 746, 748). A leader may 'invest' their stock in a particular programme over a long timeframe that may not immediately see a political 'return'. This could be an attempt to restructure the economy or society in some fundamental way or involve the reorientation of the values of a society.

Second, the LCI needs broader application and scrutiny through comparative research: case studies of particular leaders over time, studies of leaders in similar and different institutional and situational contexts. Comparative case study analysis can offer a conceptual map of interpretive possibilities in understanding, studying and comparing the political fortunes and legacies of different political leaders. This could include leaders who maintain leadership capital over long periods of time, through communication and strong links to allies and supporters, particularly those who cultivate 'national' images. There are also those that rapidly lose it (such as Gerald Ford or Gordon Brown) or those who diminish it by staying too long (a Thatcher or second-term Churchill).

Third, a particularly interesting area is the rare leader able to 'bounce back' and retrieve or recoup, at least to some extent, leadership capital lost. Tenacious 'comeback' leaders such as Richard Nixon, Bill Clinton, Francois Mitterrand or John Howard belie the notion of the inverted U as the only possible shape of a leadership capital trajectory. Enoch Powell may have been right with his famous observation that all political lives end in failure, but some leaders have a way of acquiring a new lease of life when most observers have already declared them politically dead. How and why that happens in some cases and not in others is a fascinating puzzle that LCI analysis is well suited to address.

In sum, the LCI has the potential to provide a rich, nuanced, comparative and diachronic analysis of political leadership. It taps into relational rather than trait- or competency-based theories of leadership, which fits the larger development of the political leadership studies field (Helms 2012a; Rhodes and 't Hart

2014; Strangio *et al.* 2013). Thinking about leadership in terms of capital and doing the hard yards of actually trying to measure it over time can help rid us of the shadows of 'Great Man' and other leader-centric theories of leadership that have dominated the field for decades but have yielded surprisingly little robust knowledge helpful to political scientists.

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