

Power, Politics, and Influence in Organizations

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Abstract

The study of the related concepts of power, politics, and influence in organizations has been a topic of interest for well over a century, with research expanding considerably in the last several decades. Power, politics, and influence are fundamental, and effectively ubiquitous, components of organizational life, serving to help explain how individuals act on their environments and interact with other individuals in organizations. This article briefly covers the existing knowledge of power, politics, and influence in organizations through a discussion of seminal works in these areas. Emerging areas of study and directions for future research are also discussed.

Power, Politics, and Influence: Historical Perspective and Literature Review

The History of Power, Politics, and Influence

Power, politics, and influence all represent components of human agency, which acknowledge that rather than being characterized as simply passive reactors to their contexts, individuals are active creators of their environments. Theories of human agency suggest that people act on their environments in ways that create, transform, preserve, and even destroy it, and they also act on themselves to adapt to contextual conditions (Bandura, 2006). As such, this implies the proactive initiation of goal-directed behavior.

The study of influence is perhaps the oldest experimental paradigm in the behavioral sciences, dating back to Triplett's (1898) investigation demonstrating that cyclists performed better in the presence of other cyclists than when alone (i.e., thus initiating the early underpinnings of the subsequently developed theory of social facilitation). Of course, many would date the study of influence even further back, to the sixteenth-century works of Niccoló Machiavelli (e.g., *The Prince*), which, among other things, illustrated how to gain and maintain political power. Machiavelli's work was likely one of the first to break from an abstract view of ideal ethics and political behavior, and instead focus on the effective truth of how power is amassed and preserved.

Nearly four centuries later, Dale Carnegie's self-help book *How to Win Friends and Influence People* brought the idea of influence into popular press, and predated much of the academic work in organizational politics and influence by decades. The tenants of the book were rooted in amicable and sincere interpersonal influence tactics and were applied to both professional and personal venues. Specifically, the book discussed the fundamentals of handling people, techniques to make people like you, ways to win people over to your way of thinking, and how to manage change within others. With over 30 million copies sold worldwide, there is no doubting the reach of Carnegie's message, and this work is recognized across disciplines by a wide variety of practitioners and academics alike. Carnegie's book drew attention to the role of social influence tactics in people's everyday lives and helped spawn the academic investigation into power, politics, and influence in organizations. This article will continue with a review of the

academic literature that exists and provide some directions for future investigation.

Literature and Reviews of Power, Politics, and Influence

In the same year as Carnegie's classic mentioned earlier, Lasswell (1936) defined politics as "who gets what, when, and how," and argued that it was the manner in which aspects of the environment were manipulated that predicted success. Furthermore, Lasswell was one of the first scholars to identify and discuss the key role of social astuteness and influence execution as a determinant of the success of influence attempts (Almond, 1987). Twenty-five years later, Burns (1961) conducted one of the first scholarly discussions of politics in organizations. He suggested that organizations represent arenas or systems where competitions are staged by members for valued resources.

Over time, scholarly interest in power, politics, and influence in organizations has continued to flourish. This has provided the field with a rich collection of ever-expanding research examining these three aspects of the organizational sciences. Just some of what has been learned about power, politics, and influence is reported here. We encourage readers to explore the wealth of other published work on these topics, beyond the classics and reviews mentioned.

Power in Organizations

French and Raven's (1959) work examined The Bases of Social Power by conceptually deriving logical bases for social influence and psychological change, which are dependent on the relationship between the person and social agent. From this relationship, they developed five different bases of power. Expert power states that the social agent has knowledge above and beyond that of the person. Referent power refers to a situation where a person or people share a high level of identification with a social agent. Legitimate power implies that the social agent has a higher hierarchical standing than the person. Coercive power is used when a social agent is able to exert some sort of harm on the person, which is counter to reward power, where the social agent is able to reward the person for a specific performance.

Emerson (1962) sought to corral the contemporary literature on power-related concepts and derive a simple but

generalizable theory of power through social relations. This theory gave no attention to trait or contextual factors and instead examined the power–dependence relationship between actors. Emerson reasoned that power and dependence between actors has a reciprocal nature, and the theory at its rudimentary level states that power is equal to the dependence of actor A on actor B. This dependence is positively related to motivational investment toward goals that are mediated by the other party. When there is an imbalance in this power and dependence, such that the dependence of actor A on actor B, moderated by the motivational investment of a goal, becomes greater than or less than the dependence of actor B on actor A, then one is said to have power over the other. By definition, power does not exist without the property of resistance, which occurs when an actor yields to something he or she would normally resist in an effort to work toward a treasured goal.

Emerson (1962) theorized that there are costs associated with one party meeting the demands of the other party, and that actors employ strategies to reduce these costs. Generally, these costs consist of value or identity shifts that make the process of meeting the other person's demands less painful for the dependent. Cost reduction strategies are, by definition, not necessarily associated with balancing operations, which specifically aim to change the balance of power rather than psychologically facilitating the demands of the more powerful actor. There are four balancing operations that bring a two-party interaction back toward power equilibrium. The first two are reducing motivational investment in goals moderated by the more powerful actor and finding alternative sources of gratification for those goals. The third balancing operation is for the more powerful actor to increase motivational investment in a goal moderated by the less powerful actor, which is contingent on the fourth operation that no alternative source of gratification is available for the more powerful agent to achieve this goal.

Utilizing the idea of power as the ability of A to modify B without modifying his or her own behavior, Schein (1977) conceptualized the bases of individual power, the intent of a powerholder, and the means used by a powerholder. Building upon French and Raven's (1959) sources of power, Schein noted that individuals use power in self-serving ways to "a) obtain more power, b) maintain current power, and c) eliminate other's power" (p. 66). All actions and movements within an organization are to achieve more power, and often are accomplished through behaviors that can be either congruent or incongruent with the organization's goals. Behaviors that are incongruent were deemed political by Schein, and involve the use of overt or covert actions that align with the individual's current power bases. Which power bases are utilized and the type of behaviors selected often will be determined by the intent of the individual.

Politics in Organizations

Between the mid-1970s and the mid-1980s, several scholars proposed political perspectives on organizations (i.e., Mintzberg, 1983; Pfeffer, 1981; Porter, 1976; Salancik and Pfeffer, 1974). These political perspectives seemed to share in common the view that to obtain power in organizations, it took the skillful use of political behavior and/or influence tactics/strategies, which, Pfeffer and Mintzberg argued, required

political skill. The recent emphases by scholars in this area today have maintained the intertwined nature of these constructs, demonstrating the commonalities or how the different components work together synergistically. For example, Pfeffer (2010) has argued that power is obtained through the skillful selection and execution of mechanisms of influence (i.e., politics or political behavior and influence tactics), which require political skill to ensure effectiveness in execution and goal attainment.

Salancik and Pfeffer (1974) were among the first scholars to examine power above the individual level by examining subunits in university academic departments. They found that the departments able to acquire the most outside resources (i.e., grants and other funding sources), also received the greatest amount of scarce resources from the university. Indeed, the "power derived from acquiring resources is used to obtain more resources, which in turn can be employed to produce more power – the rich get richer" (p. 470).

Taking a more structural approach, Astley and Sachdeva (1984) synthesized what they believed to be a fairly fragmented theoretical literature on organizational power by developing a theoretical model that incorporated three structural sources of power. Hierarchical authority is grounded in the conception of power being inherent in an official role or position. Resource control suggests that power can come from the ability to distribute or withhold vital resources. Finally, network centrality yields power when a person holds a central network position within multiple interdependencies, thus making him or her a conduit to resource facilitation. After running pair-wise comparisons among the three sources of power, these authors concluded that there was a mediating effect of the third, suggesting a more interconnected theoretical relationship.

Influence in Organizations

This previous theoretical work laid the framework for the empirical study of intraorganizational influence tactics by Kipnis et al. (1980). Whereas most research during this time focused on executive influence, this piece focused on the political influence tactics employed at lower levels of the organization by middle managers. Using content analysis, they identified eight dimensions of influence: assertiveness, ingratiation, rationality, sanctions, exchange, upward appeals, blocking, and coalitions. This study not only provided practical insight into how organizational agents influence each other, but also tangentially supported the notion that influence in organizations is not just bound by leadership. Indeed, there are political underpinnings to multiple levels of the organization.

A core component of how individuals may exert influence, participate successfully in politics, and gain power is through the utilization of select influence tactics known as impression management techniques. Quite literally, impression management represents the behaviors in which actors engage to manage the identities they have selected or been assigned by others by way of influencing the impressions others have of them (Tedeschi and Melburg, 1984).

Although there are a variety of impression management tactics available, they can be described primarily in terms of two dimensions: defensive-assertive and tactical-strategic (Tedeschi and Melburg, 1984). Assertive impression management deals

mostly with establishing an identity, and thus, tends to be active in nature. On the other hand, defensive impression management is more reactive, occurring when actors face some sort of issue or threat to an identity. Tactical impression management is geared toward short-term objectives, while strategic impression management is long-term focused. All impression management techniques essentially can be classified along these two dimensions, so tactics can be described as defensive-tactical (e.g., apologies), defensive-strategic (e.g., learned helplessness), assertive-tactical (e.g., ingratiation), and assertive-strategic (e.g., status).

Liden and Mitchell (1988) examined ingratiation, a form of impression management common in organizations and popular in organizational research, a major component of many social influence attempts, and a component of social interaction processes. They defined ingratiation as behaviors employed by a person to make himself or herself more attractive to another. The linear conceptualization of the ingratiation process explores the motivation of ingratiation, choice of ingratiation strategy, ingratiation behavior, target reaction, and outcomes. This portion of the model is impacted by situational determinants.

Ingratiation behaviors are motivated by a need to be liked stable trait, or a situational opportunity to defend or promote one's self. A risk assessment would determine the strategy used to ingratiate the target, as there are potential costs associated with ingratiation behavior. If the ingratiator chose to move forward, three distinct behaviors are possible. Target-directed behaviors represent interpersonal exchanges between the ingratiators and targets, and are meant to make targets feel good about themselves. Self-presentation deals specifically with impression management of one's self, and could include positive self-description or, in a more defensive situation, apologetic language. Third-party tactics involve influencing a knowing or unknowing assistant to convey positive messages about the ingratiator to the target. The targets' perception will depend upon whether the attempt is perceived as assertive or defensive, and whether it is sincere or manipulative. At the time of this study, little was known about the short- and long-term outcomes of ingratiation behaviors.

Leary and Kowalski (1990) described impression management (i.e., also referred to as self-presentation) as the process by which people control the impressions others form of them. They compiled the relevant impression management literature and developed a two-component model that conceptualizes impression management as two distinct processes: impression motivation and impression construction. Impression motivation is defined as the degree to which people are motivated to control how others see them, which is impacted by both situational and dispositional factors. In their model, a host of factors are examined using three distinct dimensions. Goal relevance of impression is the extent to which impressions have an impact on a goal or set of goals. The value of desired goals is rooted in the well-accepted notion that there is a positive relationship between the importance of a goal, and one's motivation to do so. Finally, if there is a high perceived discrepancy between desired and current images, people will tend to be motivated to act in a way that changes these perceptions.

The second component of the model addresses how impressions are constructed. Some criticisms of the impression

management models stem from the notion that people are trying to deceive the target of their impression management. While this can be the case, it is also true that individuals simply want to portray themselves in a positive light, and thus their self-concept is an important factor in determining what type of impression to build. When individuals feel the need to fabricate or embellish aspects of themselves, they will draw upon desired and undesired identity images to construct an impression. Expectations about how an individual in a particular role should behave create a role constraint that guides the observable behaviors of a person and thus impacts impression formation. Much literature exists suggesting that impressions often are tailored to meet the target's values in attempts to gain favor, and even may do so by portraying values with which senders may not agree as long as they are compatible with the target's values. Finally, impression strategies are constructed based upon the senders' perception of how they are currently viewed by the target.

So, as noted, power, organizational politics, and social influence represent distinctive yet overlapping areas of theory and research in the organizational sciences that have been studied actively for decades. Furthermore, periodically over those years, many comprehensive reviews of these literature have been published, some selectively reviewing just the work regarding each separate construct, and other recent reviews that incorporate two or even all three of the constructs together. As a result, collectively and individually, we as a field know quite a bit about power (e.g., Emerson, 1962; French and Raven, 1959; Mintzberg, 1983; Salancik and Pfeffer, 1974), organizational politics (e.g., Ferris et al., 2002a,b; Ferris and Hochwarter, 2011; Silvester, 2008), and social influence (e.g., Kipnis et al., 1980; Leary and Kowalski, 1990; Liden and Mitchell, 1988; Tedeschi and Melburg, 1984).

Power, Politics, and Influence in Action

More recently, research in this area has begun examining how individuals can effectively employ their power, politics, and influence. Among the most prevalent explanations for this effectiveness is the construct known as political skill (Ferris et al., 2012). Originally described in the 1980s (e.g., Mintzberg, 1983; Pfeffer, 1981), political skill did not start to catch on in continued scientific work until the late 1990s and mid-2000s with the development of the Political Skill Inventory, and the theoretical development of the political skill construct (Ferris et al., 2007).

Political skill is defined as "the ability to effectively understand others at work, and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal and/or organizational objectives" (Ferris et al., 2007: p. 291). The construct consists of four dimensions: social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability, and apparent sincerity. These four dimensions together form the overall construct, which is a particular form of what is known as a social effectiveness construct. These sorts of constructs are individual differences that each person possesses, to a greater or lesser degree, which help to facilitate easy and successful social interactions for those who score highly in them, through the dimensions listed earlier.

Social astuteness allows for keen understanding of the other people and social situations around an individual.

Interpersonal influence deals with an individual's ability to be flexible, to adapt to particular situations, and be able to still effectively influence others. Networking ability is quite literally how well an individual creates, maintains, and utilizes valuable contacts or networks of contacts. Finally, apparent sincerity might be the most important of the dimensions because, without this, success with any of the other dimensions is much less likely. Apparent sincerity deals with politically skilled individuals appearing genuine or honest, regardless of their underlying intentions. Influence attempts made when the target of the attempt does not believe the intentions of the influencer are sincere are much less likely to be successful than they would be if the influencer has a high political skill and target believes the influencer has no ulterior motives (Ferris et al., 2012).

Political action and the acknowledgment of politics in organizations are inherently perceptual. An action that one target of influence might interpret as politically motivated for a negative cause might be interpreted in a positive manner by another target, and might even go unnoticed and not deemed political by yet another target. The perception of organizational politics impacts organizations in many ways. Because of this, the antecedents, consequences, and moderating factors of the perceptions of organizational politics have received a greater amount of attention over the past few decades (e.g., Ferris et al., 2002a).

Researchers have found organizational influences (e.g., centralization of power, formalization, hierarchical level), work environment influences (e.g., advancement opportunities, feedback, interactions with coworkers), and personal influences (e.g., Machiavellianism, affect) to directly lead to individuals' perceptions of politics in organizations, which are then associated with a number of outcomes. Perceptions of politics have been found to be positively related to job anxiety, organizational cynicism, organizational withdrawal, and political behavior, among many others, and negatively related to job satisfaction, job performance, and organizational commitment (Ferris et al., 2002a).

The direct relationships between the antecedents of perceptions of organizational politics listed earlier and its consequences can be moderated by many individual variables, such as age, gender, self-efficacy, perceived control, and understanding of organizational politics. Thus, these moderator variables can result in considerable variation across individuals regarding how politics is perceived and the consequences such perceptions produce. What one might view as a threat and intimidating political landscape could be perceived as an environment full of exciting opportunities by another. The political skill of an individual is yet another moderating factor that can impact how politics is viewed and approached by individuals. Politically skilled employees are better able to navigate political settings, would have much different perceptions of an organization's political atmosphere, and thus would be able to work through the politics to ensure positive consequences (Ferris et al., 2002a).

Measurement of Politics in Organizations

The fact that political behavior and the political environment of organizations are perceptual and can change from person to person is one of the factors associated with the difficulty

measuring power and politics in organizations. As mentioned earlier, perceptions of politics can vary widely from person to person depending upon certain demographic, personality, and skill-set factors. Thus, determining a 'true' level of politics within an organization is likely impossible, as the construct can be construed as largely perceptual in nature.

Other issues exist when attempting to measure political behavior. In the organization sciences in general, reviewers and methodologists often criticize the prominent use of self-report measures. Due to the tainted general attitude toward politics, self-report measures are even more of an issue due to social desirability bias. Many of the items in existing measures are negatively toned (Ferris and Hochwarter, 2011), and because of this negative tone, individuals completing a survey who prefer to view themselves in a positive light would be less likely to accurately admit they partake in certain behaviors deemed as political. Additionally, individuals in organizations who are politically skilled may not wish to accurately complete surveys that they feel could inhibit their functioning within the organization's political network.

A final issue with measurement revolves around the lack of agreement on what constitutes political behavior. Many authors have acknowledged the definitional issues that persist in the power and politics literature (e.g., Ferris et al., 2002a; Silvester, 2008; Ferris and Hochwarter, 2011). Some definitions focus primarily on the negative aspects of political behavior in organizations, whereas others acknowledge that good can result and take a more neutral stance. As the literature on power and politics expands, it is important for authors to focus on aspects of these constructs that are clear and observable.

It is impossible to measure a construct that does not have a clear definition, so by providing accurate and precise definitions scholars can encourage future research that builds on previous work in a constructive manner. The measurement of power and politics has many issues that require attention, from the development of valid measures to the development of better methodologies. In order to develop these measures and methodologies, clearer and more precise definitions of what is actually being studied are necessary.

The study of power, politics, and influence in organizations has received extensive attention in many types of organizations, both large and small, public and private. However, it is somewhat ironic that organizational scholars have paid very little attention to partisan politics: the study of professional politicians, the skills they possess, and the ways they operate within their professional roles (Silvester, 2008). Some researchers have suggested that the roles of professional politicians and regular workers are very different, but little evidence exists about such differences. Silvester noted that more consideration should be given to how the study of politicians at work and political activity in organizations may overlap. Political behavior certainly is prominent in politicians, and although the behavior is expected and sanctioned for politicians, they still need to effectively use their power and influence to satisfy their various constituents. Like traditional workers in organizations, they must monitor and navigate their environments and utilize political skill to succeed. Silvester suggested that further synthesis of the bodies of research constructed by sociologists and political theorists could greatly contribute to the study of politics in organizations and vice versa.

Research on Power, Politics, and Influence: Key Issues and Directions

Rather than simply continuing to reiterate what other fine reviews already have stated, we focus our paper on several important issues in the area of power, politics, and influence on which we need much more research. We present these issues in no particular order of importance.

Nonlinear Effects of Influence

Although a significant amount of research has been devoted to examining social influence and its effects as a linear process, a discussion of the potential nonlinear effects of influence in the organizational sciences is warranted. All too often, antecedent variables are presented, theorized, and tested as linear in their relation to organization outcomes (e.g., job performance, job satisfaction), but, in reality, a growing number of empirical studies have demonstrated that variables believed to have a positive, linear relationship with these outcomes actually are associated with negative outcomes and effects (Pierce and Aguinis, 2013). This nonlinearity is likely no different for much, if not all, of the research in power, politics, and influence.

Pierce and Aguinis (2013) describe this pervasive nonlinearity as the too-much-of-a-good-thing effect (TMGT effect). They propose that all linear, positive relationships eventually reach a context-specific downturn, and level-out or become negative at high levels or when taken too far, resulting in a curvilinear relationship (e.g., an inverted U-shape). This effect was proposed to account for the seemingly paradoxical relationships found in a variety of relationships.

In the power, politics, and influence literature, the linearity of antecedents' relationships with outcomes cannot be as quickly inferred as it might have once been. An example of this can be found in the work of Ames and Flynn (2007), who found a curvilinear relationship between assertiveness and leadership effectiveness. Leadership was less effective at both the high and low extremes of assertiveness, tipping down to increasingly less effectiveness at a context-specific inflection point. Evidence such as this and the meta-theoretical framework of the TMGT effect suggest that there is actually an optimal level for many constructs that is not always the highest, or most extreme, values. In many instances, as in the one illustrated by Ames and Flynn, more is not always better.

Power, Politics, and Influence as Positive (Not Simply All Negative)

Despite the stigma attached to the word politics, not all behaviors dealing with power, politics, and influence are inherently negative. Notwithstanding this widespread misunderstanding, there has been very little research done on the positive aspects of these constructs. Hochwarter (2012) is a notable exception, and his review leads our discussion of the positive, or dualistic, aspect of power, politics, and influence. Continued research into the positive aspects of these areas is presented as a clear direction for future research.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle once noted that "man is by nature a political animal"; an observation that advocates that

political behavior as ingrained in who we are as a species. Indeed, evolutionary research suggests that the ability to acquire and manage resources, oftentimes with the influence and assistance of others, will separate those who thrive from those who perish. Whether this phenomenon is bread out of our DNA, or through social construction, it is clear that an organizational actor's survival is predicated on the ability to properly acquire and manage contextually relevant resources (Hochwarter, 2012).

In practice, organizations are a collective of actors working in a hyperchanging environment, who hold asymmetrical resources, which cause significant uncertainty and situational anxiety. Political behaviors provide the ability to adapt in these environments, and it has been shown that those organizational actors who can skillfully swap, acquire, or share resources or information among other organizational actors have been able to reduce ambiguity and thus reduce associated stress levels.

Political behavior also can be effectively employed to combat injustices within the organization. Organizational actors at all levels can utilize political behaviors to bring balance to an untold number of unjust situations such as discriminatory promotion practices, workplace harassment, and compensation. While it is acknowledged that self-serving political behavior has the power to create or maintain unjust situations, it is also the case that personal orientation and context can lead to equally powerful instances of other-serving political behaviors aimed at balancing injustices that negatively impact other actors who reside at different or identical levels of the organization.

Perhaps most famously, political skill has been positively linked with job performance and career success (Hochwarter et al., 2007; Ng et al., 2005). This relationship may once again conjure up images and anecdotes of organizational actors schmoozing and backstabbing their way to success at the expense of others, and although this can be the case, there are many demonstrated positive political behaviors that improve personal outcomes. The initial stages of any young career or contextual situation can be classified as weak and ambiguous, granting the newcomer very few cues about how to act appropriately and effectively. For example, proactive employees who effectively engage in information-seeking activities are able to reduce information incongruences, and build task-specific skills, as well as learn to properly self-regulate within the organizational setting.

The previous discussion suggests many instances and situations in which political skill, power, and influence are able to further the cause of the individual organizational actor, and the organization itself. There is immeasurable work to be done examining the positive aspects of these constructs. Hochwarter (2012) has suggested that a clear distinction be made between positive politics and other casual subordinate-benefitting activities, such as organizational citizenship behaviors. Additionally, the genetic, situational, and motivational antecedents of positive politics are yet to be explored. Fedor et al. (2008) proposed that research be done on the organizational actor's perception of political behavior and the resulting positive outcomes. Put simply, do the ends justify the means? Future research will hopefully answer these and other related questions and lead us to a more equitable and balanced understanding of organizational politics.

Conclusion

Power, politics, and influence represent key components of human agency, and they play important roles in interpersonal interaction in organizations and in daily life. Their importance has been recognized for hundreds of year, but it is just in the past 30 years that the academic investigation into these concepts' impact in organizations has received great attention. We have attempted to summarize and present the majority of the central findings involving power, politics, and influence in organizations, but, for sake of concision, much great research has been omitted. We have also presented some areas of politics in organization that we believe deserve greater attention and will be rewarding paths of investigation. In sum, although much has been done to investigate and understand the role of power, politics, and influence in organizations, there is still much to be done. We call for scholars to continue to build upon previous findings and provide greater insight into the role these constructs have in organizational life.

See also: Industrial–Organizational Psychology: Science and Practice; Management: General; Organizational Behavior, Psychology of; People in Organizations; Power; Work Motivation.

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