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A CRITICAL UNDERSTANDING OF POLITICS IN ORGANIZATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically reviews the phenomenon of politics unfolding in contemporary organizations. Organizations are increasingly becoming complex and are surrounded by innumerable forces that have made their survival difficult and competitive. To thrive amidst this complexity, the nature and fabric of organizations are undergoing a transformation in terms of systems, processes, and people. As a result, the people's transactions, relationships and inter-relationships at workplace are getting layered by various kinds of informal and often subtle activities, behaviors, and power dynamics. This paper engages in a critical understanding of these layered transactions that occur within an organization as individuals and groups seek to influence decision-making, gain advantages, and pursue their interests.



Keywords: Organizational Politics; Political Behavior; Political Skill; Power Dynamics; Organizational Psychology; Employee Well-being; Decision-Making.



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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary times, the understanding of politics in organizations is vital due to the complex and changing nature of the environment. This evolving nature of organizations is a result of various political, social, economic, legal, technological, and environmental forces. These forces may either be the source or consequence of economic conditions, societal trends, political regulations, technological advancements, legal frameworks, market dynamics, technological advancements, globalization, a diverse workforce, changing regulations, and the competitive landscape. To thrive amidst this complexity, the nature and fabric of organizations are undergoing a transformation in terms of systems, processes, and people (Truxillo, Bauer, 2016). In brief, as the nature of organizations is continuously changing there is an immediate need to acknowledge its consequences on the process of organizing and people. In other words, while contemporary organizations are adapting themselves to stay competitive, agile and sustainable, people comprising of diverse multigenerational workforce are also undergoing changes in terms of their transactions, relationships and inter-relationships at workplace. In this backdrop it becomes imperative to understand politics in organizations (Ferris and Treadway, 2012).

Politics in organizations has been referred to as informal and often subtle activities, behaviors, and power dynamics that occur within an organization as individuals and groups seek to influence decision-making, gain advantages, and pursue their interests. These political behaviors may involve forming alliances, using information strategically, manipulating perceptions, and engaging in subtle power plays (Ferris and Treadway, 2012). Historically, organizational politics research has been classified as addressing one of three main categories: political behavior, perception of politics (POP) and political skill (Ferris, 2019). Literature suggests that these three categories are

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representative constructs of political characteristics, political actions, and political outcomes, respectively. However, in later studies and reviews it was emphasized that since these three categories are inter-related and overlapping hence should capture agentic characterization (Ferris and Ellen 2019). In other words, the categories should reflect agentic characteristics, agentic actions, and outcomes of agency.

Interestingly, in organizational psychology and behavioral research organizational politics has been frequently portrayed as a negative and a deceptive phenomenon. It was described as a navigational challenge in organizational life in Mintzberg's (1983, 1985) earlier work, and different perspectives on its nature emerged. In contrast to Mintzberg's cynical view, which portrays it as divisive and unauthorized, other theorists used neutral language, such as Bacharach and Lawler (1980) and Pfeffer (1981), embraced a neutral outlook and treated politics as a natural part of organizational life and sometimes as a necessity. More recently, scholars have expanded this perception, yet suggesting that it can promote optimistic change, restore justice, and foster support (Fedor et al. 2008, Hochwarter 2012). Research suggests that favourable outcomes can be obtained when employees or groups engage in informal networks to promote positive objectives (Douglas and Lux, 2007). Research has also indicated that positive organisational politics can be manifested through the development of social capital, with the aim of achieving positive outcomes for both the individual and the community, not just for the actor's self-interest but also for shared outcomes (Brass, 1984).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Organizational politics, a term coined by Keeley in 1980, describes an organization as a setting in which people and groups compete to obtain rewards in exchange for providing each other with resources (including information and money). It is an extension of earlier research by scholars such as Georgiou (1973), Pfeffer (1981), and Ashforth (1993) who studied the power and influence dynamics in organizations. Later, Vigoda-Gadot (2003) and Ferris et al. (2005) illustrated that organizational politics are associated with higher levels of job stress, lower job satisfaction, and lower performance; Hochwarter et al. (2006) explained that political skill is associated with negotiating such environments more successfully and thus with reducing negative outcomes.

There is broader literature that goes into greater detail on how organizational politics affect trust and collaboration. Ellen et al. (2013) and Valle and Perrewé (2010) showed that organizational politics can cause loss of trust, which in turn can result in higher turnover and reduced job satisfaction. Harris et al. (2009) correlated politics with stress and burnout, while Hassan et al. (2019) observed that politics squelches creativity. Gotsis and Kortezi (2010) discussed the ethical issues arising as a result of organizational politics, and Hochwarter et al. (2007, 2016) investigated the broader impact of organizational politics on employee well-being. The influence of politics on decision-making and the power equation is still raised as a critical issue in contemporary research, as evidenced by the work of the aforementioned researchers (Madison et al. 1980; Mayes and Allen 1977), which provides a foundational base.

There is also a significant role for individual characteristics in the management of organizational politics. Self-monitoring skills have been found to help people in buffering against negative effects in politically charged settings (Ferris et al., 2002). According to Kacmar et al. (1999) highly perceived organizational politics (POPs) contribute to lower commitment and higher job tension. Mintzberg (1985) contended that politics is an inevitable aspect of organizations, and it can be constructive or destructive to the organization depending on how it is managed. Drory and Romm (1988) demonstrated that politics can cause dissatisfaction with work and intention to leave the organization, and Vigoda-Gadot and Drory (2006) stressed that politics, when managed properly, can contribute to organizational effectiveness and when managed improperly, it can impede organizational effectiveness. Globalization and digital networks have increased the range of political behaviour within organizations, adding more layers to the political landscape, as argued by Castells (2010).

According to Ferris, Treadway et al. (2005), organizational politics is defined as the exercise of influence for personal or group advantage and usually involves power struggles in an organization. This is consistent with Barnard's (1938) earlier research, Simon's (1957), and Crozier's (1964) studies on power structures in organizations. Andrews (2010) also provided a definition of organizational politics as informal efforts by a person or group in an organization in order to shape the decision-making, typically via networking or the use of power structures. Vredenburg and Maurer (1984); and Cobb and Margulies (1981) each had a multifaceted view of organizational politics—Vredenburg and Maurer (1984) concentrated on interest groups and power dynamics, while Cobb and Margulies (1981) stressed the politics of reconfiguring power structures to alter exchanges of resources.

ORGANIZATIONAL POLITICS STUDIES IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

Organizational politics has been discussed across various fields in the Indian context. Kumar & Ghadially (2001) concluded that women felt they had higher levels of politics, which led to lower job satisfaction. Poon (2003) correlated organizational politics with substandard job performance, while Saha & Kumar (2007) demonstrated that political environments are associated with authoritarian leadership behaviour. Singh & Yesudian (2007) observed that the career advancement of public sector employees is determined by political acumen rather than merit. In the IT industry, Pradhan & Jena (2011) found that organizational politics is a major determinant of employee burnout and lack of engagement.

Further research in the Indian context includes Gupta (2013), who discovered that politics obstructs knowledge transfer, and Rao & Kulkarni (2013), who identified that politics negatively impacts teamwork. Sharma & Bhatnagar (2014) correlated high-performing employees' turnover with political environments, while Chaturvedi (2015) identified networking and social support as coping mechanisms to reduce the impact of politics. Mishra & Dhar (2016) demonstrated that a climate of distrust and low levels of collaboration within organizations are attributable to workplace politics, whilst Shukla & Pandey (2016) examined the implications of politics for employee satisfaction and patient well-being in the healthcare industry.

Research based on Indian settings also sheds light on the role of organizational politics in decision-making (Sharma et al., 2017), mental health (Verma & Jain, 2018), and performance evaluation (Patel & Mishra, 2018). In fact, the work-life balance problem is intensified by politics, particularly for women (Khan & Rahman, 2019), hindering creativity (Sharma & Kumar, 2019). The negative impacts of politics can be lessened by the use of emotional intelligence (Das & Mehta, 2020); Rana & Das (2021) showed that political settings can breed perceptions of unfairness and injustice. According to Roy & Sinha (2024) organizational politics is a challenge to corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives and promotes tokenism rather than genuine social contribution by the organization.

The literature reviewed illustrates the multifaceted, sometimes negative effects of organizational politics on employee outcomes, including job satisfaction, performance, and well-being. While traits such as political skill and emotional intelligence can mitigate its negative effects, they also offer approaches for managing political dynamics within organizations more effectively. Despite the changing nature of politics amid digitalization and globalization, knowledge of and ability to navigate organizational politics remain essential to support positive organizational outcomes, which is why it is important to understand and manage organizational politics in the context of political change.

As illustrated, the interwoven relationship between political characteristics and actions produces a dynamic relation. Political characteristics drive actions and interpretations, influencing the management of shared meaning and, consequently, shaping political outcomes. This, in turn, has a reciprocal effect on individual behavior, forming a

feedback loop that guides decision-making and subsequent actions. In brief, organizational politics can be divided into different dimensions such as:

- Political characteristics, which influence individuals' political actions and interpretation of political outcomes (Ferris and Russ, 1989)
- Political actions, which work to manage shared meaning in a manner that influences political outcomes (Ferris and Russ, 1989)
- Political outcomes also influence the ways in which individuals behave politically (Ferris and Russ, 1989)

Another landmark study conducted in the Indian context, suggested by Shukla and Tripathi (2009), highlights the significant role of task and structural variables in both perceptions of politics and their impact on preferences for the use of political tactics. Consequently, organizational politics could potentially be mitigated through job redesign and restructuring. Similarly, negative emotional climates may also be alleviated using these methods. To some extent, their findings align with the optimism surrounding Soft Bureaucracy as a novel organizing approach, as it contributes to fostering a positive emotional climate.

CRITICAL UNDERSTANDING

A critical understanding of literature elucidates that organizational politics research has majorly focused on its negative aspect. However, scarcely the positive aspects of organizational politics have been explored. There is a need to explore both the positive and negative aspects of organizational politics within an organization.

Furthermore, the complex interplay between the positive and negative aspects of organizational politics has not been explored. This has been a major gap and therefore the combined impact of positive and negative aspects of organizational politics on the outcomes needs to be explored.

Majorly in organizational politics research, traditional organizations have been researched. With the advent of technology and the emergence of new-age organizations, exploring the complex concept of organizational politics and its outcomes would be interesting and need attention, looking at their growing significance in modern workplaces.

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