

UNDERSTANDING POLITICAL BEHAVIOUR IN
ORGANIZATIONS: A FRAMEWORK

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Understanding Political Behaviour in Organizations: A Framework

Abstract

Although as an organizational phenomenon political behaviour has started attracting considerable research, most studies approach it in a segmented fashion. The present paper proposes an integrated model for understanding the dynamics of political behaviour. Beginning with an exposition of the meaning, dimensions and forms of political behaviour, the paper discusses the significance of the situational, influencer, and target characteristics, and the influence of the cultural milieu in determining the incidence, nature and extent of political behaviour in an organization and its outcome. Areas for future research are suggested.

Understanding Political Behaviour in Organizations: A Framework

Although the rational model of organizations (Cyert and March, 1963) presents a picture of goal-directed, orderly, efficient and harmonious behaviour of organizational members, a great deal of actual behaviour in organization is at variance with this model. Organizational functioning can often be understood in terms of networks of individuals and groups linked together in ways or "emergent" systems which may be at variance with the "prescribed" system (Tichy, Tushman, and Fombrun, 1979). It is not uncommon to find organizational functioning paralysed because of feuds between two key individuals; major cliques fighting to interpret the real goals of the organization and advocating strategies which further their own interests; constant battles raging among departments and individuals for control of organizational resources and opportunities - interactions which can be analysed in terms of each subunit attempting to maximize its own power (Tushman, 1977).

Issues of power, influence and politics often hold a key to understanding the actual functioning of organizations. Scholars like Weber tried to probe these important issues as early as nineteen forties. During the fifties and sixties somehow issues of power and influence got side-tracked. There were a few attempts during this period to study power in situations other than the traditional superior-subordinate relationship (March, 1962; Mechanic, 1962; Dubin, 1963), yet they were rare, and leadership studies largely dominated the scene (Tannenbaum, 1968). As if to make up for this neglect, of late there has been a revival of interest in the ubiquitous phenomenon

of power and politics in organizations (Mayes & Allen, 1977; Frost & Hayes, 1979; Porter, Allen & Angle, 1981). The burgeoning research can be grouped into two major categories. The first one probes power as a structural property of units and subunits within the organization (Hickson, Hinings, Lee, Scheneck & Pennings, 1971; Astley & Sachdeva, 1984). Power, according to this perspective, is seen as resulting from structural sources such as hierarchical position, control of critical resources, centrality of location, etc.

The second approach to the study of power in the organization emphasises the individual perspective. Power in this perspective is seen as devolving upon the individual actor (Allen, Madison, Porter, Renwick & Mayes, 1979; Gandz & Murray, 1980, Farrell & Peterson, 1982).

However, the pursuit of either structural or individual approach represents efforts to segment the reality of political behaviour into artificial, restrictive categories. Each approach provides a useful but partial view of this important organizational reality. In the present paper, we propose a model of political behaviour in organizations which synthesises these approaches and seeks to evolve an integrated understanding of the political phenomenon in organizations. Also proposed are some areas for future research. The conceptual basis of the present paper is contained in the model of political behaviour presented in Figure-1. As this model suggests,

Figure-1 about here

political behaviour in organizations is influenced by characteristics of the situation, characteristics of the influencer and the

characteristics of the influence target. It can have intended and unintended consequences for the organization, the influencer, the target and the observer. Consequences can influence the future characteristics of the influencer as well as the target. As organizations are embedded in larger societal culture, the environment influences the direction, preferred modes and the texture of political behaviour in organizations, and also gets influenced by it.

Political Behaviour

Politics essentially consists of exercising influence. Although influence can be seen as the potential of an actor to influence the behaviour of another actor in a particular sphere (Crozier, 1973), not all influence attempts can be called political. Indeed an organization can be conceptualised as a network of influence attempts which are intended to restrict the behaviours of its members and channelize them towards the achievement of organizational goals. Under what conditions, then, can a particular influence attempt be called political? Since a considerable amount of organizational activity devolves around attempts to influence others, an important issue is where and how to draw a dividing line between political and nonpolitical behaviour in organizations.

A number of researchers (Pettigrew, 1973; Mayes and Allen, 1977; Frost and Hayes, 1979) have tried to define political processes and political behaviour in different ways. Drawing on the work of Porter, et. al. (1981), political behaviour (PB) can be characterised by the following elements:

PB is an influence attempt.

In the ultimate analysis, political behaviour is an attempt to influence others in the organization. Organizational activity not aimed at influencing others falls outside the realm of political behaviour.

PB is an informal influence attempt.

Political behaviour consists of influence attempts that are informal in nature. Formal influence attempts that are part of one's role in the organization are excluded from such behaviour.

PB is an informal influence attempt that is discretionary.

This means that the organization neither explicitly demands nor forbids such behaviour. The decision as to whether or not to indulge in political behaviour rests solely upon the individual. For an organizational member, particularly a new entrant, this is an ambiguous situation and one requires time and skill to decipher organizational norms pertaining to political behaviour. These norms are not clearly stated and can best be inferred from different organizational postures in different situations.

PB is a discretionary influence attempt that is aimed at protecting the self-interests of individuals and units.

A key characteristic of political behaviour in organizations is that it is self-serving, and is directed toward personnel gain (Robbins, 1976). It is intended to promote interests of individuals/groups. This is often at the cost of interests of other individuals and groups.

Mintzberg (1983, p.172) describes politics in organizations as "individual or group behaviour that is informal, ostensibly parochial, typically divisive, and above all, in the technical sense, illegitimate - sanctioned neither by formal authority, accepted ideology, nor certified expertise (though it may exploit any one of these). The objective of such behaviour, then is to 'displace' legitimate power." Because of the possibility of resistance, the influencer can sometimes try to conceal his influence attempts or camouflage the real intent with organizationally-approved reasons.

Dimensions of political behaviour

Political behaviour can be understood using three key dimensions namely the internal-external dimension, the vertical-lateral dimension, and the legitimate-illegitimate dimension (Farrell and Peterson, 1982). The first dimension indicates the arena of resources pursued by people who are engaged in political behaviour. Such pursuits can either be internal when actors consolidate their power base within the organization by exchanging favours, forming coalitions, using reprisals, etc.; or the political activity traverses organizational boundaries to enlist support from units and individuals external to the organization.

Direction of political activity constitutes the next dimension. Vertical influence effort consists of an attempt to exercise power upward, for example, by apple polishing, or upward appeal bypassing the immediate superior. Downward influence attempts include exchange of favours, and trading agreements between the superior and subordinates. Lateral influence efforts include exchange of favours and coalition formation with one's peers.

Political behaviour can be placed on a continuum of legitimacy wherein it can range from normally accepted political behaviour to an extreme form of behaviour which violates organizationally accepted rules of the game. The latter kind of activities are examples of illegitimate behaviour which includes sabotage, mutiny and organizational duplicity. Mayes and Allen (1977) view all organizational behaviour as essentially a means-ends relationship and describe political behaviour as an attempt to manage influence in the organization to obtain ends not sanctioned by the organization or to obtain sanctioned ends through non-sanctioned means. This explains the difficulty in researching political behaviour in organizations. Many such behaviours are not apparent to others and are not easily acknowledged by influencers themselves.

Political behaviour: Influence tactics

Political behaviour presents a rich gamut of organizational activities that can be included under influence attempts. A study asking respondents to describe organizational political activities reported eight categories of political tactics mentioned most frequently by chief executives, senior staff managers and supervisors (Allen, Madison, Porter, Renwick & Mayes, 1979). In descending order of reported frequency, those consisted of attacking or blaming others, use of information as a political tool, image building/impression management as a proactive measure, support building for ideas by involving others, praising others and ingratiation, developing power coalition, developing power coalitions and allies, associating with influential persons in business and social situations, and doing

favours to create obligations. The strength and relative ranking of these tactics may vary to suit the socio-cultural environment in which an organization is embedded.

Situational Characteristics

Several researchers have discussed situational characteristics that encourage the occurrence of political behaviour in organizations. According to Hickson, et. al. (1971), the degree of uncertainty in the situation, the significance of the activity to the larger system or 'centrality of the workflow' and the substitutability of activities are some such conditions. Tushman (1977) indicated disagreement about outcomes, insufficient knowledge about causality and task interdependence as antecedent conditions. According to Pfeffer (1978), ambiguity about performance standards and secretive decision processes encourage political behaviour.

Regarding a relationship between organizational levels and PB, in a study by Gandz & Murray (1980), respondents perceived the work climate to be more political at higher managerial levels, and less political at lower levels. In another study of politics in organizations (Madison, Allen, Porter, Renwick & Mayes, 1980), organizational politics was seen as furthering individual interests rather than group interests. Political behaviour was reported as occurring more frequently at middle and higher management levels than at the lower levels, and in functional areas such as marketing and sales, than in other areas. Also, managers reported certain situations like reorganization changes, personnel changes and budget allocation as having more political activity than situations like rules and procedure changes, purchase of major items, etc. Thus organizational

situations that are characterized by high uncertainty, scarcity of resources and salience of the issue to the individual appear to attract more political activity than situations where these characteristics are low. Interestingly, most respondents saw political behaviour as leading to personally desirable outcomes such as faster promotions, salary increases and being successful in a job. Respondents were generally ambivalent about the effect of political behaviour upon the organization.

Influencer Characteristics

Influencer characteristics constitute an important area for obtaining greater understanding of PB. The question thus is whether it is possible to identify influencer characteristics that contribute to a greater incidence of PB. Although few empirical studies are directly addressed to this question, relevant literature can help propose a few hypotheses. Beliefs about relationship between effort and outcome, manifest needs, locus of control, and risk-seeking propensity have been proposed by Porter et. al. (1981) as some salient influencer characteristics.

Since organizational members are constantly engaged in maximising their net outcomes in the organization, expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964) suggests that the incidence of PB would be related to an analysis of costs and benefits. Individual actor's personal experience of political behaviour in the past (whether positive or negative) and knowledge about the outcomes of PB of other people can influence the expectancy set of the prospective influencer. It can be hypothesised that expectancy of favourable outcomes is positively related with the incidence of PB.

Influencer's need for power (McClelland and Burnham, 1976) appears to be another relevant characteristic. Defined not as dictatorial behaviour, but as 'a desire to have impact, to be strong and influential' a high need for personal power can impel managers to achieve their goals through political behaviour.

Likewise, the internal locus of control (Rotter, 1966) or a belief that one's ability and effort can influence the happenings around oneself can be related to PB in organizations if internals can see political activity as a feasible alternative available to them to affect the environment around them. Moberg (1978) found a significant relationship between locus of control and perceptions of politics.

There could be many more attributes which have a bearing upon political behaviour. A study by Allen, *et. al.* (1979) found that political actors were seen as being articulate, sensitive, socially adept, competent and popular by combined groups of chief executives, staff managers and supervisors. There is need for more empirical work in this area to identify influencer characteristics which can be clearly associated with PB.

Perceived Target Characteristics

Earlier frameworks for understanding politics in organizations (Vredenburg and Maurer, 1984; Goh and Douchet, 1989) have ignored the important variable of influence target. Yet the intensity of influence attempts and selection of appropriate influence tactics seems, *inter alia*, to be influenced by characteristics of influence target as perceived by the influencer. The first perceived

characteristic of the target is his/her control over resources valued by the influencer. A person becomes attractive as a target for political activity if either the person controls considerable organizational resources to affect the outcomes in the favour of the influencer, or he/she has the power to influence the other key people.

Perceived amenability of the target to influence attempts is another important characteristic. People who have an established reputation of being immune to any influence attempts are less attractive targets, compared to those who are seen as being easily influenceable. Influence attempts also entail costs in terms of possible negative outcomes. These costs can range from incurring the displeasure of the target, the risk of the influence attempt getting leaked out thereby tarnishing reputation of the influencer/target or both, to the inability of the target to achieve the desired outcome and to protect the interests of the influencer. Selection of targets also depends upon the history of relationship and interpersonal attraction between the influencer and the target.

Thus, if given a choice, an influencer is likely to identify and select as a target for his influence attempts those people who are seen as being powerful in the desired sphere, who appear to be open to influence attempts of others, who can impose the least cost upon the influencer, and who offer least interpersonal threat and a relatively high probability of success of the influence attempt. A good potential target would be the weakest person who appears to have enough power to help realise the intent of the influencer (Tedeschi, Schlenker and Lindskold, 1972). Systematic research is required to probe these characteristics.

Cultural Milieu

The wider societal culture in which an organization functions significantly affects the nature of political behaviour. A political-cultural analysis of organizations, particularly at the subgroup level can provide useful insights for understanding political behaviour (Lucas, 1987). In India, for example, the traditional nature of the Indian society gets reflected in political activities within organizations.

Political behaviour in Indian organizations is often characterised by terms like 'pulls, connections and contacts' which signify networks as a source of an influencer's power in the organization; 'favouritism' which indicates a decision-maker's proclivity to base decisions on personal preferences rather than objective considerations; and 'groups and lobbies' which suggest the existence of distinct coalitions or cliques within the organization. Political behaviour like actuation of these networks and coalitions is often invoked in order to secure decisions favourable to oneself or members of one's own clique. Underlying these seemingly universal processes, in Indian organizations, are often strongly traditional factors like caste and religion.

Two types of political behaviour can be discerned in Indian organizations. The first one aims at furthering a person's self-interest directly which has been discussed at length earlier. The second type of political behaviour is occasioned by the influencer's need to consolidate his/her position in the long run. This is sought

to be achieved indirectly by promoting interests of people belonging to one's own ingroup. Traditional ascribed characteristics such as religion, caste and even the subcaste, languages and place of one's origin often form the basis for ingroup formation. These cliques can be reflections of the predominance of religion-, caste-, language-, and region-related considerations in the larger socio-cultural environment in which organizations are embedded. They get further reinforced by the strong affiliation ethic among Indians which spurs them to value relationships at work. There exists considerable political activity in Indian organizations which is geared towards protecting and promoting the interests of members of cliques based on kinship (bhai-bhatijavad), caste (jativad), language (bhashavad), region (prantiyatavad), etc.

Sometimes such coalitions operate subtly; more often, however, their functioning is apparent to other organizational members. In extreme cases, there is a visible polarisation of organizational members along the caste, language or regional divide and members of each group try to outdo the rival groups by pushing up their own members.

In some cases the integrity of organizational members becomes a basis for coalition-formation. Members who are dishonest and corrupt see the upright members as obstructions and threats. They often form coalitions and join forces to either remove honest members from their way or to render them powerless. The upright members coalesce to resist such attempts. Political activity in such situations consists not only of promoting one's coalition but also of pulling down the rival group. Environmental and organizational conditions that facilitate the formation and activation of cliques and coalitions, and

the dominant intragroup and intergroup political activities which mark various phases in the development of such coalitions are important areas for inquiry. Equally intriguing and significant is the phenomenon of interlocking coalitions. Conflicts and dilemmas faced by individuals with dual membership of two strong cliques (for example, a caste-based and another region-based clique), the process of their prioritisation of loyalties, and strategies used for resolution of these dilemmas are related issues which need to be explored.

Outcome of Political Behaviour

As expectancy theory tells us, the expected outcome of PB for the individual must be favourable in order to prompt organizational members to indulge in it. Yet research needs to explore whether the actual outcome is always favourable, in the short run or long run too, and which influence tactics have a greater probability of yielding positive results to the individual. Also, research needs to tell us the range of outcomes different kinds of political behaviour can have for the long-term effectiveness of the organization. Specifically, do some political activities contribute to the health and vitality of the organization and others cause organizational degeneration?

Some more research questions

Besides research areas suggested earlier, following are some other important issues:

1. Can there be any actor-observer difference in the perception of political behaviour? Can a behaviour seen by the actor as an exercise of legitimate influence be perceived by observer or

target as PB? If so, under what conditions?

2. Can PB have an impact not only on goal accomplishment, but on interpersonal relations between the influencer and the target as well? In other words besides the influencer, do the target characteristics also get affected by PB?
3. Does PB have consequences for non-participants also? For example, if individual consequences of PB are positive for influencers, observers may also like to become actors. Or they may watch out against the possibility of being made targets of PB. Vicarious learning for non-participant observers is an important area of inquiry.
4. Should study of PB remain confined to observable, actual and realized influence attempts, or should it also be addressed to latent or potential PB? Does the knowledge that an observer has the potential to become an influencer affect the observer and the potential target? As Pfeffer (1981) notes, the control of decision premises may be more important than the control of actual behaviour.
5. Should study of PB remain confined to intraorganizational influence attempts? Or should it presuppose porous organizational boundaries and include within its ambit PB directed outside the organization, and PB directed from outside by non-organizational members?
6. Finally, should study of PB remain restricted to observable behaviour and visible acts of commission by the target, or should it stretch beyond the observable to include the acts of omission when the exercise of influence led the target to do nothing?

Empirical answers to such questions are hard to obtain because of organizational reluctance, and hesitation of actors to share their tactics and outcomes, a tendency to camouflage PB so that its occurrence is not noticed by others, emotional reactions of non-participants who often disapprove of PB, etc. Yet given the pervasiveness of PB as an organizational reality, greater research effort is required to add richness to our current understanding of PB.

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Cultural Milieu

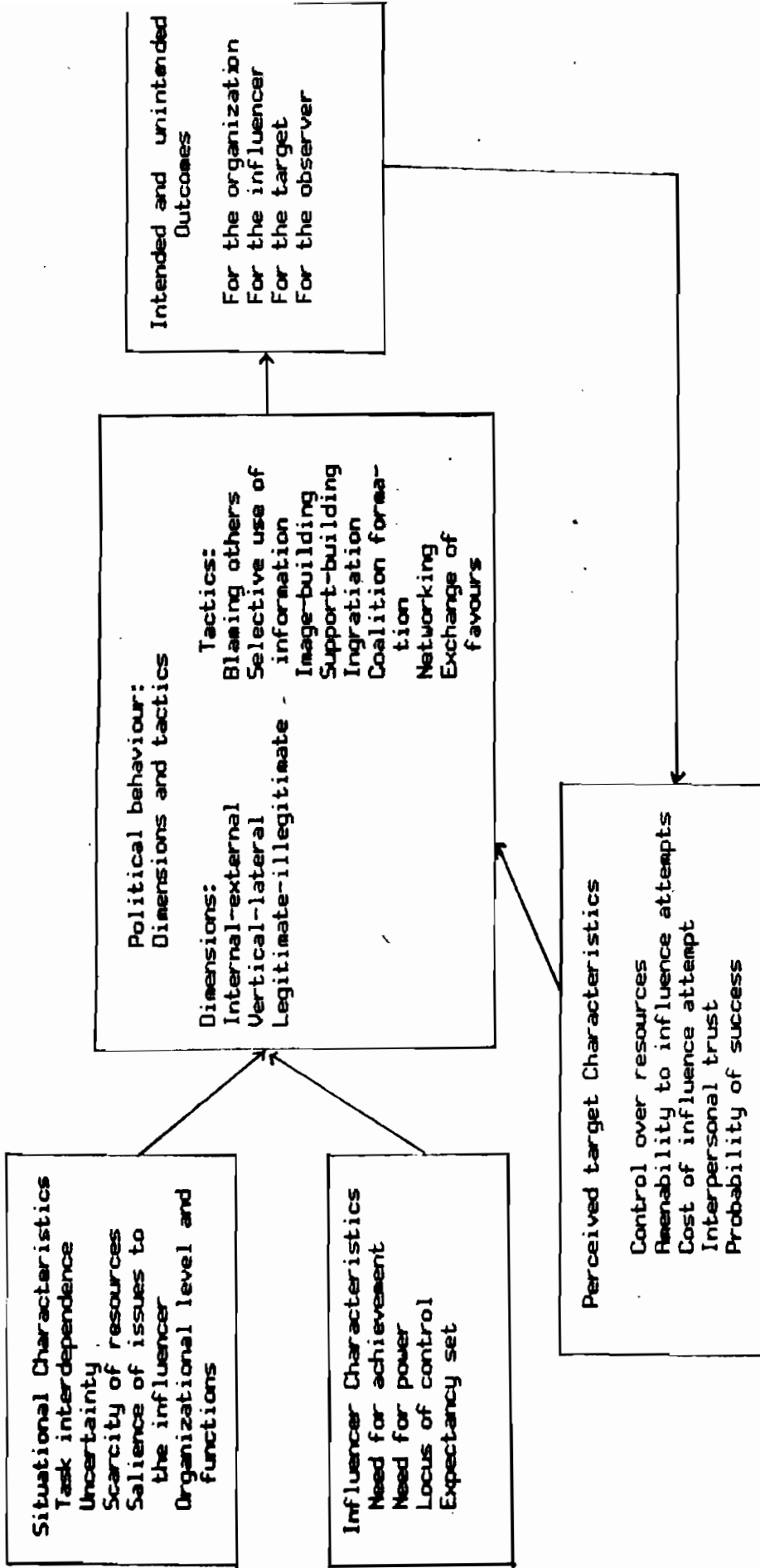


Fig. 1 : A Framework for Understanding Political Behaviour in Organizations

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