



Separation of Powers Theory and Public Service Motivation in Nonprofit, Public, and Private Sector Managers

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Abstract: A normative public administration theory, separation of powers, argues that successful managers examine issues through managerial, political, and legal lenses, balancing the often competing values inherent in each lens. We build an exploratory measurement model to see if these public service values-based lenses operate in reality and whether they inform managers' decisions. Our survey data, approximately 500 working adults who are residents of the US, was collected using Prolific. Respondents have been at their current employer for 5+ years and have management experience. For our independent variables, we develop an empirical measurement model capturing managerial, legal, and political values and use Kim's 20-item public service motivation (PSM) measure to capture a respondent's public service-oriented motives. Respondents completed a survey experiment choosing competing management values. While our data did not produce the measurement model suggested by separation of powers theory, using single item measures we do find some impacts of both PSM and sector of employment on decision making. There are differential impacts of PSM dimensions on decision making and the need for public administrators to consider how specific motivational orientations shape managerial behavior. Furthermore, our research challenges the assertion that public sector management is inherently more complex and pluralistic.

Keywords: public service motivation, managers, managerial, political, and legal lenses

Supplements: [Open data](#), [Open materials](#)

Public administration scholars, generally, and public service motivation researchers, in particular, are fascinated by the distinction between public, nonprofit, and private sectors. The notion that some individuals are particularly motivated to contribute to public benefit is often at the center of public service motivation's (PSM) core definition (Perry and Wise, 1990) and subsequent development. There is some evidentiary merit to this idea. Different values may drive people into public and nonprofit jobs rather than for-profit jobs, and once on the job, public and nonprofit employees seem to think and behave somewhat differently than their for-profit counterparts. For example, Clerkin et al (2012) find that individuals with higher self-sacrifice dimension of PSM express higher preference for nonprofit and public sector jobs over private, for-profit jobs. Further, employees from nonprofit and government sectors tend to volunteer more than corporate employees (Ertas, 2014; Piatak, 2015). There are sector-specific nuances across high-PSM individuals (Lee, 2012; Mann, 2006; Ward & Miller-Stevens, 2021), including some behavioral evidence, for example, that nonprofit employees often volunteer more frequently and in different organizations, e.g., community and religious organizations, than their public-sector counterparts (Lee, 2012) and private, business employees also find satisfaction in prosocial efforts (e.g., Moulton and Feeney, 2011) including those related to corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Rupp et al., 2018). In other words, while private-sector employees typically exhibit lower levels of PSM-related values than their public and nonprofit counterparts (Houston, 2000), PSM is not entirely absent in the private sector (Moulton & Feeney, 2011) and many private-sector employees still demonstrate

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prosocial behaviors (Liu et al., 2015), particularly in jobs that emphasize service to others (Christensen & Wright, 2011). Some researchers have even found that the oft-examined relationship between PSM and job satisfaction is sector insensitive (Andersen, et al., 2013).

Regardless of sector, the possibility that certain individuals prioritize more public-oriented values naturally leads to a line of inquiry exploring whether these values not only influence job choice and voluntary behaviors, but value-based prioritization more generally. Much of the PSM literature suggests that public service employees are more likely to prioritize intrinsic v. extrinsic values (e.g., Houston, 2000). This intrinsic motivation aligns with Rosenbloom's normative assertion that public administrators should balance a unique blend of public values that mark public service work in particular ways.

According to Rosenbloom (1983), public administrators operate under constitutionally derived mandates that require them, for example, to consider not only managerial efficiency but also legal compliance and political responsiveness. This normative, constitution-based approach to organizing public values is the organizing framework of this study. The authors' view is that the prioritization of some values over others is fundamentally about ethics; Rosenbloom's framework provides a clear constitutional-ethic to help organize these tradeoffs. Public service motivation reinforces this framework by suggesting that individuals who are drawn to public sector work may be less predisposed to market values and more disposed to non-market or public values. Andersen et al (2013, 305) support this in their work, observing that "the two concepts [public service motivation and public values] cannot be totally separated, as values can be motivating, and motivation is often oriented toward something desirable (e.g., values). Though largely complementary, we must therefore accept that the two concepts overlap." With this strong correlation in mind (see also Witesman et al, 2024 and Wang & Wang, 2020, who more holistically examine the connection of PSM to public values), the integration of PSM with the separation of powers framework provides a deeper understanding of why public sector employees are more likely to engage in complex decision-making processes that account for the competing public values, e.g., legal, political and managerial values.

We contend that Rosenbloom's separation of powers theory complements the findings of PSM research by offering a structural explanation for why public servants might prize a wider array of values than their business-sector counterparts. In other words, we examine the impacts of PSM and the employment sector (public, nonprofit and for profit) on decision making values (such as legal, political and managerial) using Rosenbloom's value-pluralism as the orienting approach.

Value Pluralism

As Guy and Mastracci (2023) argue, "public personnel administration is foundational to democratic governance" (pg. 299). Good governance in a democracy requires looking at decisions through more than just a business point of view. For example, even within the managerial realm of values, Hood (1991) reminds of inherent tensions and Waldo's (1948) work underscores the political dimensions of a public employee's work, while Rohr's (1986) work underscores public employees' legal obligations.

A normative public administration theory, separation of powers, argues that successful managers examine issues through managerial, political, and legal lenses (Rosenbloom, Kravchuk, & Clerkin, 2022). Rosenbloom's theory, while initially more normative than descriptive, articulated a value-pluralistic approach. Each lens is undergirded by sets of public service values, for example, **managerial** efficiency (with economy and effectiveness), **political** responsiveness (with representativeness, accountability, transparency) and **legal** compliance (with equity, due process, etc.). Rosenbloom's work suggests that public managers would exhibit higher levels of value pluralism than their private-sector counterparts. While there is some preliminary evidence to support this (Clerkin et al., 2017), to date, this has been tested only preliminarily.

In this study, we explore building a measurement model to see if these public service values-based lenses exist and whether they inform managers' decisions. An additional normative argument, though not usually empirically supported, is that public management is more complex (i.e., pluralistic) than private management (Rainey & Bozeman, 2000). If public service management is more complex, public service managers may be more likely to use lenses other than managerial since they are optimizing for more than just economic efficiency. For example, as we are currently witnessing at the federal level, change in political leadership can lead to massive changes, both voluntarily and involuntarily to the makeup of the civil service. In the midst of this turmoil, career public sector leaders must balance managerial efficiency, with political

responsiveness, and legal compliance. Alternatively, motivation for public service rather than sector of employment may impact decision-makers’ lenses. While public and nonprofit sector employees tend to have higher levels of public service motivation (PSM) than private sector employees, private sector employees still have some PSM. The need to contribute to something greater than oneself (Perry & Wise, 1990) that is captured by PSM may impact the values underlying managers' decisions. Therefore, we examine the impact of both the respondent’s employment sector and the respondent’s motivation on value-pluralistic decision making.

Data and Methodology

This study’s purpose is to improve our understanding of individual preferences for using a managerial, political, or legal lens when making management decisions. We collected our survey data through Prolific, a company with a research pool of over 200,000 individuals worldwide. Using Prolific’s filters, we recruited 500 individuals on January 10, 2024. We attempted to select a sample of respondents with the highest likelihood of these management lenses being salient and sought a sample of managers with more rather than less management experience. To ensure our sample captured respondents with management experience we recruited individuals who are residents of the US, between the ages of 18 and 75, are currently employed in the public, for-profit, or nonprofit sector, and have 5+ years management experience (the upper limit of Prolific’s filter). After cleaning the data for complete responses, we ended up with a sample of 484 respondents. We use multiple regression analyses to analyze our data.

***Dependent Variable: Choice Between Managerial, Political, and Legal Management Decisions
Herfindahl-Hirschman Index***

To capture our dependent variable, we present respondents with six decision choices each with two options based on competing managerial values (see Appendix A for the scenarios used in this experiment). Respondents could choose each option up to 4 times. As can be seen in Table 1, one third of respondents chose the legal option all four times and only 3% never chose a legal option. With an almost mirrored distribution, only 1 percent of respondents chose the managerial option each time it was presented and almost one-third never chose the managerial option when it was presented. Overall, when comparing all six dyads of choices, respondents chose legal options 65% to 83% of the time, political options 16% to 85% of the time, and managerial options least frequently 15% to 35% of the time.

To understand whether these decisions are concentrated in one value or are more equally dispersed across the three values, we calculate a Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI) of these decision choices. HHI, initially developed to measure industry competition/concentration, has been widely used to measure diversification/concentration of nonprofit revenues (Chikoto et al., 2016) and local government competition/regional revenue market share in public administration (Overton, 2016). If a respondent more consistently chooses one administrative value they will have a higher HHI than if they make decisions across multiple administrative values, giving us insight into the level of competition amongst the managerial, political, and legal lenses.

Table 1: Decision Choice Answer Distributions

Count of Respondent Answers	Legal Answers	Political Answers	Managerial Answers
0	3%	2%	31%
1	9%	19%	33%
2	25%	55%	26%
3	30%	21%	9%
4	33%	2%	1%

The HHI is calculated as sum of the squared percentage of managerial, political, and legal choices made by a respondent. This value ranges from 3,333.33 to 5,555.55.

Dependent Variable: Percentage of Times Managerial, Political, or Legal Management Value Chosen

In addition to exploring whether a manager's employment sector and PSM impact the variety of managerial values, we regress the same independent variables in the HHI regression on the percentage of times respondents chose each type of managerial decision. Descriptive statistics are reported in Table 2. Somewhat surprisingly, decisions based on legal values were the most chosen (47%) and decisions based on managerial values were the least chosen (19%).

Table 2: Management Values Decision Percentages

Management Value	Mean	s.d.	Min.	Max.	n
Legal	47%	17.98	0%	67%	481
Political	34%	12.65	0%	67%	481
Managerial	19%	16.44	0%	67%	484

Independent Variable: PSM

We use Kim's 20-item PSM measure (Kim, et al., 2013) to capture a respondent's PSM. In a confirmatory factor analysis restricting each indicator to load on its PSM dimension, our data provide a good fit with the model (RMSEA = 0.078; CFI = 0.988; TLI = 0.985). We use the respondent's factor scores on the Attraction to Public Service (APS), Commitment to Public Values (CPV), Compassion (COM), and Self Sacrifice (SS) in our analysis. Factor score descriptive statistics are reported in Table 3.

Table 3: PSM Dimension Factor Score Descriptive Statistics

PSM Dimension	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Attraction to Public Service	484	-0.03	0.71	-2.40	1.20
Commitment to Public Values	484	-0.04	0.74	-2.45	1.22
Compassion	484	-0.05	0.81	-2.63	1.34
Self-Sacrifice	484	-0.02	0.84	-2.40	1.63

Independent Variable: Separation of Power Frames

Unfortunately, our data did not produce a valid and reliable measure of the lenses' model, so we rely on single item measures in our analysis. We asked the respondents if they were best described as a manager (74%), politician (12%), or judge (14%).

Independent Variable: Employment Sector

We are also interested in whether there are different management choice preferences by sector of employment. Since our sample is restricted to individuals with at least 5 years of experience at their current employer we should be able to pick up on any sectoral institutional pressures that may shape how a manager makes decisions. In our sample, 16% of respondents work in the public sector, 9% in the nonprofit sector, and 75% in the for-profit sector; indicating that public sector and nonprofit employees are slightly over-represented in our sample compared to the national distribution of U.S. employees across sector (public – 13.4%; nonprofit – 6.5%; for-profit/self-employed – 80% (U.S. BLS, 2022)). Public sector employment is the excluded category in the regressions below.

Independent Variable: Control Variables

We use a number of control variables to account for potentially confounding impacts on an individual's managerial, political, and legal choices. In particular, we control for gender, race, age, education, political ideology, and religiosity. Descriptive statistics for our control variables are reported in Table 4; based on recent data, women managers are slightly underrepresented in our data (38% vs 42%) (GAO, 2023) and nonwhite managers are slightly overrepresented (23% vs 21%) (U.S. BLS, 2021)

Table 4: Control Variable Descriptive Statistics

	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Female	183	38%			
Non-white	109	23%			
Age	484	41.30	10.78	20	77
Education (7-point scale, some high school or less to graduate degree)	484	4.87	1.47	1	7
Political Ideology (5-point scale, very conservative to very liberal)	484	3.36	1.10	1	5
Religiosity (5-point scale, very religious to very nonreligious)	484	3.31	1.36	1	5

Results

The results from our linear regressions are reported in Table 5. Our results are reported in four groups: PSM Dimensions, Employment Sector, Separation of Powers Frame, and Controls.

Impact of PSM on Management Decisions

Two of the four PSM dimensions (APS and CPV) have an impact on the concentration of management decision values and one on the percentage of times managerial and legal decision values were chosen (CPV). As seen in Table 5, increasing APS decreases HHI while increasing CPV increases HHI, stressing the importance of measuring PSM dimensions and not just a global measure of PSM. Increasing APS, the rational dimension of PSM, decreases HHI, meaning that respondents with higher levels of APS are less likely to concentrate decisions in one set of managerial values. On the other hand, individuals with higher levels of CPV, the normative dimension of PSM, have a higher HHI meaning they are more likely to concentrate their decision within one set of decision making values. In looking at the percentage of time each management value was chosen regressions, increasing CPV decreases the percentage of time the decision based in managerial values was chosen and increases the percentage of time the decision based in legal values were chosen.

Impact of Employment Sector on Management Decisions

Across our four regressions, we find that employment sector matters in only one scenario. Compared to public sector managers, nonprofit managers have a lower HHI, meaning that nonprofit managers are less

likely than public managers to concentrate their decision-making in one set of management values; making decisions using managerial, political, and legal values.

Table 5: Linear Regressions

	VARIABLES	HHI	Management%	Political%	Legal%
PSM Dimensions	Attraction to Public Service	-344.81***	1.38	0.57	-2.03
		(124.08)	(2.18)	(2.02)	(2.40)
	Commitment to Public Values	524.25***	-9.41***	1.78	8.07***
		(122.40)	(2.14)	(1.98)	(2.38)
	Compassion	-104.06	2.42	-2.68	0.25
		(103.00)	(1.81)	(1.68)	(2.00)
Self-Sacrifice	15.70	0.76	-1.07	-0.04	
	(80.68)	(1.42)	(1.31)	(1.56)	
Employment Sector	Nonprofit Employment	-345.02**	0.19	0.56	-0.73
		(144.52)	(2.55)	(2.35)	(2.81)
	For-profit Employment	-159.27	1.44	-1.25	-0.49
		(98.85)	(1.75)	(1.61)	(1.92)
Separation of Powers Frame	Described as Manager	26.87	-0.21	1.99**	-1.68
		(59.29)	(1.04)	(0.96)	(1.14)
	Described as Politician	-9.76	0.62	1.46	-1.90
		(65.84)	(1.15)	(1.07)	(1.27)
Controls	Female	132.40*	-3.86***	2.01	1.82
		(77.09)	(1.35)	(1.25)	(1.49)
	Nonwhite	-108.65	2.43	-1.78	-0.50
		(86.55)	(1.52)	(1.40)	(1.68)
	Age	5.62	-0.61	-0.05	0.67
		(33.24)	(0.59)	(0.54)	(0.64)
	Increasing Education	42.17*	-0.39	0.32	0.06
		(24.68)	(0.43)	(0.40)	(0.48)
	Increasingly Liberal	121.37***	-4.51***	-0.98	5.30***
		(41.15)	(0.72)	(0.67)	(0.80)
Increasingly Nonreligious	42.10	-1.78***	0.13	1.67***	
	(30.68)	(0.54)	(0.50)	(0.59)	
Constant	3,777.79***	43.67***	28.26***	28.12***	
	(346.64)	(6.07)	(5.64)	(6.71)	
	Observations	477	484	481	481
	R-squared	0.15	0.33	0.05	0.33

Notes: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed test). Standard deviations appear in the parentheses below the means.

Impact of Separation of Power Lens on Management Decisions

Across our four regressions, we find that administrative lenses are important in but one scenario. Compared to respondents best self-described as a judge, those who are best self-described as managers are more likely to choose the political value-based decision.

Impact of Control Variables on Management Decisions

We find a number of our control variables impact both the concentration of management values and the proportion of time decisions based on managerial and legal values are chosen. Female respondents have a higher HHI than male respondents, indicating that females tend to concentrate decisions in fewer management values than males. This seems to be driven by females being less likely to choose management decisions based on managerial values than males. We also find that as respondents become more politically liberal, their HHI increases. This seems to be driven by increasing political liberalism being associated with respondents decreasing likelihood of making decisions based on managerial values and increasing the likelihood of making decisions based on legal values. Similarly, as respondents become increasingly less religious, there is a lower likelihood of choosing decisions based on managerial values and increasing the likelihood of making decisions based on legal values.

Discussion

Overall, we find that both PSM and employment sector influence the concentration of decision-making values; albeit not always in the direction we expected. Different dimensions of PSM have differing impacts on decision value concentrations. The impact of increasing APS has the anticipated impact of decreasing decision value concentration. As APS increases, respondents choose decisions more equally across managerial, political, and legal values rather than favoring decisions based on just one or two values. Contrary to expectations, increasing CPV leads to higher HHI, indicating that respondents with higher CPV will favor decisions based on only one or two values. In particular, respondents with higher CPV are more likely to choose decisions based on legal values and less likely to choose decisions based on managerial values.

Taken together, these findings show the importance of individual employees' multi-dimensional PSM and not just an overall measure of PSM since the dimensional motivations have differing impacts on a respondent's value-pluralistic decisions. Those with higher levels of rational motivation (APS) may be more inclined to weigh the costs/benefits of the managerial, political, and legal implications of each decision rather than more reflexively relying on only one to two types of management values. Whereas those with higher levels of normative motivation (CPV) seem to embrace the public law basis of public management decision-making and seem to prefer to make decisions based on legal rather than managerial values.

Given the rhetoric around public management being more complex than private management, we expected public sector managers to have lower levels of concentration of management decision values than for-profit and nonprofit managers. However, our findings indicate that nonprofit managers are the ones with lower levels of values concentration than public sector managers. These results could lead us to believe that it is nonprofit management that is more complex than public sector management since nonprofit managers base decisions on a broader set of management values than public sector managers. Leaders and managers in the nonprofit sector, especially since their organizations tend to be small relative to government agencies, often make decisions with limited resources, no human resources department, and rely heavily on collaboration with both the public and private sectors. Some have blended paid and volunteer staff that can require differentiated selection, recruitment, and retention efforts. Many nonprofits also rely on a portfolio of federal and local government funding, donations from individuals and private sector organizations, and even earned income that all have different reporting and accountability requirements.

An interesting non-finding in our study is that there are no differences between sectors and the uses of the managerial, political, and legal lenses. We wonder to what extent public sector outsourcing of projects and social services to the for-profit and nonprofit sectors has necessitated the use of the political and legal lenses by managers in those sectors.

Thinking about broader connections to the literature, our findings further develop Andersen et al.'s (2013) assertion that public service motivation and public values are intertwined, and in nuanced ways. For example, like Andersen et al. we demonstrate that PSM's sub-dimensions hold key insights. Like those

authors we found that self-sacrifice is not related to public value expression but Attraction to Public Service (APS) and Commitment to Public Values (CPV) differentially influence managers' value-pluralistic decisions. More broadly, our results provide some evidence of Kaufman's (1956) observation that the resolution of values-in-conflict is heavily influenced by dynamic, contextual factors. It is in that light that we might better understand how sector seems to play a role in value pluralism, with nonprofit managers exhibiting greater value pluralism than their public-sector counterparts, thus refining existing theoretical assumptions. Recent pressures on the nonprofit to find the right balance between market values and values of care or civic engagement are well documented (e.g., Sandberg and Elliott, 2019).

Conclusion

While our exploratory models have raised some interesting findings, there are some limitations to this study that also have implications for future research. First, our respondents overrepresent the for-profit sector. In the future a stratified random sample of managers could lead to more generalizable results. Second, our decision scenarios may be conflating management decisions with policy preferences. In a separate analysis where we structure our dependent variable for a discrete choice experiment, we find that political ideology is the most important driver of decisions. In the future, management decision choices should be based on more supervisory decisions rather than policy decisions to reduce this potential conflation for policy over managerial preference. Similarly, we recognize that the values we presented in tradeoff exercise may not be consistently interpreted as distinct. Our approach has been to identify the primary lens, but we do not have sufficient evidence at this exploratory stage that our instrument fully isolates constructs. For example, whether a city manager prohibits the use of "racial or ethnic characteristics by law enforcement officials even if it reduces crime overall" might be interpreted as representing primarily legal values, this certainly has implications for managerial and political values. Future work could certainly build on the present study by (1) refining the instrument as much as possible to achieve empirically distinct constructs and (2) explore other methods, including qualitative ones, to advance our understanding of lens distinctiveness. For example, delphi technique and methods like conjoint analysis might better explore distinction within overlapping constructs.

Third, we are strictly adhering to Rosenbloom's constitutional framing of values; this is a normative theory that needs to be tested. This means that we per se fall on the Durant & Rosenbloom (2020) side of the debate that social equity, as a public administration value, is constitutionally subsumed under the legal values that drive public management rather than on the Svara & Brunet (2020) side that argues for social equity as a separate and distinct pillar. We invite future, parallel work that incorporates other value frames such as this or New Public Management to contribute to our efforts to understand how public administration values impact managerial decisions. Fourth, future research should center our control variables, gender, education, political ideology, and religiosity, and explicitly theorize how these characteristics are expected to impact value pluralism and the uses of managerial, political, and legal lenses. Fifth, given the exploratory nature of our study and resource constraints, we limited our sample to managers with at least five years of experience. Future research should examine the relevance of these lenses in decision making in at least two different ways: 1) a general sample of U.S. adults to better understand the generalizability of a constitutional/separation of powers approach to management, and 2) workplace studies to get a better understanding that the role of organizational, not just sector, context on decision making through managerial, political, and legal lenses.

This study provides some evidence that managers, regardless of their sector of employment, use political and legal values, in addition to managerial values, when making decisions. On the one hand, nonprofit managers and those with higher levels of APS are more likely to make decisions based in each of the values, i.e., value-pluralistic decisions. On the other hand, and contrary to expectations, public managers and those with higher levels of CPV prefer decisions based in legal rather than managerial values.

Our findings challenge the conventional wisdom—at least as Rosenbloom normatively hypothesized in 1983—that public sector management is inherently more complex and pluralistic. This raises several ways where more work is needed to understand the real contexts in which public administrators work and perhaps ways in which public administration educators may need to better address value-pluralism training. Our work suggests that nonprofit managers may exhibit greater value pluralism in practice, suggesting new directions for comparative sector research. Our work also points to the differential effects of PSM dimensions on decision-making and highlights the need for public administration scholars to move beyond aggregate PSM

scores and instead consider how specific motivational orientations shape managerial behavior. Finally, our work invites more research that seeks to understand how managers in different sectors navigate the often-competing legal, political, and managerial values that shape leadership development, training, and hiring strategies that align with the unique value demands of each sector.

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Appendix

Appendix A. Title/Description

The following questions were developed as a way to test Rosenbloom's normative theory. The authors have been heavily influenced by Rosenbloom in our research and teaching. These questions are the result of multiple pilot tests and careful discussions about which questions might evoke the fundamental distinctions in values. As mentioned in the introduction, the authors' view is that the prioritization of some values over others is fundamentally about ethics. Rosenbloom's framework provides a clear constitutional-ethic to help respondents more explicitly contemplate these tradeoffs. Respondents were presented with the following context and questions:

This next set of questions asks your opinion about value tradeoffs in public management and policy decisions. Each question asks "should" a public manager make a particular decision. Select yes if you think they should make that decision and no if they should not.

Should a city manager prohibit the use of racial or ethnic characteristics by law enforcement officials even if it reduces crime overall? (*yes = legal; no = managerial*)

Should a city manager approve a feasibility study to put a new road through wetlands because it promises to be the most cost effective route? (*yes = managerial; no = political*)

Should a city manager survey the citizenry for their views on a controversial proposal even though such a survey would contribute to a public perception that the manager is weak and unable to make decisions? (*yes = political; no = managerial*)

Should a county health department support a policy mandating that all county business be conducted in English even though 30% of the agency's constituency are not English first language speakers? (*yes = managerial; no = legal*)

Should a public manager enforce a recently passed citizen initiative even if it violates minority rights? (*yes = political; no = legal*)

Should a public agency work to overturn a policy that it believes to be inequitable even if the policy has broad popular support? (*yes = legal; no = political*)