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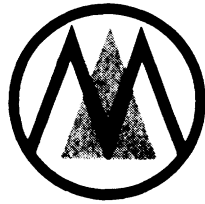
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Conceptual Notes

Toward A Definition of Organizational Politics¹

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Viewing organizations as political entities is not a recent phenomenon. March (7) suggested that organizations are political coalitions in which decisions are made and goals are set by bargaining processes. Other writers stressed the utility of taking a political perspective when studying organizations (1, 6, 9, 22). Anyone associated with almost any form of organization eventually becomes aware of activities that are described by employees as "political", but what is termed political by one observer may not be viewed as political by another. To understand the nature of political processes in organizations, some agreement as to what constitutes political behavior must be developed. This article at-

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tempts to shed light on the organizational political process by constructing a literature-derived definition of organizational politics (OP). Guiding this effort are the following assumptions:

1. Behavior referred to as politics takes place in varying degrees in all organizations.
2. Not all behavior in organizations can be categorized as political.
3. The organizational political process can be described in non-evaluative terms.
4. While many variables involved in describing organizational politics may be familiar to other organizational behavior concepts, a combination of these varia-

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bles constitutes a unique process that cannot be described adequately by existing paradigms. This unique process is organizational politics.

Earlier Attempts to Define Organizational Politics

Claims Against the Resource Sharing System

Political behavior in an organization has been viewed as actions that make a claim against the organization's resource sharing system. Harvey and Mills (4) utilized this definition in their treatment of the political aspects of adaptation to change. Their basic premise was that any adaptive change will produce conflict through its effect on the distribution of scarce resources among organizational units. This conflict was thought to be resolved by political processes including coalition formation, bargaining, side-payments, etc.

In a study of decision processes employed in purchasing computer equipment, Pettigrew (11) defined the political process as generation of demands for resources and mobilization of support for the demands generated.

Although some claims against an organization's resource sharing system may constitute political behavior, normally many of these claims would not be considered political. For example, an employee's asking for a salary raise, which constitutes a claim against the resource sharing system, would not be political behavior, but the use of threat to unionize to obtain a raise would be considered a political act. Circumstances surrounding the demand process must be considered in defining OP.

Conflict Over Policy Preferences

Wildavsky (21) suggests that the budgeting process is a political method of allocating financial resources, a notion consistent with the earlier Cyert and March (3) proposal that the budget represents the outcome of bargaining in the or-

ganization coalition. Wildavsky defines politics as conflict over whose preferences are to prevail in the determination of policy.

To define politics as a form of conflict seems too narrow an approach, especially when one limits politics to the conflict over policy decisions. The administration of policy involves political activities in its own right. Thus, a suitable definition of OP must include the politics of policy implementation as well as the politics of policy determination.

Another view of politics in the determination of policy is proposed by Wamsley and Zald (19). Their work relating to public organizations defines politics as the structure and process of the uses of authority and power to define goals, directions, and major parameters of the organizational economy. This definition may be suitable at upper levels of the organization but political processes also take place at lower levels where policy or system-wide decisions are not made.

Relationships of Control and Influence

In discussing power tactics used by executives, Martin and Sims (8) state that politics is concerned with relationships of control or influence. Although control, power, and influence are key issues in the study of OP, this approach allows inclusion of behaviors and forms of influence not normally considered political. An example of a non-political means of control in an organization is the periodic performance review when done in accordance with policy guidelines normally provided for this purpose. The review/appraisal constitutes a form of feedback to the ratee on his/her job performance and is a form of influence or control in that the employee is expected to correct performance deficiencies.

Burns (2) viewed politics as the exploitation of resources, physical and human, for achievement of more control over others, and thus of safer, more comfortable, or more satisfying terms of individual existence. Although this is a quite agreeable definition of politics, it fails to account

for the fact that controlling others for personal benefit makes determination of what is political and what is not a province of the intent of the actor. A more rigorous approach would allow a definition of OP based on observable criteria exclusive of the actor's intent.

Self-Serving Behavior

Some writers have considered politics as behavior directed toward personal gain (2, 14). Although this approach is intuitively appealing, the argument can be made that all willful behavior ultimately serves some self-interest. If personal gain is the underlying motive for all calculated behavior, its inclusion in the definition of political activity adds nothing and may detract from definitional clarity. How is behavior classified if it is specified by the organization but also obtains rewards for the actor? Including self-interest in the definition of OP forces consideration of routine job performance as a political act. A suitable definition of OP must allow exclusion of routine job performance from consideration.

Field Research

A growing body of literature relates to the social influence process involving use of power and its effects on both the agent and the target of influence (17, 18). Almost no research has been conducted to explore organizational politics *per se*. Studies in print are concerned primarily with the effects of influence and power on decision processes.

Interviews and questionnaires were used by Strauss (16) to determine which techniques purchasing agents used to expand their power/influence in an organization. Of thirteen tactics discovered, he classified three as personal-political. Purchasing decisions were also studied by Pettigrew (11) and Patchen (10). Both field studies focused on who was influential in making purchasing decisions, what bases of power were used, and what methods of conflict resolution were apparent. Although Pettigrew addressed

the issue of situational uncertainty in its effect on the power base of political actors, purchasing decisions would usually be considered rather structured and programmable in nature. Thus political activity surrounding these decisions might be restricted by rational problem solving techniques.

Although purchasing decisions are generally well structured, budget allocations are not. Recent work assessed the political nature of budgeting decisions in a university (12, 15). Researchers used unobtrusive measures to study the effects of departmental power on allocation of budgets. Departmental power was highly related to the department's ability to obtain outside grants and contracts. The greater the department's power, the less budget allocations were dependent on universalistic criteria of departmental work load and student demand for the department's courses. To assess the effects of uncertainty on criteria used to make research grant allocations, this research team in a later study (13) again employed unobtrusive measures. Their findings indicate that social influence is more likely to be used in uncertain situations. Unfortunately, none of these budgeting studies involved collecting data from individual actors in the decision processes. Influence effects were inferred from outcomes rather than measurement of processual elements.

Toward A Definition of Organizational Politics

The definitions and research briefly presented above allow us to formulate a definition of OP that meets certain necessary conditions. First, a suitable definition would allow either micro or macro levels of analysis — consideration of both individual and organizational political phenomena. Second, it must allow for the use of politics in other than decision processes surrounding resource allocation. Third, any suitable definition of OP must clearly discriminate between political and non-political behaviors. For example, routine job performance is not a politi-

TABLE 1. Dimensions of Organizational Politics

| Influence Means | Influence Ends | |
|--------------------------------|--|---|
| | Organizationally Sanctioned | Not Sanctioned by Organization |
| Organizationally Sanctioned | Non-Political Job Behavior I | Organizationally Dysfunctional Political Behavior II |
| Not Sanctioned by Organization | Political Behavior Potentially Functional to the Organization III | IV Organizationally Dysfunctional Political Behavior |

cal activity but could be considered so if earlier constructs are employed.

What, then, is an acceptable definition of organizational politics? A thread of continuity through the existing literature is best recognized as influence. If outcomes alone are not sufficient to define political behavior, the processes whereby outcomes are influenced must be examined. Thus the notion of influence is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the inference of political action. A supervisor making routine job assignments influences the behavior of subordinates, but this form of influence is not political. Likewise, some forms of influence may not be intentional. Politics implies calculated influence maneuvering. But even restricting politics to calculated influence is not a sufficient condition, in that some forms of calculated influence should also be excluded from the OP construct. Is not the organization itself a form of influence calculated to restrict the behavior of its members? The organization structure as it exists at some given point in time should be excluded from the OP construct, although *changes* made to the existing structure could be politically relevant.

Therefore OP is a dynamic *process* of influence that produces organizationally relevant outcomes beyond the simple performance of job tasks. Common organizational practice is to provide each member of the organization with a description of duties that specifies the organiza-

tionally desired job outcome and the limits of discretionary behavior acceptable in attaining those outcomes. Thus, the existing organization delineates both acceptable outcomes and appropriate means to their attainment for each job position. Activities within these sanctioned boundaries must be considered non-political. These considerations lead us to the following definition of OP:

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.

This approach to a definition of OP is schematically represented in Table 1. Quadrant I, characterized by organizationally specified job behavior, is the only non-political quadrant in the classification system. Quadrant II contains political activities recognized by some bureaucratic theorists as abuses of formal authority/power (20). Behavior in this quadrant is dysfunctional from the standpoint of the organization, in that organizational resources are being utilized to further non-organizational objectives. The bureaucratic form of organization can be viewed as an attempt to eliminate this type of behavior.

Quadrant III defines political behavior undertaken to accomplish legitimate organizational objectives. The use of charisma or side-payments to accomplish sanctioned objectives would be included in behaviors assigned to this quadrant.

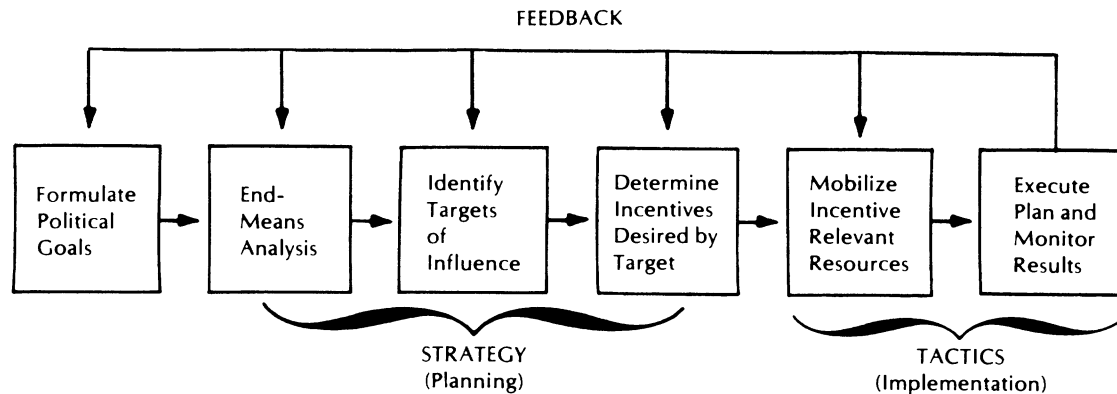


FIGURE 1. The Influence Management Process.

Quadrant III activity could be functional to the organization if undesirable side-effects did not occur. Indeed, some writers view organizationally functional Quadrant III behavior as leadership (5).

Quadrant IV behavior, like Quadrant II behavior, is dysfunctional from the organizational perspective. It deviates from organization norms with respect to both outcomes and methods. This form of OP will not be tolerated if it is discovered. Due to the possibility of being dismissed from the organization for such actions, individuals engaging in such behavior probably will be highly secretive, making Quadrant IV resistant to research attempts.

The management of influence (the process of politics) can be viewed as formulation of political objectives, ends-means analysis leading to decisions of strategy and tactics, execution of tactics, and feedback/control methods. Figure 1 is a simplified representation of the process of influence management.

In formulating political objectives, an individual within an organization should first take stock of whether desired outcomes are sanctioned by the organization. The political actor would determine if these outcomes are attainable through solitary action or if other persons must be involved. This ends-means analysis would lead to

identification of targets of influence and the incentives required to effect the desired target behavior (see Figure 1). At this point in the process a political objective can be inferred if an individual other than the actor must be involved and if either the outcomes desired or the means of influencing the other person are not sanctioned by the organization (see Table 1). Thus the combination of outcomes and means employed to reach the outcomes defines the political nature of the influence process, while the process itself is a traditional managerial approach to problem-solving.

Although the influence management process is represented as a series of discrete actions, in reality it may be impossible to demonstrate clear distinctions among them. For example, identification of influence targets and their desired incentives would be expected to originate in the process of ends-means analysis rather than to follow it discretely. The concurrent execution of two or more stages of the influence management process is highly probable. But this should not detract from the utility of this conceptualization of the process.

This view of OP as an influence management process allows inclusion of variables already recognized by prior researchers. Even the earliest political writers were concerned with ends-

means analysis as a strategic activity. The vast literature dealing with power and its effects fits into the political process model since influence targets (persons) and power bases (resources) are included in both strategic and tactical model elements. Also implied in this model is the concept that political activity can be an on-going organizational phenomenon such that one political act can trigger a chain of related political occurrences.

With an acceptable definition of organizational politics a logical step should be to formulate an integrated theory of OP. The dynamic nature of the political process seems to dictate a systems approach to political conceptualization. Within such systems, attention must be directed to individual as well as situational variables. For example, personality characteristics of political actors should be identified; politicians are hy-

pothesized to differ from other employees in their willingness to pursue non-sanctioned objectives or in their use of non-sanctioned influence means. Non-political employees would be expected to discard objectives rather than to violate organizational sanctions. Situational or structural variables would be expected to interact with personality variables in the conduct of the political process. Some individuals might be expected to evidence political behaviors only under certain conditions, for example where goals or procedures are ill defined or in situations where the organization faces considerable uncertainty. Others may derive intrinsic benefits from engaging in politics and may do so in almost any situation. Clearly an opportunity exists in developing OP theory to provide a linkage between micro-oriented and macro-oriented organizational theoreticians.

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