TRANSFORMING ORGANISATIONAL POLITICS INTO POSITIVE OUTCOMES: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF POLITICAL SKILLS ON EMPLOYEE INNOVATION AND ENGAGEMENT - A CONCEPTUAL PAPER

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Abstract: This concept paper examines organizational politics (OP) from a constructive perspective by positioning political skill as a critical mechanism through which political environments can foster positive employee outcomes. Although organizational politics has traditionally been associated with adverse consequences such as stress, disengagement, and turnover intentions, emerging evidence suggests that employees equipped with strong political skills may reinterpret political dynamics as opportunities rather than threats. Grounded in Social Exchange Theory and Conservation of Resources Theory, this paper proposes a mediational framework linking organizational politics to employee innovation and engagement through four dimensions of political skill: social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability, and apparent sincerity. Conceptually, the paper advances organizational politics literature by reframing politics as a manageable organizational resource. Practically, it offers implications for leadership development and human resource practices aimed at cultivating political skills to enhance innovation and engagement in politicized work environments.

Keywords: Employee Engagement, Employee Innovation, Organizational Politics, Political Skills.

1. Introduction

Organizations are inherently political arenas characterized by competing interests, scarce resources, and ongoing negotiations among individuals and coalitions. Power dynamics, influence attempts, and strategic behavior are not anomalies but structural features embedded within organizational life. Classical assumptions of organizational rationality—where individuals align seamlessly with formal goals—have long been challenged by evidence demonstrating goal incongruence, resource competition, and political maneuvering (Pfeffer, 2010; Vigoda, 2000). As argued by Henry Mintzberg, organizations function as power systems in which internal and external coalitions continuously attempt to shape decisions and outcomes.

Historically, organizational politics (OP) has been predominantly framed as dysfunctional, associated with stress, job dissatisfaction, disengagement, and turnover intentions (Vigoda, 2000). Such a deficit-oriented perspective portrays politics as a destructive force that undermines organizational effectiveness. However, emerging scholarship suggests that politics may not be inherently negative; rather, its impact depends on how individuals interpret and navigate political environments. In line with this balanced view, Drory & Gadot argue that organizational politics can contain constructive dimensions that contribute to human resource effectiveness when appropriately managed.

Despite growing recognition of the dual nature of organizational politics, limited research has examined the mechanisms through which political environments can generate positive employee outcomes. Most empirical studies continue to emphasize negative attitudinal consequences, leaving a conceptual gap regarding how politics might stimulate desirable behaviors such as employee innovation and engagement. This gap is particularly significant in contemporary organizations—especially within public sector contexts—where hierarchical structures and formalized procedures intensify political interactions.

Drawing upon Social Exchange Theory and Conservation of Resources Theory, this study proposes that political skill serves as a critical mediating capability that transforms organizational politics into

positive outcomes. Political skill, conceptualized by Gerald R. Ferris, refers to an individual's ability to understand others at work and to use such knowledge to influence others in ways that enhance personal and organizational objectives. It comprises four dimensions: social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability, and apparent sincerity. Employees possessing high political skill are more likely to interpret political environments as arenas of opportunity rather than threat, enabling them to mobilize resources, build alliances, and gain support for innovative ideas.

From an innovation perspective, political skill allows employees to secure sponsorship, access critical information, and navigate resistance—key elements necessary for implementing novel ideas. From an engagement perspective, politically skilled employees are better equipped to maintain meaningful relationships, preserve psychological resources, and reciprocate organizational support, thereby fostering higher levels of vigor, dedication, and absorption. In this sense, political skill acts as a psychological and relational resource that buffers the negative effects of politics while amplifying its constructive potential.

Therefore, this conceptual paper reconceptualizes organizational politics not as a dysfunctional liability but as a contextual condition whose outcomes depend on employees' political competencies. By positioning political skill as a mediating mechanism between organizational politics and employee innovation and engagement, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of political dynamics in organizations. It advances the literature by shifting the narrative from "managing the damage of politics" to "leveraging politics as a strategic resource."

2. Problem Statement

Organizational politics (OP) has long been recognized as an unavoidable feature of organizational life. Extensive empirical research documents its negative consequences, including job dissatisfaction, emotional exhaustion, reduced organizational commitment, and turnover intentions (Vigoda, 2000). While these findings have significantly advanced understanding of the dysfunctional aspects of politics, they have also resulted in a predominantly deficit-oriented narrative that portrays politics as inherently destructive.

However, such a one-sided perspective overlooks a critical theoretical question: Why do some employees thrive in political environments while others experience strain and withdrawal? If organizational politics is structurally embedded in modern organizations, particularly in hierarchical and bureaucratic systems, then eliminating politics entirely is neither realistic nor feasible. Instead, understanding the conditions under which politics produce constructive versus destructive outcomes becomes essential.

Although prior studies acknowledge that contextual variables such as organizational climate (Tripathi & Tripathi, 2022) and transparency (Rosen et al., 2006) influence perceptions of politics, less attention has been devoted to the role of individual capabilities in shaping political experiences. This omission creates a significant conceptual gap. Organizational politics may not uniformly determine employee outcomes; rather, its effects may depend on how employees interpret, navigate, and leverage political dynamics.

Political skill emerges as a theoretically promising yet underexplored mechanism in this regard. Conceptualized by Gerald R. Ferris, political skill reflects an individual's ability to effectively understand others and influence them in ways that advance personal and organizational goals. Employees high in political skill may reframe political environments as arenas for opportunity, coalition-building, and resource acquisition rather than as sources of threat. Despite its conceptual relevance, limited research has positioned political skill as a mediating mechanism that transforms the effects of organizational politics into positive behavioral outcomes.
Furthermore, much of the existing literature has focused on attitudinal outcomes such as job satisfaction and turnover intentions, while comparatively less attention has been given to proactive and growth-oriented outcomes such as employee innovation and engagement. In knowledge-based and public sector

organizations, innovation is critical for adaptability and service improvement, while engagement is essential for sustained performance and commitment. Understanding how political environments influence these constructive outcomes is therefore both theoretically and practically significant.

The absence of an integrated framework that links organizational politics, political skill, and positive employee outcomes represents a critical research gap. Without identifying the mediating mechanisms that explain this relationship, the literature remains fragmented and limited to documenting direct negative effects. A mediation-based perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding by examining *how* and *why* organizational politics can be converted into constructive outcomes under certain conditions.

Therefore, this study addresses the following core problem which is "how can organizational politics be transformed from a perceived organizational liability into a strategic resource that enhances employee innovation and engagement?"

By proposing political skill as a mediating mechanism, this conceptual paper seeks to move beyond the traditional "politics-as-dysfunction" paradigm and toward a capability-based framework that explains variance in employee responses to political environments. This reframing is particularly relevant in public sector contexts, where political dynamics are often intensified due to formalized hierarchies and resource constraints.

2.1 *Research Objectives*

RO1: To examine the relationship between organizational politics and employee innovation.
RO2: To examine the relationship between organizational politics and employee engagement.
RO3: To examine the relationship between organizational politics and political skill.
RO4: To analyse the mediating role of political skill in the relationship between organizational politics and employee innovation.
RO5: To analyse the mediating role of political skill in the relationship between organizational politics and employee engagement.
RO6: To develop a mediation-based conceptual framework that reconceptualizes organizational politics as a potential strategic organizational resource.

2.2 *Research Questions*

RQ1: What is the relationship between organizational politics and employee innovation?
RQ2: What is the relationship between organizational politics and employee engagement?
RQ3: How does organizational politics influence the development or activation of political skill?
RQ4: Does political skill mediate the relationship between organizational politics and employee innovation?
RQ5: Does political skill mediate the relationship between organizational politics and employee engagement?

3. Literature Review Strategy

This conceptual paper adopts a structured narrative literature review approach to identify and synthesize relevant studies on organizational politics, political skill, employee innovation, and employee engagement. A systematic search was conducted using major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. The search employed combinations of keywords such as "organizational politics," "perceived organizational politics," "political skill," "employee engagement," "employee innovation," and "workplace outcomes." Boolean operators (e.g., AND, OR) were used to refine search results and ensure comprehensive coverage of the topic.

The literature search focused primarily on peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2000 and 2024 to capture both foundational and contemporary developments in the field. Seminal works

published prior to this period (e.g., Blau, 1964; Mintzberg, 1983) were also included due to their theoretical relevance. Articles were selected based on their relevance to the study variables, theoretical contribution, and empirical rigor. Priority was given to studies published in high-impact journals within the fields of organizational behavior, human resource management, and psychology. The selected literature was then analyzed and synthesized to develop the proposed mediation framework linking organizational politics, political skill, and positive employee outcomes.

4. Literature Review

4.1 *Organizational Politics: Conceptualization and Theoretical Foundations*

Organizational politics has long been recognized as an inevitable component of organizational life. It refers to behaviors strategically employed by individuals or groups to influence decision-making processes in ways that serve personal or collective interests (Allen et al., 1979; Drory & Romm, 1990). Perceptions of organizational politics (POP) capture employees' subjective evaluations of the extent to which self-serving behaviors dominate workplace decisions (Kacmar & Ferris, 1991).

Politics tends to emerge in contexts characterized by power asymmetry, resource scarcity, and ambiguity in decision-making processes (Ferris & King, 1991; Mintzberg, 1983). According to social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and equity theory (Adams, 1965), employees assess fairness and reciprocity in organizational relationships. When procedures appear biased or politically motivated, employees may interpret the environment as unjust, thereby shaping their work attitudes and behaviors. Although organizational politics is structurally embedded in organizational systems, much of the literature has traditionally portrayed it as dysfunctional and detrimental to both individual and organizational effectiveness (Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006).

4.2 *Organizational Politics and Negative Work Outcomes*

A substantial body of empirical research links perceptions of organizational politics to negative employee outcomes. A meta-analysis by Chang et al. (2009) demonstrated that POP is positively related to stress and strain, and negatively associated with job satisfaction and performance. Similarly, Vigoda (2000) found that political perceptions significantly reduce organizational commitment and increase withdrawal behaviors.

Studies across different national contexts further confirm these findings. For example, Abubakar and Abdullahi (2017) reported that perceived organizational politics predicts turnover intention over time. Labrague et al. (2016) found that politics increases burnout and turnover intentions among nurses. Haider et al. (2020) showed that politics contributes to job anxiety, which subsequently predicts turnover intention.

In innovation-related outcomes, Abbas and Raja (2014) found that perceived politics negatively affects innovative performance while increasing job stress. Likewise, Kidron and Peretz (2018) reported that political climate shapes employees' engagement in political behavior, potentially undermining constructive engagement.

Collectively, these studies reinforce the dominant "politics-as-stressor" perspective, positioning organizational politics primarily as a harmful workplace phenomenon.
However, this perspective assumes that employees are passive recipients of political environments rather than active agents capable of navigating such environments effectively.

4.3 *Political Skill as a Strategic Capability*

Political skill has emerged as a critical individual capability that enables employees to function effectively within politicized environments. It is defined as the ability to understand others at work and to influence them in ways that enhance personal and organizational objectives (Ferris & King, 1991).

Political skill encompasses social astuteness, networking ability, interpersonal influence, and apparent sincerity. Rather than representing manipulative behavior, political skill reflects social competence and adaptability in complex organizational contexts.

Empirical studies suggest that political skill alters the impact of politics on work outcomes. Ahmad et al. (2017) found that political skill mediates the relationship between organizational politics and employee work behaviors. Similarly, Haider et al. (2020) demonstrated that political skill mitigates the negative effects of politics on turnover intention through reduced job anxiety. Zivnuska et al. (2004) also reported that political competence enhances job performance under politicized conditions.
These findings suggest that political skill may serve not only as a buffer but also as a mechanism through which employees transform political dynamics into strategic opportunities.

4.4 *From Politics to Positive Outcomes: A Mediating Framework*

While existing research predominantly examines political skill as a moderator that reduces negative outcomes, limited attention has been given to its mediating role in generating positive outcomes.
Innovation and engagement require influence, coalition-building, and access to resources—processes that are inherently political in nature (Mintzberg, 1983; Pfeffer, 2010). Employees with high political skill may better secure managerial support, build alliances, and champion new ideas, thereby enhancing innovative performance. Similarly, engagement reflects cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investment in work roles (Afianti, 2023). When employees perceive themselves as capable political actors rather than victims of political systems, they may experience greater control, confidence, and proactive involvement.

Therefore, political skill may function as a transformational mechanism that converts politicized environments into contexts conducive to innovation and engagement. This mediation perspective reframes organizational politics from a purely dysfunctional construct to a contextual condition whose outcomes depend on employees' political capability. By integrating organizational politics and political skill within a mediation framework, this study contributes to the literature by advancing a "politics-as-potential" perspective consistent with the objective of transforming organizational politics into positive outcomes.

5. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Development

This study proposes a mediation framework in which political skill explains how perceived organizational politics (POP) may be transformed into positive employee outcomes, specifically innovation and engagement. While prior research predominantly emphasizes the dysfunctional consequences of politics (Chang et al., 2009; Vigoda, 2000), this study advances a capability-based perspective, arguing that outcomes depend on employees' political competence.
The proposed framework positions perceived organizational politics as the antecedent, political skill as the mediating mechanism, and employee innovation and engagement as outcome variables.

5.1 *Perceived Organizational Politics and Employee Outcomes*

Perceived organizational politics reflects employees' interpretations that workplace decisions are driven by self-serving behaviors rather than formal policies (Kacmar & Ferris, 1991). When employees perceive high levels of politics, they may experience uncertainty, distrust, and reduced psychological safety.

Empirical evidence consistently links POP to negative outcomes. Chang et al. (2009), in a meta-analytic review, found that politics perceptions are negatively related to job performance and satisfaction. Similarly, Vigoda (2000) reported reduced organizational commitment and increased withdrawal behaviors in politicized environments.

Regarding innovation, Abbas and Raja (2014) demonstrated that perceived politics negatively influences innovative performance through increased job stress. Political climates may discourage idea sharing due to fear of credit appropriation or biased evaluation.

Employee engagement may also decline in politicized settings. Engagement reflects cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investment in work roles (Afianti, 2023). When employees perceive favoritism or hidden agendas, their sense of fairness and organizational trust diminishes, potentially reducing engagement. Thus, consistent with prior literature, the following hypotheses are proposed:
H1: Perceived organizational politics is negatively related to employee innovation.
H2: Perceived organizational politics is negatively related to employee engagement.

5.2 *Perceived Organizational Politics and Political Skill*

Although organizational politics is often viewed negatively, it also represents a complex social environment requiring interpersonal competence. Political environments demand awareness of power structures, informal networks, and influence processes (Mintzberg, 1983).

Political skill refers to the ability to understand others and influence them effectively to achieve work objectives (Ferris & King, 1991). Employees exposed to politicized contexts may develop or utilize political skill to navigate uncertainty and competition.

Research suggests that political awareness and influence capabilities become particularly salient in high-politics environments (Ahmad et al., 2017). Rather than remaining passive, individuals may strategically adapt by strengthening their networking ability and interpersonal influence. Therefore, politics may stimulate the activation or development of political skill as a survival and advancement mechanism.
H3: Perceived organizational politics is positively related to political skill.

5.3 *Political Skill and Employee Innovation*

Innovation requires not only creativity but also the ability to gain support, secure resources, and influence key decision-makers. These processes are inherently social and political. Politically skilled employees are more likely to build alliances, manage impressions effectively, and present ideas persuasively (Zivnuska et al., 2004). Ahmad et al. (2017) found that political skill enhances positive work behaviors even in politicized contexts.

In environments characterized by competition and power dynamics, employees with high political skill may successfully champion innovative initiatives by navigating informal structures and gaining managerial endorsement. Thus:
H4: Political skill is positively related to employee innovation.

5.4 *Political Skill and Employee Engagement*

Employee engagement reflects a state of energetic and dedicated involvement in work roles (Afianti, 2023). Engagement is influenced by perceived control, competence, and meaningfulness. Politically skilled employees may experience greater psychological empowerment because they perceive themselves as capable of influencing outcomes rather than being constrained by politics. Haider et al. (2020) demonstrated that political skill reduces job anxiety in politicized environments, suggesting enhanced coping and confidence.

By effectively managing relationships and workplace dynamics, politically skilled employees may sustain higher levels of cognitive and emotional investment in their work. Therefore:
H5: Political skill is positively related to employee engagement.

5.5 *Mediating Role of Political Skill*

Existing literature has largely examined political skill as a moderator that buffers negative effects (Haider et al., 2020). However, this study proposes a mediation perspective, suggesting that political skill explains how politics influences outcomes.

In politicized environments, employees may either:

1. Experience stress and disengagement (low political skill), or
2. Leverage political dynamics strategically (high political skill).

Political skill may transform political complexity into opportunity by enabling influence, alliance-building, and strategic positioning. Consequently, politics may indirectly contribute to positive outcomes when political skill is present.

This mediation logic aligns with social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), where competence in navigating exchange relationships enhances reciprocal benefits. Accordingly:
H6: Political skill mediates the relationship between perceived organizational politics and employee innovation.
H7: Political skill mediates the relationship between perceived organizational politics and employee engagement.

5.6 *Proposed Conceptual Model*

Figure 1 depicts the proposed conceptual model which shows the mediating role of political skill in the relationship between perceived organizational politics, employee innovation, and employee engagement.

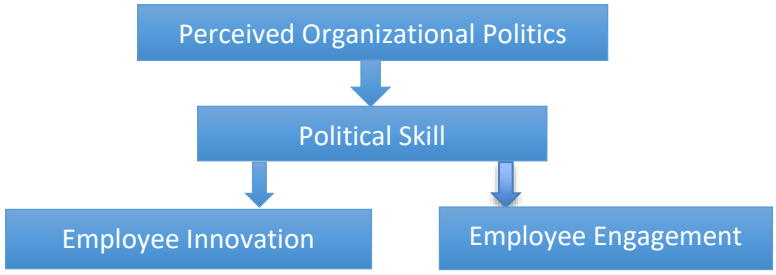


Figure 1: Proposed conceptual model

6. Conclusion, Contributions, and Implications

Organizational politics has long been portrayed as a dysfunctional and stress-inducing feature of organizational life. A substantial body of research demonstrates its negative associations with employee attitudes, psychological strain, turnover intention, and performance (Chang et al., 2009; Vigoda, 2000). Consistent findings across contexts have reinforced the dominant narrative that political environments are inherently harmful to organizational functioning.

However, this study challenges the prevailing deficit-based perspective by proposing a capability-based framework. Rather than conceptualizing organizational politics as uniformly destructive, this paper argues that its outcomes depend on employees' political competence. Specifically, political skill is positioned as a mediating mechanism that explains how perceived organizational politics can be transformed into positive employee outcomes, namely innovation and engagement.

By integrating organizational politics and political skill within a mediation framework, this study advances a more nuanced understanding of workplace politics. Politics is reframed not merely as a stressor, but as a contextual condition embedded in power structures, influence processes, and resource competition. When navigated effectively, such conditions may provide opportunities for strategic positioning, idea championing, and enhanced relational influence.

Thus, the transformation of organizational politics into positive outcomes is not automatic. It occurs through the development and application of political skill.

6.1 *Conceptual Contributions*

This conceptual paper contributes to the organizational politics literature in several important ways. First, it reframes the dominant "politics-as-problem" paradigm by advancing a "politics-as-potential" perspective. While prior research has largely emphasized the negative consequences of organizational politics, such as stress, dissatisfaction, and withdrawal behaviours (Chang et al., 2009; Vigoda, 2000), this study proposes that political environments may also generate constructive outcomes under certain conditions. By shifting the focus from purely dysfunctional interpretations, the study enriches theoretical discourse and encourages a more balanced understanding of workplace politics. Second, the study advances existing research by positioning political skill as a mediating mechanism rather than merely a moderating or buffering factor. Previous studies often examine political skill as a variable that weakens the negative effects of organizational politics (Ahmad et al., 2017; Haider et al., 2020). In contrast, the present framework suggests that political skill explains the underlying process through which organizational politics influences important employee outcomes, specifically innovation and engagement. This mediation perspective deepens understanding of how employees navigate and respond to politicized work environments. Third, the study integrates organizational politics with positive organizational constructs, namely employee innovation and employee engagement rather than focusing exclusively on negative outcomes such as stress, turnover intention, and dissatisfaction. By linking politics with positive organizational behaviour outcomes, this study broadens the scope of organizational politics research and responds to calls for more comprehensive examinations of power, influence, and relational dynamics in contemporary organizations.

6.2 *Theoretical Implications*

The proposed framework offers several important theoretical implications. First, it reinforces the view that organizational phenomena are context-dependent rather than inherently positive or negative, suggesting that the effects of organizational politics depend largely on how individuals interpret and navigate such environments. Second, the framework highlights the importance of individual capability, particularly political skill, in shaping employees' organizational experiences and responses to workplace dynamics. This perspective emphasizes that employees are not merely passive recipients of political environments but active agents who can strategically manage interpersonal relationships and influence processes. Third, the framework suggests that political environments may function as developmental contexts where interpersonal competence becomes a valuable strategic resource. In such settings, employees who possess strong political skill may be better positioned to mobilize support, access resources, and maintain productive work relationships. Furthermore, grounding the framework in social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) strengthens the theoretical foundation of the study by suggesting that influence competence facilitates reciprocal exchanges and relationship building within organizations, thereby enhancing access to support and resources that ultimately promote employee innovation and engagement.

6.3 *Directions for Future Research*

Although this paper proposes a conceptual framework, empirical validation is necessary to further establish the relationships suggested in the model. Future research should test the proposed mediation model using more rigorous research designs, such as multi-wave or longitudinal studies, to better capture causal relationships among perceived organizational politics, political skill, and employee outcomes. Additionally, scholars may examine contextual moderators, including organizational culture and ethical climate, which could influence how political environments are interpreted and navigated by employees. Future studies may also explore whether different dimensions of political skill, such as networking ability and apparent sincerity, exert distinct or differential effects on innovation and engagement outcomes. Furthermore, cross-cultural investigations could provide deeper insights into whether the politics–skill–outcome relationship varies across different cultural and organizational

contexts. Finally, future research may examine potential unintended consequences of political skill, particularly whether excessive reliance on political competence could lead to manipulative behaviors, ethical concerns, or perceptions of insincerity within organizational settings.

6.4 *Final Reflection*

Organizational politics is neither inherently destructive nor inherently beneficial. It is a structural reality of organizational life shaped by power distribution, resource allocation, and human interaction.
This study argues that the key determinant of outcomes lies not in the existence of politics itself, but in employees' ability to navigate it effectively. Political skill serves as the mechanism through which politicized environments can be transformed into contexts that foster innovation and engagement.
By advancing a capability-based mediation framework, this paper contributes to a more balanced and development-oriented understanding of organizational politics one that aligns with the central objective of transforming organizational politics into positive outcomes.

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