

The Functional and Dysfunctional Aspects of Organizational Politics: A Conceptual Analysis

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Abstract

Organizational politics exist in nearly every organizational setting. Despite considerable attention by organization researchers, there is a need for greater clarity of the concept's framework. In response to this need, the current study examines the fundamental nature of the concept and its application to organizational life in light of existing research. Drawing on the organizational conflict literature, the work distinguishes between functional and dysfunctional aspects of organizational politics reflecting on this distinction in light of the varying levels of analysis. Development of a conceptual framework leads to a number of proposed hypotheses that demonstrate how the phenomenon might be examined empirically including discussion of how these hypotheses might guide studies at the various levels of analysis. The work concludes with discussion of the potential impact of further study of organizational politics on organizational life and organizational performance.

It may be that one of the more influential aspects of organizational life, whether in a profit-seeking, non-profit, or governmental institution, is the presence of organizational politics. Unfortunately, a case can also be made that the conceptualizations and investigations of the subject have created as much confusion as they have illumination.

In his review of the politics literature, Baack (2017) posed several questions, noting that greater clarity with regard to organizational politics might take place if four basic issues are addressed in any conceptualization, definition, or operationalization of the concept.

First, any envisioning of organizational politics should specify whether the concept should be viewed as totally negative and unethical (unsanctioned) activities in terms of both means and ends, or if politics can be perceived as having positive elements associated with social influence seeking to achieve sanctioned ends. Second, presuming politics are to be described in negative terms as unethical acts only, examples of the actual means or activities involved should be spelled out. Third, the level of analysis should be made clear: individual, coalition, or organization-wide. Fourth and closely related to the third point, any research effort should indicate whether *perceptions* of unethical politics are under investigation.

Many research articles begin with a statement suggesting that organizational politics are inevitable. Baack concludes that while the relationships between organizational politics with the ethical or unethical intents of those activities remain important areas of investigation, there are as many questions remaining as there are answers provided thus far.

This paper examines three primary issues. First, drawing from the organizational conflict literature, the distinction can be made between functional and dysfunctional politics. Second, levels of organizational politics are described noting functional and dysfunctional elements.

Third and finally, hypotheses are developed to more specifically categorize elements of organizational politics and how they might be observed or addressed.

Functional and Dysfunctional Organizational Politics

For many years, conceptualizations of conflict have offered one important distinction. *Functional conflict* occurs when any strife serves the interests of the organization in some way (McGrath, 1984). An example of functional conflict would include any strong disagreement regarding whether a company should promote its “green” environmentally-conscious activities or simply let the actions speak for themselves. One side of the conflict might argue that publicizing such acts would generate positive publicity and favorable attitudes from the public and the government. The other side might counter that doing so can lead to the impression that the firm’s products are more costly or that citizens may distrust any self-promotion of such efforts. It has been suggested that such internal conflicts have occurred in the soft-drink industry with regard to more energy-efficient forms of production and product packaging as well as in the automotive industry in which some favor promoting environmental responsibility while others prefer an emphasis on a simpler concept, such as improved gas mileage. In these circumstances, both sides of the conflict seek to further organizational interests.

The distinction to be made is with *dysfunctional conflict*, a circumstance in which the activities are destructive and consequently hinder or damage individual, group, or organizational performance (Amason, 1996). Typical examples of dysfunctional conflicts would include public shouting matches that disrupt organizational morale or create negative public impressions, strikes or work stoppages, attempts to injure the other side in a manner that also harms the organization, tampering with the work of others, withholding vital information, and actual violence.

A strong similarity exists between distinctions between functional and dysfunctional conflict and the manner in which organizational politics have been defined and described. In 1977, Mayes and Allen sought to clarify the nature of organizational politics. Their analysis argued that politics can be divided into *ends* or outcomes, and *means* or methods. Further, some influence ends and some influence means are organizationally-sanctioned, or, that they would be approved by those at higher levels in the hierarchy as legitimate. Others, however, are not sanctioned by the organization and cannot be objectively deemed as legitimate. Combining these concepts, this definition resulted:

Organizational politics is the management of influence to obtain ends not sanctioned by the organization or to obtain sanctioned ends through non-sanctioned influence means.

The similarity with the conflict perspective rests in the convergence of the terms “functional” with “organizationally-sanctioned” and “dysfunctional” with “non-sanctioned.” As a result, it seems plausible that the identifiers associated with conflict can be transferred to any description of organizational politics, leading to the following terms:

- Functional organizational politics
- Dysfunctional organizational politics

Levels of Analysis

Some efforts have been made to distinguish between forms of political activity by noting the levels at which they occur. Four potential levels of organizational politics would include the following:

- Individual
- Coalition
- Organizational-Wide

- Organization versus Organization

This categorization scheme exhibits some basic intuitive appeal. It seems logical that at times political actions would be undertaken by one person trying to gain power or position (or to win in a conflict situation) at the expense of another. The same holds true for groups and coalitions, such as when political activities occur between individual departments or subsets of those departments (e.g., production and quality control; sales and accounting; or the local beat and sports department within the same news organization). Typically, organization versus organization politics has been observed to function in different ways and in a different realm than the other three levels, one most often investigated by those who study strategic management.

The problem with the politics-by-level approach may be that the levels often overlap. For example, a manager of a department may engage in political actions designed to help a subordinate or mentee achieve promotion to a higher rank, without a specific rival or contestant to overcome (Kane-Frieder, Hochwarter, Hampton, & Ferris, 2014). A coalition may seek to obtain a larger budget allocation in order to operate more effectively; and the increase may be well deserved and help improve operations—a functional end or outcome. The same coalition may also attempt to build greater power and upward influence within the overall organization in order to unnecessarily increase its influence or seek to “feather the nest” with no positive outcome as the intent—a dysfunctional form of politics.

Further, a coalition could function at both the individual and group levels by seeking to improve the standing of a single individual, such as one that the group prefers for promotion to a higher rank. That said, specifying a level of analysis often provides a useful method by which some of the nuances of organizational politics may be examined.

Individual Political Behaviors

In 2009, Rosen and colleagues opened an article stating that “Organizational politics refers to a broad range of activities associated with the use of influence tactics to improve personal or organizational interests” (see also Ferris et al., 1989; Vigoda, 2003). In a later study, the same group noted “Extending Johns’ (1999) theory, we identify workplace politics (i.e. unsanctioned behavior that focuses on advancing one’s own self-interests) as a contextual feature that affects the costs and benefits associated with allowing self-serving motives to influence the evaluation process” (Rosen et al., 2016).

The Johns 1999 article focused on what are termed “self-serving behaviors,” or the attempts to defend personal identity or protect personal resources. Examples of self-serving behaviors include avoiding taking responsibility for the failure to meet obligations, taking undeserved credit for success, and attributing success to one’s personal efforts, or what are also known as “acclaiming” incidents (Rosen et al., 2016).

The difference that emerges is in regard to the previously described issue regarding functional and dysfunctional means and ends. Pursuing personal interests, especially those gained at the expense of others, involves seeking to achieve individual *ends* or outcomes. Personal interests might include increased prestige within the company, a pay raise, a promotion, or inclusion in a popular group in one sense, or more moderately, simply trying to “get ahead.” Further, personal interests might also include trying to make a rival look bad or finding a way to exclude or ostracize another with a motive such as vengeance or the desire to “get even.” To achieve such ends or outcomes various political behaviors or means become involved, such as those summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Individual Political Tactics or Means

Tactic	Description
Acclaiming	taking credit for the successes of others
Visibility	being seen with "all the right people"
Ingratiation	brown-nosing, flattery, sucking up
Exchange	trading favors
Coalitions	leading, and gaining power from, informal groups
Pressure	using demands, threats, or intimidation
Upward appeal	enlisting the support of supervisor or upper management
Empire building	keeping and controlling scarce information
Domination	forcing and winning conflict
Impression management	developing others' perceptions regarding oneself
Situation engineering	altering the situation to achieve goals or outcomes

Self-serving behaviors implies means or actions such as ingratiation (sucking up), upward appeals, and sanctions should be included in any list of individual tactics. Allen et al. (1979) added additional ideas regarding the nature of individual politics as they apply to maneuvers and characteristics of actors. Their list of tactics (means) include:

- Attacking or blaming others
- Use of information
- Image building/impression management
- Support building for ideas
- Praising others/ingratiation
- Power coalitions/strong allies
- Associating with the influential
- Creating obligations/reciprocity

The desired outcomes of these actions would be to increase one's personal outcomes or ends. A person who engages in these behaviors has been labeled a "player." Most of the time, the connotation of such a title has been negative or derogatory.

The open question is whether all individual political activities are directed at dysfunctional outcomes, or those not in the interests of the company. Then, potential confusion arises due to a series of complications.

First, an individual may truly believe that she or he is the most qualified person to lead a department or organization, and indeed such may be the case. Others in the organization may strengthen that conviction and encourage the employee to do “everything possible” to move to a higher rank. In order to achieve promotion, the person engages in visibility tactics (being seen), creates reciprocity with others, builds allies, engineers situations, and takes advantage of impression management maneuvers, all with what might be termed a “functional” outcome (helping the company) as the intent.

Second, it seems plausible that a person may reach a point in which his or her level of pay and benefits do not match the individual’s degree of qualification or simply make it impossible to stay with the organization due to financial constraints. The person has the choice of either seeking employment elsewhere or engaging in acts that would increase his or her pay/benefit package. No harmful intent is involved, and the person may be strongly committed to- and satisfied with the organization in every other way.

Third, various political actions may be designed to “protect” or strengthen the positions of co-workers and peers, or perhaps even one’s supervisor. Individual political actions include the use of information, support and praise of others, and certain types of favor exchanges that may be used to help a co-worker, mentee, or supervisor rather than merely seeking to become a player, thus serving the company’s well-being, again a functional outcome.

Fourth, as Mayes and Allen (1977) pointed out, various activities can be designed to achieve other sanctioned organizational ends. While some may perceive the behaviors as purely

political player deeds, the intent of those acts could be to further a coalition, department, or organization's best interests. Individual employees are candidates to engage in such attempts, as are rank-and-file workers or as managers.

One possible method by which this confusion or dilemma might be somewhat clarified, would be to discern the difference between acting exclusively in one's own self-interest or rather in pursuit of the interests of others, even when doing so also benefits the person engaged in political activities. Self-serving actions can then be divided into those that are more likely to be detrimental to the overall organization (intentionally or unintentionally) and those designed to serve organizational interests.

Coalition Politics

Coalitions of employees or coalitions of groups of people share the same goals and often engage in both functional and dysfunctional political activities as they seek to obtain sanctioned and/or unsanctioned ends. The tactics used by coalitions include (Baack, 2012):

- alliances
- embrace or demolish
- divide and conquer
- empire building
- growth

Alliances form when members of a coalition work together to help the unit achieve various goals. Alliances often involve cooperation with other coalitions or groups. When a sales manager supports the development and marketing of a potential product or product improvement

created by the R & D department, an alliance has emerged that may have a strong impact on top management’s decision making processes.

The embrace-or-demolish occurs when a coalition informs the opposition or another group that those who do not join the cause will be dominated in some way. The idea that “any group that is not with us is against us” may emerge in any unionization effort as well as in pressures for organizational change including the attempt to remove an unpopular or ineffective CEO.

Divide-and-conquer strategies aim at leading opposition members to argue among themselves and lose power as a result. Consider a coalition fighting a company’s merger with another firm. Those opposed strongly argue it will “hurt” those in their company. If a manager or someone in favor of the merger can make the argument that doing so will improve conditions for all, the oppositional coalition may become divided and less effective as a result.

Empire building takes the form of controlling scarce information, such as when a group in information technology seeks to maintain tight control over the company's computer system in order to retain power.

Growth tactics include adding members to build the power of the coalition. Each of these tactics can be deployed to seek the unsanctioned ends noted in Table 2.

Table 2
Unsanctioned Coalition Goals

Eliminate unpopular employee
Increase group status/power
Increase budget/resources
Influence decisions to the detriment of the organization but with coalition gains
Put another group at a disadvantage

At the same time, as has been suggested, coalition goals may also be designed to further the organization's interests (Rosen et al., 2009). Sanctioned ends at the coalition level might include:

- Supporting the most ideal candidate for promotion
- Supporting a company strategy or tactic to improve the organization
- Pointing out and reducing unfair treatment of an individual employee or set of employees
- Seeking to build a more ethical climate or to repair the damage created by an unethical act
- Constructing better communication networks within the organization
- Resolving internal conflicts between individuals, groups, and departments

The most logical candidates for seeking to achieve sanctioned ends appear to be building alliances and attempting to increase the coalition's strength through growth. Items to consider would when seeking to discern the coalition's intent include levels of secrecy present in coalition activities; the verbiage used (supporting the organization's interests versus other outcomes) publicly and privately, and the manner in which the group or coalition deals with other groups, including basic treatment through behaviors such as civility.

As was the case with the individual level, a coalition seeking to build its own level of power, influence, and prestige appears to be self-interested and desirous of unsanctioned ends, thereby suggesting dysfunctional political activities. Logically, such dysfunctional politics are more likely to lead to dysfunctional conflicts. A group working to assist an individual, another group, or the entire organization takes a more other-oriented approach and may be considered to be a functional political entity. Such a group may help to resolve conflicts or at the least not cause new ones.

Politics at the Organizational Level

Past research suggests that some organizational environments are more conducive to politics at the individual and coalition levels than others. Company cultures that can be characterized as exhibiting low levels of trust, high levels of role ambiguity, unclear performance evaluation systems, and high pressures for performance are likely to result in greater degrees of politicking (Ferris & Kacmar, 1992; Rosen, Harris, & Kacmar, 2009). Each of these circumstances creates uncertainty and a power vacuum in which a politically-minded employee (a player) can take advantage.

Agency theory (Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1989) suggests that problems occur when two parties in a cooperative relationship (supervisor and employee) hold differing goals and work where a difference in division of labor exists. An agency problem emerges when one party (the supervisor) has goals or ends that impose requirements on the other (employee) and that other would find it difficult or expensive to comply. A second agency problem arises when the two parties have differing views with regard to the degree of acceptable risk that can be taken on behalf of the organization.

In terms of functional and dysfunctional politics, agency theory presents a format by which the party with lesser power is forced or compelled to do something he or she believes is wrong. Due to the ability of the more powerful person in the relationship to change outcomes (pay, benefits, performance appraisal findings, and opportunities for promotion) the person in the weaker position often feels forced to carry out questionable acts with dysfunctional outcomes.

In general, most examinations of politics at the organizational level appear to focus on the environment present as described by observers, such as in the body of work of Ferris and

Kacmar (1992), which may have its roots in ideas presented by Gandz and Murray (1980) and Madison et al. (1980).

Gandz and Murray identified “the perceived politicization of organizational processes,” which suggests that observers notice political actions and activities and tend to view such behaviors in negative terms as largely related to self-serving behaviors. The resultant impact becomes greater dissatisfaction with one’s job and organization, or a dysfunctional outcome. Madison et al. investigated the potential impact, asking managers to identify times in which organizational politics are harmful to both individuals and organizations.

The Ferris and Kacmar approach utilizes five items posed to subjects regarding their perceptions of politics (POPS) as follows:

- Favoritism rather than merit determines who gets ahead
- There is no place for yes-men around here: good ideas are desired even when it means disagreeing with supervisors (reverse scored)
- You can get along around here by being a good guy, regardless of the quality of your work
- Employees are encouraged to speak out frankly even when they are critical of well-established ideas (reverse scored)
- There are cliques and in-groups that hinder the effectiveness around here

Later, Nye and Witt (1993) characterized these five questions as tapping into Perceptions of Organizational Politics Scale (POPS), containing three elements: (1) General Political Behavior, (2) Going Along to Get Ahead, and (3) Pay and Promotion. Such an assessment of the overall organizational climate would strongly point to the dysfunctional elements involved in politics.

What stands in contrast are findings that suggest leader political behaviors may favorably influence some subordinate outcomes, including job satisfaction, mood, and citizenship behaviors (Kane-Frieder et al., 2014). Such outcomes would seem to favor recent theories of leadership, including the Servant Leadership approach (Greenleaf 1969, 1977), Transformational Leadership concepts (Bass & Avolio, 1993; Stone, 2004), as well as the Level 5 Leadership model (Collins, 2001). In essence, it seems possible that certain leaders and some organizations may feature political acts and environments designed to assist others and achieve functional outcomes.

Development of Hypotheses

Based on the analysis presented thus far, the following hypotheses emerge:

H1: Functional individual politics occur when an individual seeks to achieve ends, goals, or outcomes which are compatible with other aspects of the organization, including other levels of activity (coalition, organization-wide). In this instance, self-interests do not contradict or actually complement achievement of organizational ends or goals.

H 2: Dysfunctional individual politics occur when an individual seeks to achieve ends, goals, or outcomes that serve self-interests at the expense of other individuals, coalitions, or the overall organization.

H 3: Functional coalition politics occur when a group, coalition, or department seeks to achieve ends, goals, or outcomes which are compatible with other aspects of the organization, including other levels of activity (individual interests, other coalitions, organization-wide). In this instance, coalition interests do not contradict or actually complement achievement of organizational ends or goals.

H 4: Dysfunctional coalition politics occur when a group, coalition, or department seeks to achieve ends, goals, or outcomes that serve the coalition's interest at the expense of certain individuals, coalitions, or the overall organization.

H 5: Functional organizational-wide politics occur when the overall environment serves to encourage or foster individual, coalition, and organizational ends, goals, and outcomes in a compatible manner that does not produce dysfunctional conflicts and activities.

H 6: Dysfunctional organization-wide politics occur when the overall environment serves to encourage or foster individual, coalition, and organizational ends, goals, and outcomes in a manner that disrupts organizational functioning and produces unnecessary dysfunctional conflicts and activities.

What remains are numerous issues, such as how political players are discovered by observers. Further, what of the tactics employed by those who avoid politics and become players? How do players and non-players interact? This would include any gray areas, such as doing favors for others without reciprocity in mind and attempting to become irreplaceable through enhanced expertise and/or strong personal relationships. In essence, how do you know when someone is trying to *avoid* political activities yet remain a team player?

Discussion and Conclusion

In order to investigate these hypotheses, the use of currently available research instruments would require some scrutiny. At the outset, a statement of the level of analysis under inquiry and the methods of evaluation would demand clear elaboration.

With that idea in mind, one study might be dedicated to facilitating understanding of within department or unit political behaviors (acclaiming, visibility, impression management), whereby an individual seeks undeserved rewards or promotion, to a higher level in the organization, or dysfunction ends that would harm the company as opposed to situations in

which the individual is most suited to the promotion and has been encouraged by peers and superiors to achieve a functional or desirable end.

A second study might investigate between-group or unit politics, such as the quest for additional budget or choice task assignments. Supervisory tactics would become a key ingredient in such a study. As an opening thought, the tactics used within-unit, such as taking credit for the work of others, being seen with right people, and so forth may be effective political acts at an interpersonal in-unit level, yet would not be the same as those used by a manager to defend the interests of his/her department. The first set of actions appears to be more directly self-serving and dysfunctional whereas an effective manager could be looking out for personal as well as unit and organizational interests using totally different tactics or means.

A third research effort could be dedicated to understanding how supervisor-subordinate relationships affect both political acts and desired outcomes, as well as how subordinate perceptions of the supervisor influence views of the overall organization.

In general, questions regarding perceptions of dysfunctional political behaviors or what have been termed “going along to get ahead” as well as unfairly seeking higher pay and or a promotion should be posed to respondent or observer asking the individual to note the level at which he/she observed such behaviors: within-unit or as an organization-wide phenomenon.

Note that the possibility exists that perceptions of politics simply represent “sour grapes.” Low performers and those who have not risen through the organizational ranks may believe it is the brown-nosers and impression-managers that get ahead, when in fact they are overlooking the possibility that they are not viewed as exhibiting managerial potential for very legitimate reasons. In essence, these individuals perceive dysfunctional unethical behaviors when such may or may not be the case.

Finally, it is important to remember that not all employees engage in political tactics. Some people simply want to perform their jobs and then go home for the day. Others try to avoid political tactics by distancing themselves from any change or action and by avoiding blame for any negative event. These workers might be fully or partially aware of the potentially negative personal outcomes associated with politics.

The value present in the study of organizational politics rests in the profound impact such behaviors and activities have on individual careers, departmental, and organizational performance. These include:

- the distribution of resources
- strategy and policy making
- HR decisions: pay, promotion, performance appraisal, termination, transfer, layoffs
- whistleblowing
- levels of conflict and stress
- the social atmosphere of the organization

Consequently, one helpful distinction would be the one made as the primary argument in this work: researchers should specify *how* they intend to define and study the topic, as solely dysfunctional and damaging the enterprise or whether there are times and places in which company politics can serve the greater good of the organization.

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