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Does public sector
leadership differ?

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Does public sector leadership differ?



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Disclaimer

This paper is not an exhaustive academic exploration, rather intended as a brief high-level overview to assist with applied understanding and sensemaking. Chat GPT was not used in compiling this paper.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Does public sector leadership differ?

Based on a literature review, this paper provides a high-level synthesis to assist with answering this question. Given the history and nature of academic publishing, it is important to note that the following is predominantly based on western academic literature.

There are varying perspectives in the literature (and in practice) about whether and to what extent public sector leadership is different to that of other sectors. **Van Wart's (2013)** three theses capture different schools of thought about the extent to which public sector leadership is different (or not).

1	Dissimilar purpose	E.g. Public sector has a fundamentally different purpose to that of the private.
2	Underlying similarity	E.g. Sectors (public, private, for purpose) can be more alike, or normatively, should be.
3	Convergence	E.g. Sectors (private, public, for purpose) all converge over time.

On balance, according to the literature, public sector leadership is generally considered to be unique due to the **context** in which leadership emerges and takes place and the **authority** that the public sector has.

Context matters

Scholars have proposed different rationales for why and ways to distinguish how public sector leadership is different. To assist with sensemaking, these can be synthesised in two main ways- variables and lenses.

1. Paradigms, traditions and subfield variables

Building on the work of Backhaus & Vogel (2022) by adding administrative paradigm to their two existing context variables (administrative tradition and subfield), understanding all three and their evolution is necessary to better identify the context of and influence on public sector leadership.

1	Administrative paradigm	E.g. Collaborative governance paradigm, new public management, etc
2	Administrative tradition	E.g. Westminster tradition, Anglo-American administrative tradition, etc
3	Administrative subfield	E.g. Organisational structure including hierarchy, systems, and culture.

2. Character, function and jurisdiction lenses

Getha-Taylor et al (2011) outline three lenses to help analyse the distinctiveness of public leadership and the opportunities and constraints for effective leadership.

1	Character	E.g. character reflects the changing perceptions of governance itself
2	Function	E.g. actions, intent and resources
3	Jurisdiction	E.g. formal boundaries and political jurisdictions

Taken together, these approaches provide a helpful way to make sense of different ideologies and viewpoints about the uniqueness of the public sector and the context within which leadership takes place.

Analysing why and how public sector leadership is different to that of others has implications for how leadership is developed. Without recognition about the uniqueness of context, the utility of generic literature and approaches to cultivate leadership and develop leaders can be limited.

INTRODUCTION

Based on a literature review, this paper provides a high-level synthesis to assist with answering the question ‘Does public sector leadership differ?’ Given the elitist and exclusionary history and nature of academic publishing¹, it is important to note that the following is predominantly based on western academic literature.

This paper begins by contextualising what ‘leadership’ means, followed by an analysis based on the literature about whether public sector leadership differs, and if so, why and how.

What do we mean by leadership?

Over the last three decades, there has been an increased interest and growth in leadership research specific to public services. According to Warren Bennis, widely regarded as the pioneer of contemporary western leadership studies, ‘leadership remains the most studied and least understood topic in all the social sciences. Like beauty or love, we know it when we see it but cannot easily define or produce it on demand’.²

There are a range of factors and issues that make it difficult to distinguish between different theories, understandings, approaches, processes and outcomes of leadership. For example, there are **different conceptualisations** of leadership characteristics, behaviours, processes and outcomes. Some scholars have raised concerns about the **adoption of generic leadership** styles and leadership constructs and the extent to which they account for the specificities of public sector leadership.³ Conceptual diversity does not only characterise leadership as an **independent variable**, but also the outcomes of leadership, that is, the **dependent variables** in the leadership equation.⁴ Spicker (2012) goes further, arguing that that the ‘perniciously vague’ concept of leadership remains contentious, under-conceptualised, and challenges its relevance and application to public services.⁵

Nevertheless, research on public sector leadership (also referred to as public leadership, administrative leadership, bureaucratic leadership, political leadership, and government leadership, among others) can be found in journals across a **range of disciplines and fields of practice**, beyond those generally considered to be ‘public administration’ and ‘public management’ journals in fields such as leadership, human resources, education and psychology among others. As Dandalt (2024) emphasises, the research questions and construct of literature reviews used by leadership scholars is mostly informed by generic leadership and management studies, and consequently there is no clear boundary between public sector and private sector leadership research.⁶

Regarding definitions of leadership, one of the most common is ‘**as a process of influencing others**’.⁷ Another is that leadership is, at heart, is a relational process,⁸ placing emphasis on the processes of connection between leaders and those they interact with.⁹ Other scholars focus on the field of practice, such as ‘**administrative leadership**’ and define this as ‘the leadership of non-elected leaders in public sector settings, rather than on political or community leadership’.¹⁰ ‘Public service/s leadership’ and ‘public leadership’ (those who have formal authority in government and public services) are also commonly used,

¹ Grydehøj, A., Su, P., Huang, S. and Nadarajah, Y. (2023). Tensions and challenges in the decolonisation of academic publishing: A cross-tabulation analysis of articles in *Island Studies Journal*. *Learned Publishing*, 36: 4-13.

² Hamill, P. (2013). *Embodied leadership: The somatic approach to developing your leadership*. Kogan Page, Great Britain, p. 11.

³ Backhaus, L., & Vogel, R. (2022). Leadership in the Public Sector: A Meta-Analysis of Styles, Outcomes, Contexts, and Methods. *Public Administration Review*, 82(6): 986–1003. <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13516>, p.987. See Fernandez, S., Yoon, C & Perry, J. (2010). Exploring the link between integrated leadership and public sector performance. *Leadership Quarterly*, 21(2): 308-23. Tummers, L, & Knies, E. (2016). Measuring public leadership: Developing scales for four key public leadership roles. *Public Administration*, 94(2): 433–51.

⁴ Vogel, D., Reuber, A., & Vogel, R. (2020). Developing a short scale to assess public leadership. *Public Administration* 98(4):958–73.

⁵ Backhaus & Vogel (2022), p.987

⁶ Spicker, P. (2012). “Leadership”: a perniciously vague concept. *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, 25(1): 34-47. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09513551211200276>

⁷ Dandalt, E. (2024). Public sector leadership in leadership scholarship: A systematic literature review. *Journal of Public Affairs*, 24(3):1-10, p.3.

⁸ Backhaus & Vogel (2022), p.987. See Yukl, G., & Gardner, W. (2020). *Leadership in Organizations*. 9th ed. Harlow: Pearson.

⁹ See Uhl-Bien, M. (2006). Relational Leadership Theory: Exploring the social processes of leadership and organizing. *Leadership Quarterly*, 17(6):654-676. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2006.10.007>; Fairhurst, G., & Uhl-Bien, M. (2012). Organizational discourse analysis (ODA): Examining leadership as a relational process. *Leadership Quarterly*, 23(6): 1043-1063. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2012.10.005>

¹⁰ Hartley, J. (2018). Ten propositions about public leadership. *International Journal of Public Leadership*, 14(4): 202-217. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPL-09-2018-0048>

¹¹ Backhaus & Vogel (2022), p.987; Van Wart, M. (2013). Administrative Leadership Theory: A reassessment after 10 years. *Public Administration* 91(3): 521-43.

with calls from Hartley (2018) to better distinguish between the two, noting the latter incorporates both.¹¹ For this paper, the term ‘**public sector leadership**’ is used.

Leadership research focused on behaviour explains that this is **operationalised in two ways**: (1) leadership as a formal role or (2) leadership as a social influence.¹² Behavioural theory has generally shifted from explaining that leaders could be differentiated from non-leaders based on traits such as personality and intelligence¹³, to now generally viewing leadership as **socially influential behaviours**.¹⁴

HOW DOES PUBLIC SECTOR LEADERSHIP DIFFER TO THAT OF OTHER SECTORS?

The extent to which public sector leadership differs to that of other sectors is contested along with whether it should be studied as a separate subfield or integrated into leadership studies more broadly.¹⁵

Leadership in the public sector is generally considered to be unique, making leadership development and claims regarding effectiveness **difficult to generalise and disentangle** from other fields, and to study within. As Backhaus & Vogel (2022) highlight, it is fair to say that scholarship has not yet fully accounted for the **context** in which public sector leadership occurs.¹⁶

The following section canvases some of the main debates and offers a range of reasons affirming the uniqueness of public sector leadership.

Three different theses

To help summarise perspectives about whether and to what extent public sector leadership differs to that of generic or more mainstream leadership, Van Wart (2013) developed **three different theses** to capture different schools of thought: the dissimilar purpose, the underlying-similarity and the convergence of sectors thesis.¹⁷ Each is briefly outlined here.

1. Dissimilar-purpose thesis

First, the dissimilar-purpose thesis emphasises that the public sector is authorised and controlled largely by law, that its mandate is ultimately the collective public good, and that it has a long-term horizon. In contrast, the private sector uses the market as its source of creation and control, the customer as its focus, and has a short-term horizon.¹⁸ As Ospina (2017) summarises, many arguments centre on the role that administrative structures and leadership play in public organisations embedded in democratic regimes¹⁹, value tensions between bureaucracy and democracy (efficiency versus responsiveness), preservation and change (institutional stewardship versus entrepreneurship), and self-interest rationality and public good orientation (individual versus collective).²⁰ This rationale leads some scholars to call for a separate study of public sector leadership as its own field of study based on its unique character, function, and jurisdiction.²¹ At a very high-level, scholars have argued that public sector leadership differs to that of other sectors, namely the private sector because of the context within which it takes place, including the nature of what public service work and ethos entails. For example, public sector leadership differs due its ‘public

¹¹ Hartley (2018), p.213.

¹² Deng, C., Gulseren, D., Isola, C., Grocutt, K., & Turner, N. (2022). Transformational leadership effectiveness: an evidence-based primer. *Human Resource Development International*, 26(5), 627–641, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2022.2135938>, p. 629.

¹³ See Deng et al (2022), p. 629.

¹⁴ See Deng et al (2022), p. 629; Yukl, G. (2012). Effective Leadership Behavior: What We Know and What Questions Need More Attention. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 26 (4): 66–85. doi:10.5465/amp.2012.0088.

¹⁵ See Ospina, S.M. (2017). Collective Leadership and Context in Public Administration: Bridging Public Leadership Research and Leadership Studies. *Public Administration Review*, 77: 275-287. <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.12706>

¹⁶ Backhaus & Vogel (2022), p.987 drawing on the work of Ospina, S. (2017). Collective Leadership and Context in Public Administration: Bridging Public Leadership Research and Leadership Studies. *Public Administration Review*, 77(2): 275-287.

¹⁷ <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.12706>; Ospina (2017); Van Wart (2013); Vogel, R., & Masal, D. (2015). Public Leadership: A Review of the Literature and Framework for Future Research. *Public Management Review*, 17(8): 1165–89.

¹⁸ Van Wart (2013).

¹⁹ Van Wart (2013), p.233.

²⁰ See Van Wart (2013); Waldo (1952).

²¹ Ospina (2017), p.277. See also Getha-Taylor et al. (2011)

²² Van Wart (2013), p.233. See also Getha-Taylor et al. (2011); Van Slyke & Alexander (2007); Dandalt (2024) regarding character, function and jurisdiction.

value'²² ethos as opposed to profit, the nature of political astuteness,²³ and its function to deliver for all citizens. In democratic contexts, Mau (2020) emphasises that the democratic nature of how public sectors operate creates leadership considerations that are not necessarily transferable to the private sector (or for-profit) organisations.²⁴ In these respects, public sector leadership is more closely aligned with 'for purpose' leadership understandings rather than more standard business management approaches.

2. Underlying-similarity thesis

Second, the underlying-similarity thesis emphasises that sectors (public, private, for purpose) can be more alike, or normatively, should be more alike with two different variants. The first variant is that public sector organisations can or should be run in a more 'business-like' fashion. While this thesis is not new and may be popular in political rhetoric and public opinion, seeking to run government like a business has been severely criticised in the academic literature as too instrumentally and technocratic oriented, naïve, excessive,²⁵ and generally understood as New Public Management.²⁶ The second variant, coming from an entirely different perspective based on a systems approach to problem solving, is that organisations are more aligned when they work in collaborative networks such as those found in emergency management systems to cope with disasters and in public-private partnerships.²⁷ For example, Ospina (2017) argues that instead of developing unique public leadership theories, public administration scholars should join relational leadership's theoretical conversation with its emphasis on context that can be adaptable to the public service, with a focus on '**publicness**' of leadership as their object of study.²⁸ Marcy (2023) highlights that while many scholars and practitioners are reasonably sceptical of more general leadership theories (some of which may have a private sector bias that is unhealthy for the public sector), public sector leadership development approaches and methods that are extensions of these theories, are often left unexamined.²⁹ Whilst at times the adoption of more general leadership theories has been embraced by practitioners, a common complaint in the public sector is that there is an over-reliance on leadership development simulations and experientials that focus on particular private sector values, such as an emphasis on profit-generation.³⁰

3. Convergence-of-sectors

Thirdly, the **convergence-of-sectors** thesis argues that sectors (private, public, for purpose) converge over time.³¹ Van Wart (2013) explains that there are some findings of convergence, although distinctiveness remains, and whilst some have argued there are signs of the private sector shifting towards what is considered by some to be more public service ethos (such as self-regulation, common good etc), this is heavily contested.³² For example, Vivona (2024) argues that entrepreneurship, primarily found in private sector and business research, can and should be applied in the public sector, finding that entrepreneurial leadership can be strongly associated with a democratic organisational culture in public sector organisations and the ability to achieve their goals.³³

CONTEXT MATTERS

Broadly speaking and drawing on aspects of the three theses detailed above, the 'yes' camp for why and how public sector leadership is different to that of other sectors is much larger than that of the 'no' camp in the literature, primarily because context matters. Whilst acknowledging that aspects of differentiation are contested, the following section details what is commonly understood to be some of the main distinguishing features of public sector leadership.

Scholars have repeatedly stressed the need to understand leadership as a **context-dependent phenomenon**.³⁴ Based on their meta-analysis of public sector leadership research, Backhaus & Vogel

²² O'Flynn, J. (2007), From New Public Management to Public Value: Paradigmatic Change and Managerial Implications. *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 66: 353-366. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8500.2007.00545.x>

²³ Yates, S & Hartley, J. (2021). Learning to lead with political astuteness. *International Public Management Journal*, 24(4), 562-583. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10967494.2021.1894281>

²⁴ Marcy (2023), p.263.

²⁵ For early critiques, see Hood (1991 & 1995) as cited in Van Wart (2013), p.233.

²⁶ Van Wart (2013), p.233.

²⁷ Van Wart (2013), p.234.

²⁸ Ospina (2017), p.284.

²⁹ Marcy (2023), p.264.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ See Kettl (2005) as cited in Van Wart (2013), p.234.

³² Van Wart (2013), p.234.

³³ Vivona (2024), p.1577.

³⁴ See Backhaus & Vogel (2022), p.989; Ospina (2017); Vogel & Masal (2015); Wright & Pandey (2010).

(2022) emphasise that to date, context is a **blind spot** not only in public leadership studies, but also in public administration scholarship more generally.³⁵ As a result, the generalisability and transferability of research findings and their practical implications across different contexts remain significantly limited.

Paradigms, traditions and subfield variables

Building on the work of Backhaus & Vogel (2022) by adding administrative paradigm to their two context variables (administrative tradition and subfield), understanding all three and their evolution is necessary to better identify the context of and influence on public sector leadership.

1. Administrative paradigm

Regarding **public administration paradigms**, historically there have been shifts from what is referred to as Traditional Public Administration to New Public Management, Public Value Management, and more recently governance related models such as Networked, Responsive and Collaborative Governance that influence how western public services operate and the type and practice of leadership required and possible.³⁶

These **paradigm shifts** influence the context for how, what type and the impact of leadership that takes place. For example, Pollitt & Bouckaert (2011) highlight how reform movements challenging the neo-Weberian paradigm from New Public Management in the late 1980s to **New Public Governance**³⁷ or '**integrative governance**'³⁸ offered different visions of leadership. Van Wart (2013) summarises that these changes in leadership are associated with perennial debates around how much and under what circumstances 'administrative leaders' should be neutral or entrepreneurial, conservators or innovators, and recently, facilitators of democratic, inclusive, and participatory processes.³⁹ In the 1990s there was a wave of scholarly interest in leadership in the public sector as it took on a new character with role redefinitions for public managers required for a changing environment.⁴⁰ The conceptual shift implied a rethinking of the public manager as an active creator of public value, and as such a leader with discretion, advancing, shaping and directing with conviction a complex agenda of policy implementation.⁴¹ More recently, the emergence of collaborative governance⁴² has led to research about how leaders can foster more facilitative, integrative, and inclusive environments.⁴³ According to Ospina (2017), as the New Public Governance paradigm consolidates a **collaborative approach**, the idea that leadership for the common good belongs to a single individual loses currency.⁴⁴ Instead, leadership in complex contexts (such as the public sector) is characterised by multiple relationships of accountability and levels of action that has created the opportunity to explore the relational nature and the collective dimensions of leadership.⁴⁵ Mau et al (2022) question whether the shift towards more shared and collaborative forms of leadership takes on even greater importance in times of crisis (such as COVID19).⁴⁶

2. Administrative tradition

Backhaus & Vogel (2022) argue that there are two key contextual variables that are critical to understanding how and why public sector leadership is not only different to other areas of leadership but also varies significantly within it depending on (although not limited to): the administrative tradition and subfield. First, for example, regarding **administrative tradition**, the US has an Anglo-American administrative tradition in which management and policy education plays a major role with emphasis on pragmatism, flexibility, and managerial autonomy, whereas, Germany is said to represent a continental European tradition with primacy on the legal profession and more emphasis on legality, hierarchy, and neutrality.⁴⁷ The UK, and Australia and

³⁵ See Backhaus & Vogel (2022), p.989; Meier et al., (2017); O'Toole & Meier (2014).

³⁶ For historical account, see Ugyel, L. (2016). *Paradigms and public sector reform*, Springer: London.

³⁷ Pollitt & Bouckaert (2011); Ospina (2017), p.276. See Mau et al (2022).

³⁸ See Dandalt (2024).

³⁹ See Van Wart (2013), p.522; Ospina (2017), p.276.

⁴⁰ Ospina (2017), p.276.

⁴¹ See Van Wart (2003 & 2013) as cited in Ospina (2017), p.276.

⁴² See Emerson, Nabatchi, & Balogh (2011).

⁴³ Feldman et al. (2006); Kelman, Hong, & Turbitt (2013); O'Leary, Gerard, & Bingham (2006); Silvia & McGuire (2010) as cited in Ospina (2017), p.276.

⁴⁴ See Brookes & Grint (2010); Crosby & Bryson (2005, 2010); Morse & Buss (2007); Pollitt & Bouckaert (2011) as cited in Ospina (2017), p.276.

⁴⁵ Ospina (2017), p.276.

⁴⁶ Mau, T.A., Callahan, R.F., & Ohemeng, F. (2022). Guest editorial: Leadership in times of crisis: the intersection of political and administrative leadership, *International Journal of Public Leadership*, 18(2): 93-100, p.95. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPL-05-2022-118>

⁴⁷ Backhaus & Vogel (2022), p.989. See also Kuhlmann & Wollmann (2019); Painter & Peters (2010).

Aotearoa New Zealand following colonisation (among others) adhere to a Westminster tradition of public administration with an independent and impartial public service that serves the government of the day.

How different paradigms and traditions play out at a **national level** also differs. Despite a growth in research on aspects of leadership at a national level, the extent to which insights from these studies can be transferred from one national site to another remains unclear due to (although not limited to), how administrative systems have evolved over time, their unique idiosyncrasies,⁴⁸ and the distinctiveness of place.

3. Administrative subfield

Public sector leadership also differs depending on the **administration subfield** such as different areas of specialisation (Defence compared to that of Education and Health etc). Backhaus & Vogel (2022) argue that administration subfields 'differ profoundly' due to situational factors and therefore leadership studies need to account for this.⁴⁹ These differences include (although not limited to) the **organisational context** such as the **structure, hierarchy, systems and cultures** of different departments and agencies. Taken together, Backhaus & Vogel (2022) emphasise that the extent to which insights from leadership studies can be generalised and transferred across different administrative traditions and subfields remains an open issue.⁵⁰

Character, function and jurisdiction lenses

Recent assessments of public leadership research stress the uniqueness of public leadership, which tends to emphasise the *public over leadership*.⁵¹ Following the Minnowbrook tradition of public administration (valuing social equity and using it as a guide in managing public programs)⁵², Getha-Taylor et al (2011) developed three different lenses to help identify the distinctiveness of public leadership: the *character, function, and jurisdiction*.⁵³ Whilst their research focused on 'public leadership', defined as 'leadership for the public good, where challenges are complex, stakeholders are many, values are conflicting, and resources are limited'⁵⁴, their framing has been used in their subsequent 2016 review⁵⁵ and by other scholars looking at public sector leadership.⁵⁶ It is outlined here to help capture the distinctiveness of public sector leadership and how it is studied.

1. Character of public leadership

According to Getha-Taylor et al (2011) scholarship on the character of public leadership reflects the changing perceptions of governance itself, from transactional relationships within hierarchical systems to political and strategic skills required to be able to manoeuvre within complex environments and perform intermediary actions that balance competing stakeholders and interests.⁵⁷ Getha-Taylor et al (2011) detail three core tensions that contribute to the distinctiveness of the **character** of public sector leadership. First, the tension between bureaucracy (efficiency) and democracy (responsiveness). Second, the friction between constancy and change, with different values and behaviours at play such as stewardship vs being entrepreneurial. Third, balancing self-interested and rational orientation with a public good orientation. Research has shown the importance and distinctiveness of **public service values, motivations** and **'public service-oriented identity'** compared to that of the private sector.⁵⁸ For example, research on public service motivation (PSM) has revealed more self-sacrificing motivations than self-serving with an attraction to policy making, compassion, and commitment to the public interest.⁵⁹

⁴⁸ Backhaus & Vogel (2022), p.989. See also Van Wart et al (2015); Kuhlmann & Wollmann (2019); Painter & Peters (2010).

⁴⁹ Backhaus & Vogel (2022), p.989. See also Kerr & Jermier (1978); Slyke et al., (2006).

⁵⁰ Backhaus & Vogel (2022), p.989.

⁵¹ Ospina (2017), p.275. Emphasis added. See also Demircioglu, Chowdhury, & Vivona (2020); Vivona, Demircioglu & Raghavan (2021).

⁵² Gooden, S., & Portillo, S. (2011). Advancing social equity in the Minnowbrook tradition. *Journal of Public Administration Research & Theory*, 21(1): i61-i76.

⁵³ Getha-Taylor, H., Holmes, M., Jacobson, W., Morse, S., & Sowa, J. (2011). Focusing the Public Leadership Lens: Research Propositions and Questions in the Minnowbrook Tradition. *Journal of Public Administration Research & Theory*, 21(1): i83-i97.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muq069>

⁵⁴ Getha-Taylor et al (2011), p.83.

⁵⁵ Chapman, C., Getha-Taylor, H., Holmes, M.J., Jacobson, W., Morse, S., & Sowa, J. (2016). How public service leadership is studied: An examination of a quarter century of scholarship. *Public Administration*, 94(1): 111-128. <https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.12199>

⁵⁶ See Dandalt (2024).

⁵⁷ Getha-Taylor et al (2011), p.88.

⁵⁸ See Quinn et al., (2010); Marcy (2023), p.266.

⁵⁹ See Perry (1996); Perry & Wise (1990); Wright (2001) as cited in Getha-Taylor et al (2011), p. 87. Also Schwarz, G., Eva, N., & Newman, A. (2020). Can Public Leadership Increase Public Service Motivation and Job Performance? *Public Administration Review*, 80: 543-554. <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13182>

2. Function of public leadership

Getha-Taylor et al (2011) argue that the distinctiveness of public versus private is entrenched in the function of the public service which includes actions, intent and resources.⁶⁰ At a high level they argue (as others do) that this relates to the 'publicness' of the public sector such as how authority is exercised, decision making, performance considerations, and employee rewards.⁶¹ There are a range of political considerations that distinguish public sector leader research. These include (although not limited to) **public value creation, political astuteness, political machinations** (such as electoral cycles), **political scrutiny** and the **authorising environment**. Scholars often write about these as constrained aspects of control in the public sector compared to others⁶². For example, it is commonly acknowledged that the level of discretion that the typical leader or manager has in the public service is often much less than that of the private sector.⁶³ Others emphasise that compared to the private sector, commitment to the **public interest**, even when it may be at odds with internal and external processes distinguishes the public sector.⁶⁴ This includes navigating external constraints, often competing demands for accountability, transparency requirements, and diffuse goals that complicate the practice of public leadership.⁶⁵ For example, pursuing public value creation means compromising among several and opposing interests⁶⁶ with some arguing that this is further complicated due to risk-aversion and resistance to change in the public sector.⁶⁷ In the context of New Public Governance, public leaders must balance the demands of 'many masters' and are required to bridge and operate across multiple relationships, while stewarding or conserving important accountability concerns.⁶⁸

3. Jurisdiction of public sector leadership

Jurisdiction refers to formal boundaries (such as legal authority and often geographic boundaries) and political jurisdictions, both of which provide real and perceived barriers to public leadership.⁶⁹ As Frederickson (2007) notes, the jurisdiction of public sector leadership has become more and more **amorphous**.⁷⁰ For example, Getha-Taylor et al (2011) argue that the diffusion of authority to 'street-level bureaucrats',⁷¹ to all jurisdictions of government (local, state, federal, public authorities, and other trans-jurisdictional entities), and beyond the boundaries of government institutions (nonprofits, collective policy arrangements, and private firms) requires greater attention to leadership across the entire **spectrum of governance**.⁷² The emergence of policy reform alliances and networks of service delivery requires a different type of leadership to address both vertical and horizontal relationships of accountability.⁷³ As such, the context of public leadership is a **boundary-crossing process**, often with those considered to be 'leading' doing so in the absence of formal authority, and with effectiveness resting on leadership within as well as across hierarchies.⁷⁴ Unlike the private sector, the public sector has the jurisdiction of **delivering for all**, not just segments or niche sections of a population that the private sector may pursue. Whilst the extent to which the public sector equally and equitably does this is contested, especially regarding service delivery and outcomes for First Nations and Māori in Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand, the intention and requirement to deliver for all is a core distinguishing jurisdictional component.

For these reasons, scholars such as Marcy (2023) argue that the development of public sector leadership requires more nuance and attention to **public constraints** than what might be recommended in literature grounded in private sector contexts.⁷⁵ Scholars such as Pinnington (2011), based on empirical research, argue for more distinctiveness in leadership training in the public sector because of sectoral differences.⁷⁶

⁶⁰ Getha-Taylor et al (2011), p.88.

⁶¹ Getha-Taylor et al (2011), p.88.

⁶² See Marcy (2023); Ospina (2017).

⁶³ Marcy (2023), p.262.

⁶⁴ Marcy (2023), p.267.

⁶⁵ See also Vivona, Demircioglu, & Raghavan (2021); Getha-Taylor et al (2011), p.88.

⁶⁶ See Jung (2014); Vivona (2024), p.1567.

⁶⁷ See Rainey (2009), Vivona (2024), p.1567.

⁶⁸ Getha-Taylor et al (2011), p.89.

⁶⁹ Kettl (2006) as cited in Getha-Taylor et al (2011), p.90.

⁷⁰ Frederickson (2007) as cited in Getha-Taylor et al (2011), p.90.

⁷¹ Lipsky (1983); Maynard-Moody & Musheno (2003); Vinzant & Crothers (1998) as cited in Getha-Taylor et al (2011), p.90.

⁷² Getha-Taylor et al (2011), p.90.

⁷³ See Fernandez, Cho, & Perry (2010); Ospina & Foldy (2015); Van Wart 2011) as cited in Ospina (2017), p. 275.

⁷⁴ Getha-Taylor et al (2011), p.84.

⁷⁵ Marcy (2023), p.262.

⁷⁶ See Pinnington (2011) as cited Van Wart (2013), p.533.

SUMMARY

There are varying perspectives about whether and to what extent public sector leadership is different to that of other sectors. On balance, public sector leadership is generally considered to be unique due to the **context** in which leadership emerges and takes place and the **authority** that the public sector has.

Analysing why and how public sector leadership is different to that of other sectors has implications for how leading and leadership is developed in the public sector. Without a deep understanding of the context and its uniqueness, the utility of approaches to develop leaders and cultivate leadership appear limited.

