

# The Positives and Negatives of Organizational Politics: A Qualitative Study

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## Abstract

**Purpose** The study aimed to develop a richer understanding of how employees perceive organizational politics in contemporary organizational contexts, and to identify whether organizational politics is described in both positive and negative terms.

**Design/methodology/approach** Individual in-depth interviews were conducted using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis with 14 employees across three organizations.

**Findings** Participants' perceptions of organizational politics were interpreted according to four levels: reactive, reluctant, strategic, and integrated. The four levels captured how individuals defined, described, and perceived outcomes of organizational politics. Definitions included organizational politics as destructive and manipulative (reactive), as a necessary evil (reluctant), as a useful strategy that helps get things done (strategic), and as central to organizational functioning and decision-making (integrated). Political behaviors were described in terms that correspond to five established bases of organizational power: connection power, information power, coercive power, positional power, and personal power. Descriptions of organizational politics encompassed positive and negative individual and organizational outcomes.

**Implications** Traditional negatively framed definitions of organizational politics need to be extended and elaborated. Definitions of organizational politics need to accommodate a range of understandings.

**Originality/value** Despite numerous calls for qualitative research regarding organizational politics, this is one of very few qualitative studies in this area. The proposed classifications of levels, definitions, and behaviors complement and extend existing conceptualizations of organizational politics. We contribute an understanding of organizational politics that is more balanced than existing negatively skewed conceptualizations and that will have implications for measurement and management of organizational politics.

**Keywords** Perceptions of organizational politics · Positive politics · Qualitative research · Interpretative phenomenological analysis · Political behavior · Power bases

## Introduction

Organizational politics has been the focus of significant research attention for more than 30 years (Allen et al. 1979; Ferris et al. 2002; Ferris and Hochwarter 2011; Ferris and Treadway 2012; Rosen and Hochwarter 2014). Organizational politics is commonly defined as “activities that are illegitimate, self-serving, and often harmful to the organization or its members” (Rosen et al. 2009, p. 203). Consistent with this definition, organizational politics is usually characterized negatively and has been described as undesirable, based in self-interest, and demonstrated by behaviors such as backstabbing, self-promotion, and ingratiation (Allen et al. 1979; Chang et al. 2009; Ferris et al. 2002; Gandz and Murray 1980; Hochwarter et al. 2003; Rosen et al. 2009).

The most commonly used measure of perceptions of organizational politics is the negatively biased Perceptions

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of Organizational Politics Scale (POPS, Ferris and Kacmar 1989, 1992; Kacmar and Carlson 1997; Kacmar and Ferris 1991). The negative bias of the popular 12-item version (Kacmar and Ferris 1991) has been noted by numerous researchers (Dipboye and Foster 2002; Fedor and Maslyn 2002; McFarland et al. 2012) and is reflected in items such as “People in this organization attempt to build themselves up by tearing others down,” “People here usually don’t speak up for fear of retaliation by others,” “Favoritism rather than merit determines who gets ahead around here,” and “There has always been an influential group in this department that no one ever crosses.” Comprehensive meta-analyses of studies that have used the POPS have demonstrated adverse impacts of organizational politics on individuals and organizations (Bedi and Schat 2013; Chang et al. 2009; Miller et al. 2008).

In response to the prevailing negative conceptualization and measurement of organizational politics, researchers have called for recognition of the potentially functional and positive aspects of organizational politics (Albrecht 2006; Ammeter et al. 2002; Drory and Vigoda-Gadot 2010; Fedor and Maslyn 2002; Gotsis and Kortezi 2010; Hochwarter 2012; Kurchner-Hawkins and Miller 2006; Liu et al. 2010; Pfeffer 1992; Vigoda and Cohen 1998). As such, the conceptualization of organizational politics as a positive phenomenon has been gaining momentum. Hochwarter (2012) recently explored the benefits of positive political behavior and acknowledged “positive politics” as “an indispensable component of organizational life” (p. 33). In a parallel research stream, the research on political skill has demonstrated that it is important for leaders of contemporary organizations to be able to understand and influence others (Ferris et al. 2005). In their exploration of the relationships between work stress and political behavior, perceptions of organizational politics, and political skill, Perrewe et al. (2012) concluded that further research is needed to determine when organizational politics harms or helps employees.

To develop a more balanced understanding of organizational politics, Hochwarter (2012) argued that “organizational politics research requires new and insightful approaches that promote richer interpretations of this important phenomenon” (p. 52). Other prominent researchers have argued that sound qualitative investigation would contribute greatly to the field (Ferris and Treadway 2012; McFarland et al. 2012). McFarland et al. suggested that qualitative research could provide more in-depth and comprehensive understanding of organizational politics, greater contextual information, as well as “lead to new insights that may not be recognized in existing theoretical work” (p. 116). Despite extensive changes in the world of work (Borecká 2014), qualitative research regarding organizational politics remains relatively rare

(McFarland et al.). The most widely cited qualitative studies on organizational politics were conducted more than 30 years ago (e.g., Allen et al. 1979; Gandz and Murray 1980; Madison et al. 1980; Riley 1983). More recent qualitative studies have maintained a focus on the ‘dysfunctional aspects of political behavior’ (Kacmar and Carlson 1998) or the ‘dark side’ of organizational politics (Ullah et al. 2011).

In response to this identified research need, this paper reports the findings of a qualitative study which aimed to develop a richer understanding of how employees perceive organizational politics in contemporary organizational contexts, and to identify whether organizational politics is described in both positive and negative terms.

### **Lack of Consensus in Conceptualizations of Organizational Politics**

A key issue in the organizational politics field is that there remains a lack of consensus regarding the definition of organizational politics (Dipboye and Foster 2002; Drory and Romm 1990; Drory and Vigoda-Gadot 2010; Ferris and Hochwarter 2011; Lepisto and Pratt 2012; McFarland et al. 2012; Provis 2006). Lepisto and Pratt (2012, p. 93) noted that “much more is known about what organizational politics does than what it is.” Dipboye and Foster (2002) provided 15 definitions of organizational politics that included politics as ‘social skill,’ ‘unjust equality,’ ‘lying and dishonesty,’ and as a ‘club.’ Although early research regarding organizational politics discussed and debated distinctions between power, politics, and influence (Mintzberg 1983; Pfeffer 1992), more recent research has tended to focus solely on perceptions of organizational politics (e.g., Adebunsi et al. 2013; Nasurdin et al. 2014). Clearly, dissensus regarding the definition and characterization of organizational politics continues (Ferris and Treadway 2012) and there are opportunities to arrive at a more widely agreed definition. Additional qualitative research may inform unresolved questions regarding organizational politics.

### **The Evidence for Positive Politics**

A number of researchers have investigated both the positive and negative aspects of organizational politics (Albrecht 2006; Buchanan and Badham 1999, 2008; Fedor and Maslyn 2002; Fedor et al. 2008; Gandz and Murray 1980; Kipnis et al. 1980; Madison et al. 1980; Maslyn et al. 2005; Zanzi and O’Neill 2001). Madison et al., for example, in their interviews of 87 managers, found that politics had beneficial individual and organizational outcomes. Some of the benefits for individuals included career advancement,

recognition, ‘getting the job done,’ and promoting ideas. Some of the beneficial organizational outcomes included the achievement of organizational goals, improved decision-making, and improved communication. Similarly, Buchanan (2008) and Buchanan and Badham (1999, 2008) argued that political behavior can generate both functional and dysfunctional individual and organizational consequences. Their study of 250 British managers from a range of industries revealed that managers thought politics could be used to build networks of useful contacts, support initiatives, and achieve objectives. Gandz and Murray (1980, p. 244), in their seminal study, found that 42 per cent of their 428 questionnaire respondents agreed that politics helps organizations function effectively. Despite this finding, Gandz and Murray recommended that organizational politics “should be restricted to a subjective state in which organizational members perceive themselves or others as intentionally seeking selfish ends in an organizational context when such ends are opposed to those of others” (p. 248).

The early work by Gandz and Murray (1980) informed the first iteration of the POPS (Ferris and Kacmar 1989). The POPS assesses organizational-level perceptions of organizational politics across three dimensions: “go along to get ahead,” “pay and promotions,” and “general political behavior.” A recent meta-analysis by Bedi and Schat (2013), integrating the results of 118 samples ( $N = 44,560$ ), found negative associations between the POPS and organizational trust ( $d = -0.85$ ), interactional justice ( $d = -0.82$ ), procedural justice ( $d = -0.75$ ), organizational support ( $d = -0.73$ ), job satisfaction ( $d = -0.54$ ), organizational commitment ( $d = -0.45$ ), distributive justice ( $d = -0.41$ ), perceived work control ( $d = -0.39$ ), continuance commitment ( $d = -0.28$ ), and job involvement ( $d = -0.27$ ). POPS was also shown to be associated with adverse psychological health consequences such as stress ( $d = 0.44$ ) and burnout ( $d = 0.36$ ) and attitudinal and behavioral consequences such as higher turnover intentions ( $d = 0.54$ ), higher counterproductive work behaviors ( $d = 0.45$ ), and higher absenteeism ( $d = 0.14$ ).

Noting the negative bias of the POPS, Fedor and colleagues (Fedor and Maslyn 2002; Maslyn et al. 2005; Fedor et al. 2008) developed a measure of ‘Positive and negative perceptions of politics’ with the intention of balancing the existing Kacmar and Ferris (1991) POPS scales. Their first iteration of positive items included “What some people do that looks, on the surface, to be self-serving, often ends up being for the benefit of others” and “To get my job done, I have sometimes needed to bend the rules” (Fedor and Maslyn 2002). Although acknowledging that some political behavior can result in positive outcomes for an organization, Fedor and Maslyn’s conceptualization of

organizational politics emphasizes self-serving or unsanctioned behavior (Fedor et al. 2008; Maslyn et al. 2005). Indeed, the ‘positive’ items they developed retained a negative tone, with items such as “As long as we are performing well, it doesn’t bother me if my work group is accused of being somewhat political” and “While others might judge what my manager/supervisor does as political, his/her actions have been for the benefit of my work group.” Most research studies regarding perceptions of organizational politics continue to focus on the negative aspects of organizational politics with POPS remaining the most popular measure of perceptions of organizational politics (e.g., Adebunsi et al. 2013; Li et al. 2014; Nasurdin et al. 2014). We argue that there is a need to more explicitly explore the positive dimensions of organizational politics.

In a related research stream, Kipnis et al. (1980) developed the Profiles of Organizational Influence Strategies (POIS) as a measure of political behavior or influence tactics. The POIS was derived from the analysis of 165 critical incident essays that resulted in 370 influence tactics that Kipnis et al. finally reduced to eight dimensions of ingratiation, upward appeals, coalitions, exchange of benefits, rationality, blocking, assertiveness, and sanctions (threats). The POIS reflects both positive and negative aspects of organizational politics. Example items include “In order to influence my boss (or subordinates/co-workers) I make him/her feel important” (ingratiation), “I make a formal appeal to higher levels to back up my request” (upward appeals), and “I obtain the support of co-workers to back up my request” (coalitions). The POIS has been used to provide insight into the impact of political behavior on individuals and organizations. For example, in a rare longitudinal study of organizational politics, Vigoda and Cohen (2002) found that individuals who successfully engaged in political behavior also had less negative perceptions of organizational politics. However, this more balanced perspective on political behavior is not more widely reflected in research regarding perceptions of organizational politics.

In another stream of organizational politics research, Ferris and colleagues developed the Political Skill Inventory. Initially a six-item unidimensional measure (Ferris et al. 1999; see also Ahearn et al. 2004), Ferris et al. (2005) later developed the Political Skill Inventory (PSI) with 18 items that reflected four dimensions of individual political skill: networking ability, apparent sincerity, social astuteness, and interpersonal influence. Example items include “I am good at building relationships with influential people at work” (networking ability) and “I am particularly good at sensing the motivations and hidden agendas of others” (social astuteness). This more positive perspective on organizational politics is also not reflected in the broader

conceptualizations of organizational politics. However, political skill has attracted significant research attention over the past 10–15 years (e.g., Ahearn et al. 2004; Blickle et al. 2008; Brouer et al. 2006, 2013; Ferris et al. 1999, 2005; Harvey et al. 2014).

Overall, in spite of a long research history acknowledging and researching the positive aspects of organizational politics, negative conceptualizations of perceptions of organizational politics have dominated empirical research as well as the overall field of organizational politics (Hochwarter 2012). In addition, very little empirical research has explored how organizational members actually view organizational politics.

## Summary

The previous discussion suggests significant gaps in the organizational politics literature. Firstly, in order to more fully reflect ongoing changes to the nature and context of work, contemporary qualitative research regarding organizational politics is required (Adams et al. 2002; Albrecht and Landells 2012; Ferris and Hochwarter 2011; Ferris and Treadway 2012; Landells and Albrecht 2013; McFarland et al. 2012). Secondly, further consolidation of the various definitions and conceptualizations of organizational politics is needed (Drory and Vigoda-Gadot 2010; Lepisto and Pratt 2012). Thirdly, researchers have called for recognition of the potentially positive aspects of organizational politics but additional research is needed to explore employees' perspectives on organizational politics and to understand whether these are positive, negative, or neutral (Ferris and Hochwarter 2011; Hochwarter 2012). Finally, a deeper understanding of the differing understandings of organizational politics across individual skill, actual behavior, and individual perceptions of the environment is needed.

Therefore, the current study had two main purposes: (1) to develop an updated account of how employees perceive organizational politics in contemporary organizational contexts; and (2) to identify whether the lived experience of organizational politics is described in both positive and negative terms.

## Method

### Analytical Approach

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA, Smith 1996) guided the conduct and analysis of this qualitative study. Dipboye and Foster (2002) suggested researchers adopt a phenomenological approach when attempting to understand differences in how individuals perceive

organizational politics. The 'phenomenological' aspect of IPA is concerned with trying to understand the participants' world and describing what it is like. The 'interpretative' aspect of IPA encourages researchers to provide a critical and conceptual commentary on participants' sense-making activities (Smith 1996, 2004). Smith (1996, p. 263) specifically recommended IPA in cases where "typical quantitative studies in the discipline could be usefully supplemented by projects employing qualitative methods which attempt to examine a smaller sample of respondents in greater detail using, for example, semi-structured interviews."

IPA researchers typically use small samples, with the intent of giving a truly in-depth analysis of each individual's responses (Smith and Eatough 2007). Smith and Osborn (2008) reported that "IPA studies have been published with samples of one, four, nine, fifteen, and more" (p. 56). IPA researchers provide interpretative, not just descriptive, analysis and highlight unique perspectives as well as shared experiences (Smith and Osborn 2008).

Although commonly used in the health sciences, 14 of the 293 papers encompassed by Smith's (2011) review of IPA papers published between 1996 and 2008 were classified as 'occupational psychology.' Researchers who have used IPA in organizational contexts include Millward (2006), who used an IPA approach to understand how 10 employed women experienced maternity leave and their transition to motherhood, and Moodley (2009) who researched five hospital volunteer counselors' experience of burnout.

### Participants

Fourteen interview participants were recruited, using convenience sampling, from three Australian workplaces: a state semi-government organization with 580 employees, a federal government organization with 800 employees, and a private sector organization with 60 employees. Recruitment across different organizations was important to determine if there was a diversity of views of organizational politics. Once the research aims and methods were approved at the executive level, the Human Resources (HR) manager for each organization distributed an email inviting participation and providing an ethics approved explanatory statement. Individuals were instructed to contact the researchers directly via email if they were interested in participating. The sole inclusion criterion was that participants must have had at least 2 years work experience in order to ensure they were likely to have awareness of organizational politics.

The fourteen respondents (8 females, 6 males) who agreed to participate ranged in age from 28 to 65 years (mean 36 years). Their work experience ranged from 5 to

50 years (mean 23 years), and tenure at their current organization ranged from 6 months to 23 years (mean 6 years). Most participants (12 of 14) had a university education. Eight of the fourteen participants were managers and six had no managerial responsibility. The roles represented included administrative officer, teacher, accountant, principal lawyer, economist, and General Manager. Five participants were employed by the state organization, five participants were employees of the federal organization, and three participants were employed by the private organization.

### Data Collection Procedures

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author. Interview questions were designed to allow participants to first share their unprompted perspectives on organizational politics. Questions then prompted participants' descriptions of a highly political organization, features of a less political organization, decisions that typically involved organizational politics, behavioral examples of organizational politics, and outcomes or consequences of organizational politics. Great care was taken to elicit the individual's perspectives before asking more specific questions concerning both positive and negative perceptions and examples. Questions and probes included "How would you define or describe organizational politics?", "From your work experience to date, how would you describe the features of a highly political organization?", and "What kinds of decisions do you perceive typically involve organizational politics?" Questions also included "From your work experience to date, can you describe examples of someone else's behavior that are to you good examples of organizational politics?", and "Can you describe examples of your own behavior that are to you good examples of organizational politics?" (The word 'good' was used in the context of a 'good example' rather than a 'positive example'). Participants were also asked "What do you see as the outcomes or consequences of political behavior in organizations?"

All interviews were conducted in the employees' workplaces. The mean duration of the interviews was 47 min with interviews ranging from 24 to 64 min. All interviews were, with consent, audio-taped and then transcribed. The mean word length of the transcripts was 6815 words with a range from 2640 words to 9835 words. The 14 interviews generated more than 95,000 words. As per conditions of the ethics approval, a copy of their transcript was provided to each interview participant for review and approval. All participants were assured, as per ethics approval, that their responses would remain totally confidential.

### Data Analysis

The present study followed the steps for analyzing IPA data that were recommended by Smith and Osborn (2008). First, each transcript was read closely and important themes, terms, and issues in the transcript that provided insight into each interview participant's perspective on organizational politics were noted. Secondly, these notes were examined for emerging themes that were marked up on the transcript. Next, the themes were recorded separately to the transcript and the list of emerging themes was analyzed for relationships—how were they similar to or different from each other? Clusters of themes were formed. These clusters were then analyzed to look for further relationships and connections. Similar themes were clustered together and given a name describing the superordinate or higher order themes (Cassidy et al. 2011). A table was produced with themes and higher order themes noted. This process was conducted for each interview (Smith and Osborn 2008). Essentially, for each interview, the analysis led from within-transcript notes, to within-transcript themes, to independent emerging themes, to theme clusters, to higher order themes.

To contribute to the rigor and transparency of the analysis, as suggested by Saldaña (2012), the IPA approach was supplemented by additional qualitative methods. For example, the political behaviors were extracted from the transcripts and subject to the 'cutting and sorting' technique (Ryan and Bernard 2005) whereby two researchers independently sorted 53 descriptions of political behaviors into no more than eight categories. These categories were then reconciled to five categories by the first author and the political behaviors were reduced to 13 behaviors. That is, 412 examples of political behaviors were extracted from the transcripts and consolidated into 53 different political behaviors by the first researcher. Two researchers then independently sorted 53 descriptions of political behaviors into no more than eight categories. The first author initially identified six categories and the second researcher identified seven categories. The first author reconciled the different categorizations into seven categories. The first researcher then sorted the 412 examples of political behaviors into the seven categories. Through this process of continual comparing and contrasting, the categories were reconciled to five categories and the political behaviors were reduced to 13 behaviors. For example, the initial categories of 'Anticipating others' agendas/searching for hidden motives/framing initiatives to make people more understanding' and 'Questioning and gossip' were reconciled into one overarching category of 'observe and interpret the decision-making context.' All supplementary analyses were conducted subsequent to the interpretative phenomenological analysis.

The results that follow identify higher order themes, the common threads across and within the individual interviews, and provide verbatim comments from interview participants that illustrate the themes and individual understandings. Extracts from at least three or four participants per theme are provided, as recommended for sample sizes greater than eight (Smith 2011). In the interests of word count, the perspectives of every participant are not fully detailed. However, consistent with the IPA approach, the perspectives of individuals and themes across the group are presented and then the implications of these findings for organizational politics research are considered in the discussion.

## Results

Two higher order themes emerged from the IPA across all 14 interviews. The first theme encompassed the ‘diverse descriptions of organizational politics and political behavior.’ The second theme encompassed participants’ reports of both the positive and negative impacts of organizational politics on individuals and organizations.

### Theme 1: Diverse Descriptions of Organizational Politics and Political Behavior

Participants provided diverse descriptions of organizational politics and political behavior. Sub-themes clustered under this higher order theme were (1) diverse definitions of organizational politics, difficult to define and (2) political behaviors.

#### Diverse Definitions of Organizational Politics: Difficult to Define

The range of perspectives expressed by interview participants was reflective of Vigoda and Cohen’s (1998, p. 60) assertion that “when you ask someone to clearly define OP, it is likely you will not get two similar or even close answers.” The interview responses revealed definitions of organizational politics that were generally diverse, often contradictory, tentative, and that were difficult to articulate. Participant 6, for example, commented “it’s one of those things that, if I see it, I can name it, but to describe it exactly can be difficult.” Although Participant 5 was one of the few participants who was able to articulate a definition of organizational politics, defining it as “the flow of knowledge, decision making and power within an organization,” she also commented “I’m not even sure if the way I define it is accurate.”

Across the fourteen interview participants, four distinct perspectives on organizational politics emerged. One group

of participants had a reactive or detached perspective on organizational politics—they saw organizational politics occurring at a distance and actively avoided it. A second group were reluctant participants in organizational politics. They viewed it as sly and underhanded, yet at times reluctantly used organizational politics to achieve outcomes. A third group had a proactive or strategic perspective on organizational politics. They perceived organizational politics as a useful strategy that could be employed in either self-interest or the organization’s interest. The fourth group perceived organizational politics as fundamental and integrated, where politics was central to the flow of decisions and information in an organization. Each of these perspectives will be explored further below.

Four participants (Participants 1, 7, 8, and 9) viewed organizational politics as operating at arm’s length. They were essentially reacting to or observing organizational politics, with little or no direct involvement in organizational politics and a desire to avoid politics. Two of the four participants (Participants 1 and 9) held a highly negative view of organizational politics. For example, Participant 1 commented, “Organizational politics... when they’re directed at you, I find that difficult to deal with, because I’m not used to confrontation. Also I find it difficult when it’s happening around me.” Similarly, Participant 9 stated, “I can tell you about when I had to stand up for myself from the politics cos I generally just try to avoid it, unless it’s absolutely directed at me.” Two participants (Participants 7 and 8) held a more neutral view of organizational politics. For example, Participant 7 commented, “I don’t think I get particularly involved in politics because I don’t really care about that side of things. I just do my job.” Participant 8 commented, “It’s probably something that someone used to climb up a corporate ladder, probably some tactics that some people use to get ahead.”

Three participants held a conflicted view of organizational politics (Participants 2, 4, and 12). They had reluctantly used politics to achieve outcomes and could describe benefits of organizational politics when prompted, but they would prefer not to have to use organizational politics, viewing it as potentially “sly” (Participant 4) or “underhanded” (Participant 2). Participant 4 held a view of organizational politics as fairly negative and manipulative (“it always moves a little bit more to the negative than the positive”), yet also readily described examples of her own behavior that were helpful in achieving outcomes. She commented, “you know it’s not what you should be doing but in some ways you know you’ve got to”, and “how else can you necessarily get things done?” When asked to provide an example of her own behavior that is a good example of politics, Participant 2 responded, “So where I’ve acted political? Yeah, it’s made me feel a bit

uncomfortable, but I kind of have to do it!” Participant 12 described politics as “the art of managing...the political agendas of the people around you who are necessary to doing the work that’s expected.” He also said, “People call it emotional intelligence and things like that. I think that essentially what that is is a form of manipulation, and I don’t like manipulating people.”

Four participants viewed organizational politics as a strategy that they employed in specific situations (Participants 3, 6, 10, and 11). Participant 3 commented, “I think politics has a bad, a negative connotation, but for me it’s a word for relationships within an organization.” He further elaborated, “I always contact someone that I know within that department, rather than maybe the person that has the information.” Participant 6 defined organizational politics as “The ability to get things done through the informal channels. It’s the ability to influence and use power.” Participant 10 commented, “they can see the strategic aspects of how they work and the political framework within which they work and that can make them sufficiently flexible to get difficult things done through a highly politicised environment or an environment where there are entrenched positions that need to be moved.”

Three participants (Participant 5, 13, and 14) defined organizational politics more broadly and philosophically, essentially as fundamental and integrative to organizational functioning. It was viewed as central to their approach to work and their experience of work. For example, Participant 5 described organizational politics as “the flow of knowledge, decision making and power within an organization.” Also defining organizational politics as central to his approach to work, Participant 14 stated, “office politics is how we achieve our aims, how we network, how we communicate, how we build relationships, so viewing it broadly as a necessity.” Participant 13 had a similarly integrative perspective of organizational politics, describing it as “the external and internal factors that influence strategy.” Participant 13 also observed how her perspective on organizational politics had changed throughout her career: “That was my first real, post-uni exposure to the workplace, there was a lot of politics going on that I didn’t know about, or you were cushioned from it or protected ... My thinking about this kind of stuff is probably very different 10 years on than it was when I first started working.”

In summary, the interviews suggested four discrete perspectives on organizational politics: reactive or detached, reluctant, strategic, and integrated. Each of these different perspectives was also reflected in participant descriptions of political behaviors.

### Political Behavior

Although participants had difficulty defining organizational politics, most were clearly able to describe the behaviors

and impacts of organizational politics. Participants provided 412 examples of 13 different political behaviors. These 13 distinct political behaviors were grouped into five overarching categories with the ‘cutting and sorting’ analytical process as previously described. The categories that emerged from the analysis were (1) build and use relationships, (2) observe and interpret the decision-making context, (3) manipulate and undermine others, (4) control decisions and resources, and (5) build your personal reputation. Table 1 shows the five categories of political behavior and the behaviors that constitute each category. As demonstrated in the table, interviewees described the same political behavior very differently according to the lens through which they viewed politics.

The most frequently mentioned behavioral category was ‘build and use relationships’ with 115 comments. The three key behaviors that comprised this category were ‘use informal processes and relationships to get things done,’ ‘build key relationships and networks for use in the future,’ and ‘build coalitions of support for ideas including lobbying.’ Participants who viewed organizational politics as fundamental and integrated discussed how their approach to work involved working with and through others. ‘Strategic’ participants spoke about their relationship-building strategies. ‘Reluctant’ participants described undesirable behaviors such as ‘pandering’ to others. ‘Reactive’ participants described negative behaviors such as ‘sucking up.’

The second most frequently mentioned category was ‘observe and interpret the decision-making context’ with 106 comments. The two key behaviors that comprised this category were ‘interpret the decision-making context’ and ‘gather organizational information.’ Participants who viewed organizational politics as fundamental and integrated described general approaches to work that included developing contextual awareness, anticipating stakeholders’ needs, and waiting for the right opportunities. ‘Strategic’ participants provided examples of interpreting others’ intentions. ‘Reluctant’ participants provided examples of ‘second-guessing’ others and ‘having to ask the right people.’ ‘Reactive’ participants provided largely negative examples such as rumors and gossip.

The third most frequently mentioned category was ‘manipulate and undermine others’ (92 comments). Ninety-two comments provided examples of backstabbing, bullying, excluding, withholding information, manipulating others, and similar undesirable behaviors. This category was largely viewed in a similar way by all respondents—with most participants describing bullying and manipulative behavior. However, participants with an ‘integrated’ lens tended to speak about manipulation with regard to organizational objectives, participants with a ‘reluctant’ lens tended to speak about the underhandedness of

**Table 1** Categories of political behavior

Political behaviors	Example comments
Category 1: Build and use relationships	
Use informal processes and relationships to get things done (52 comments)	<i>Integrated</i>
Build key relationships and networks for use in the future (42)	“Bringing people in early and getting people’s buy-into the goal.” (Participant 5)
Build coalitions of support for ideas including lobbying (21)	“People often use informal processes to get to what they need in this organization shorter, I mean I do.” (Participant 5) “You develop relationships, you encourage people to open up to you.” (Participant 14)
	<i>Strategic</i>
	“Building that social capital so that I can call upon it if needed.” (Participant 3) “That’s how I got my secondment to the IT department, I knew the people and the only one that they knew was me.” (Participant 3) “Associating yourself with bigger forces outside the organization.” (Participant 6) “Part of the job as you get further and further up is to work through other people.” (Participant 10) “Colleagues who bring about outcomes whether that’s promotion or different workflow, they use relationships.” (Participant 11) “People getting together to negotiate outcomes and objectives.” (Participant 11)
	<i>Reluctant</i>
	“Sometimes you gotta pander to them, make them feel like they’ve got the ultimate say, bring them on board nice and early because you know if you don’t actually do that, it’s not gonna go anywhere.” (Participant 2) “Getting approval but also recommendations from partner organizations to say ‘yes, this is something that we require.’” (Participant 4)
	<i>Reactive</i>
	“I tend to see a lot of girls just sucking up to the managers.” (Participant 8)
Category 2: Observe and interpret the decision-making context	
Interpret the decision-making context (e.g., right people, right time, others’ agendas, rationale for decisions, etc.) (72 comments)	<i>Integrated</i>
Gather organizational information (including through gossip) (34)	“Being very, very clear about my primary, secondary and tertiary stakeholders internally, as to who is going to be impacted by my decision-making.” (Participant 5) “It’s probably political in the sense that I’m waiting for the right opportunity to do that, I’m working on the preparation. That’s also just getting the work done as well, but that’s just my approach to the work.” (Participant 13) “Trying to be aware of the lie of the land and context of decisions and being aware of what other people in the office are thinking on an issue or on a challenge or project.” (Participant 14)
	<i>Strategic</i>
	“I’m quite observant so I’ll always be thinking ‘why is this person saying this thing to me? Why is this person saying that thing to them? What are their objectives? What’s going on here?’” (Participant 11)
	<i>Reluctant</i>
	“There’s another set of checklists, of who is it you should consult, who should you talk to, who are you meant to get the sign off from.” (Participant 2) “Having to talk to the right people.” (Participant 4)



**Table 1** continued

Political behaviors	Example comments
	<p>“You hear everyone else talking about what else is happening within the organization.” (Participant 4)</p> <p>“A lot of second-guessing what other people think.” (Participant 12)</p> <p><i>Reactive</i></p> <p>“You don’t know the whole story so that’s where it gets people talking.” (Participant 7)</p> <p>“There are always rumors, oh, ‘Who’s gonna leave the firm and go somewhere else?’, and once it gets out, everyone just talks about it.” (Participant 8)</p> <p>“You hear people talking ‘Why did he apply? He’s not going to get it anyway.’” (Participant 8)</p>
Category 3: Manipulate and undermine others	
Undermine others (through bullying, backstabbing, harassing, excluding, withholding information and putting people down) (59)	<i>Integrated</i>
Manipulate others (including disguising your true motives) (33)	<p>“They bring their own political agenda and frame it as an organizational value and objective.” (Participant 5)</p> <p>“It’s definitely not helpful and not useful where it’s used to bully people or belittle people.” (Participant 13)</p> <p>“Information being withheld, not being given the information to do their job, information being used as a weapon, as a tool, the old saying ‘information is power’.” (Participant 14)</p> <p><i>Strategic</i></p> <p>“People not being communicated with in a work space.” (Participant 11)</p> <p>“Sometimes I play down the work that I’m doing and if they say ‘oh how’s it going’ and I go ‘oh yeah, it’s pretty boring’. But it’s not boring, it’s good fun.” (Participant 3)</p> <p>“Undermining people’s credibility behind their back, and that is a form of bullying. It’s minimizing people’s roles within the place. It’s giving them work that doesn’t meet any of their needs, to keep them tied up with things that might not be that important.” (Participant 6)</p> <p>“People know that there is political manipulation and maneuvering going on here.” (Participant 6)</p> <p><i>Reluctant</i></p> <p>“Some people could view it as sneaky, I considered it quite smart, but if I could think some people view it as sneaky, maybe deep down I’d think it was sneaky too.” (Participant 2)</p> <p>“I have to try and look like I’m still putting a lot of trust in them, but I’m not really.” (Participant 2)</p> <p>“How you have to behave or potentially manipulate what you wanna do to be able to get to where you wanna be.” (Participant 4)</p> <p>“Essentially that is a form of manipulation and I don’t like manipulating people.” (Participant 12)</p> <p>“There’s almost an element of blackmail when you see that going on. It’s ‘the consequences for you are, well, I won’t be able to trust you’ and ‘we need to trust each other so I’m really looking for you to back me up on this’.” (Participant 12)</p> <p><i>Reactive</i></p> <p>“Trying to destroy, virtually destroy people.” (Participant 1)</p> <p>“A lot of it is gossiping, harassing, putting people down.” (Participant 1)</p> <p>“There was a situation, or a couple of occasions, where it was this girl that ended up being with the boss that she ousted one girl out of the office and nearly got another guy ousted out of the office.” (Participant 7)</p>

**Table 1** continued

Political behaviors	Example comments
	<p>“There are some people who don’t like a certain employee and they will go talk about them behind their backs.” (Participant 8)</p> <p>“What has been more obvious to me is the bullying, smart-arse remarks, picking on someone.” (Participant 9)</p>
Category 4: Control decisions and resources	
Actively protect your turf (20)	<i>Integrated</i>
Position yourself to control decisions (11)	“Creating new forums for discussion, creating a new forum to drive an agenda.” (Participant 14)
Empire building/gather resources (10)	<i>Strategic</i>
Disregard others’ advice (8)	<p>“One of the things people will do to help develop their power base is get selected to the right committees and attend the right meetings and take on tasks and responsibilities through those connections.” (Participant 6)</p> <p>“It’s placing or positioning yourself in the organization in those activities that are part of the decision making and influencing process.” (Participant 6)</p> <p>“She would always recruit, because once someone’s in the organization, it’s very difficult to boot them out.” (Participant 10)</p>
	<i>Reluctant</i>
	<p>“It’s a power thing where they definitely feel like it’s their decision to make and that nothing will get by me, unless you get me on side.” (Participant 2)</p> <p>“They believe they’re the only ones skilled and qualified in that, and if it has to do with this specific thing, which is my job, then no-one gets past, no one gets anything, and if I don’t agree to it, I’ll tell you how it should be done, because I know best.” (Participant 2)</p> <p>“You can actually tell when people are just consulting for the sake of it or getting ideas for the sake of it, not genuinely going to do anything with it.” (Participant 2)</p> <p>“Going in and yelling and saying ‘this is my field of expertise’ or ‘I know what I’m doing here so back off’.” (Participant 4)</p> <p>“Every person feels like you need to pass it by them because essentially you’re doing a part of their job and they get frustrated or upset if they find out that something’s being done.” (Participant 4)</p> <p>“He makes all the right noises but at the end of the day he’s going to go with what he was going to go with.” (Participant 12)</p>
	<i>Reactive</i>
	“Get involved in things unnecessarily. Abuse authority.” (Participant 9)
Category 5: Build your personal reputation	
Build your personal reputation (38)	<i>Integrated</i>
Seek career progression (11)	<p>“There’s a desire to turn work over and have runs on the board and have them publicized and get some cred[it] and status for it.” (Participant 13)</p>
	<i>Strategic</i>
	“We all might have tried to create a reputation and impression of ourselves at work.” (Participant 11)
	<i>Reluctant</i>
	<p>“They’re the ones that want all that glory.” (Participant 2)</p> <p>“People can brown nose their way into a position of being in the right place at the right time.” (Participant 12)</p> <p>“If you’ve got two people vying for a job, one way to discredit the other person and promote your own candidacy is to approach their staff or someone else that they’re dealing with and just tweak things.” (Participant 12)</p>

**Table 1** continued

Political behaviors	Example comments
	<i>Reactive</i>
	“It can be part of maneuvering yourself in the right direction, getting in good with the right people to help yourself and whatever you need careerwise.” (Participant 7)
	“There’s this guy who people think he stays back really late just to work, but in actual fact, he just leaves after the partners leave. He gives the impression that he’s working hard.” (Participant 8)
	“I’ve had a manager that will not train properly so you look incompetent and so that they look indispensable.” (Participant 9)

manipulation, and ‘reactive’ participants tended to discuss more extreme behaviors of bullying and destroying others.

The remaining two categories of ‘control decisions and resources’ (49 comments) and ‘build your personal reputation’ (49 comments) were less frequently mentioned. Both categories included comments that illustrated the different lenses through which people viewed organizational politics. For example, build your personal reputation was variously viewed as getting credit and status for work well done (integrated), actively creating a reputation (strategic), ingratiating and glory-seeking (reluctant), and making others look incompetent (reactive).

In summary, interview participants defined and described organizational politics in terms that can be broadly interpreted as integrated, strategic, reluctant, and reactive. In effect, these four perspectives each constitute a lens through which participants perceive organizational politics. Additionally, five categories of political behavior were found: build and use relationships, observe and interpret the decision-making context, manipulate and undermine others, control decisions and resources, and build your personal reputation.

## **Theme 2: Significant Impacts of Organizational Politics: Positive and Negative**

Participants reported they thought organizational politics had significant impacts on individual and organizational outcomes. Sub-themes under this higher order theme were ‘significant impacts on individuals,’ ‘significant impacts on organizations,’ ‘highly negative impacts,’ and ‘both positive and negative impacts.’ Participants did not consistently identify the team or the group as a discrete or distinct level of analysis. The impacts of organizational politics were described according to the lens through which participants viewed organizational politics. Table 2 provides a summary of the perceived positive and negative consequences of organizational politics at individual and organizational levels.

## **Negative Consequences: Individual Level**

At the individual level, participants provided 79 comments that identified negative consequences of organizational politics as frustration, unhappiness, stress, cynicism, low motivation, damaged self-worth, dissatisfaction, bitterness, and anxiety. Participants also reported resistance to change, pushing people out of an organization, isolating people, stalled career progression, and impacts on personal health. Negative consequences were most commonly described by participants with a ‘reluctant’ and ‘reactive’ lens. For example, Participant 4 provided 17 different comments regarding negative individual consequences which included being “constantly frustrated with the process” and feeling that “to get from A to B sometimes you think ‘well what’s the point?’” Participant 12 suggested, “If you’re going to have people bypassed or alienated, that’s going to lead to increasing tension and potentially frustration.” Participant 2 stated, “It can lead to frustrations and views that nothing ever gets done. I think there would be a lot of dissatisfaction.” Participant 1 commented, “It’s very stressful. I go home unhappy. It affects my family because one minute I’m so happy and everyone can tell, and now it’s affecting my health.” Participants with a ‘strategic’ or ‘integrated’ lens also identified negative individual consequences. For example, Participant 5 provided one comment, “it can have all those negative consequences as well, people can be left feeling unheard, feeling overwhelmed.” Participant 13 provided numerous examples across positive and negative consequences for individuals and organizations. These reflected her more integrated or philosophical perspective. For example, her 13 comments regarding negative individual consequences included “it’s definitely not healthy and not useful where it’s used to bully people or to belittle people or to deliberately take power away from people” and “lack of productivity because they feel ... they’re not involved.”

**Table 2** Perceived positive and negative consequences of organizational politics at individual and organizational levels

	Individual	Organization
Positive consequences	Career progression/individual success (16)	Higher productivity/achieve outcomes (21)
	Higher satisfaction (4)	Organizational progression/facilitates change and adaptation (13)
		Increased communication/discussion of important issues/communication between silos (8)
Negative consequences	Pushes people out of the organization/Intention to leave (14)	Higher innovation (3)
	Frustration (12)	Lower productivity/reduced effectiveness (19)
	Unhappiness (8)	Loss of focus on organizational goals (17)
	Stress (5)	Conflict/tension (15)
	Cynicism (5)	Divisions/factions/internal fracturing (12)
	Low motivation (5)	Lack of clarity about what is happening/uncertainty (9)
	Damaged feeling of self-worth (5)	Stalled innovation/stall an organization (7)
	Resistance to change (5)	High staff turnover (4)
	Isolates/excludes people (4)	Limits the range of views being expressed (4)
	Dissatisfaction (4)	
	Stalled career progression (4)	
	Bitterness (3)	

Consequence only listed if three or more comments

### Negative Consequences: Organizational Level

At an organizational level, the negative consequences of organizational politics identified by participants included lower productivity, reduced effectiveness, loss of focus on organizational goals, conflict and tension, divisions and factions, uncertainty, higher staff turnover, low morale, unprofessional behavior, and poor culture. Negative organizational consequences were most commonly described by participants with a ‘reluctant’ and ‘reactive’ lens. For example, Participant 9 provided nine comments including “I find it to impact on productivity. I think if politics goes up, productivity goes down.” Participant 2 provided six comments including “Negative political situations stall an organization. They may not break the organization, but they will stall it from progressing.” Participant 12 suggested that “people tend to lose sight of what they’re employed to do.” Participant 1 felt that politics “can divide a whole organization.” Participants 13 and 14 provided comments that more generally reflected their integrated or philosophical perspective. For example, Participant 14 commented, “in more subtle ways, so if the dominant political schema is ... dominated by men ... and the dominant politics of the organization discriminates to exclude all other views outside of that, that’s when it will very much go into the negative,” “if the political behavior leads to really important issues going to stalemate,... you probably have the wrong mix of people around the table,”

and also commented that there could be a “loss of focus on the organization’s goals.”

### Positive Consequences: Individual Level

As was the case for the negative consequences, the positive consequences reported by participants were quite varied and were perceived to affect both individuals and the organization. Less than half as many comments described positive consequences (74 comments) as compared with comments describing negative consequences (180 comments). The most commonly reported positive consequence for individuals was accelerated career progression (16 comments). Other positive consequences for individuals included higher satisfaction (4 comments), increased happiness (2 comments), and increased motivation (2 comments). Participant 6 commented, “It can be good for the organization, certainly for the individual themselves. It can progress their career or their influence of their role or their ability to contribute. Their own needs for self-satisfaction, achievement and their own ability to exercise power and influence.” Participant 3 felt that “good politics is going to lead to higher satisfaction, happiness.” Participant 10 suggested that “your capacity to engage in organizational politics in a productive fashion will assist to get you promoted.” Participant 11 commented that it “drives and motivates people because they know that ultimately the outcomes that need to be brought about will be brought

about in one way or another.” Positive individual consequences were most commonly described by participants with a ‘strategic’ or ‘integrated’ lens. Participants with a ‘reactive’ or ‘reluctant’ lens were less likely to describe positive individual consequences. For example, Participant 1 did not describe any positive individual consequences. Participants 8, 9, and 12 described career progression and promotion as the only positive consequences of organizational politics.

### Positive Consequences: Organizational Level

Participants provided more than twice as many examples of positive consequences for the organization (54 comments) than the individual (20 comments). These positive consequences included higher productivity, achievement of organizational goals, organizational progression beyond the status quo, increased communication, and higher innovation. Positive organizational outcomes were most commonly described by participants with an ‘integrated’ or ‘strategic’ lens. For example, Participant 13 provided 11 comments regarding positive organizational consequences including “political behavior that’s contributing to outcomes, getting work done, delivering on the things you’ve committed to, or changing them where they need to respond to a particular issue, that’s quite positive.” She also commented, “It depends how you define politics, but if you think of it as being linked to values, ideas or things that people feel strongly about, that’s going to be a motivating factor that helps an organization move on.” Participant 5 provided seven comments including “it can encourage an organization to take risks because they could actually get a critical mass saying we need to be braver, and so an organization can progress.” She also commented, “People can feel challenged. People can learn from the process. You can also show those weaknesses and deficits within the organization that can lead to change because you recognize that you learn from political processes, that we could’ve done better ... let’s not have those sort of gaps in our knowledge or in our skill base or in our leadership.” Participant 3 provided 9 comments including “positive political behavior will lead to flexibility and innovation. It allows organizations to change more easily and more adaptable (sic).” He also commented “individuals feel more comfortable in reaching outside their department and that’s when you’re gonna actually get more things done.” Finally, Participant 14 provided 6 comments and felt that politics “can have a positive influence. It can lead to achieving your aims and not making silly decisions, being aware of the context in which you make a decision.” As highlighted earlier, four participants did not describe any positive organizational outcomes (Participants 1, 8, 9 ‘reactive or detached’ and 12 ‘reluctant’).

In summary, participants described a wide range of individual and organizational consequences of organizational politics. Participants with a ‘reactive’ or ‘reluctant’ lens commonly reported negative outcomes. Participants with a ‘strategic’ or ‘integrated’ lens commonly reported positive outcomes and also easily identified negative outcomes of organizational politics.

### Discussion

As highlighted earlier, this qualitative study had two main purposes: (1) to develop an updated account of how employees perceive organizational politics in contemporary organizational contexts; and (2) to identify whether the lived experience of organizational politics is described in both positive and negative terms. The interpretative, phenomenological approach to this study provided rich insights into how organizational members perceive organizational politics.

Consistent with calls for a more comprehensive and context-valid understanding of contemporary organizational politics (Drory and Vigoda-Gadot 2010), the present research suggests that traditional negatively framed definitions of organizational politics (e.g., Gandz and Murray 1980) need to be extended and elaborated. The first key finding of this study is that organizational members interpret organizational politics in very different ways. More specifically, the results suggested four distinct lenses: reactive, reluctant, strategic, and integrated. The particular lens through which individuals viewed organizational politics determined their view of political behavior, the extent to which organizational members engaged in individual political behavior, as well as the perceived outcomes of organizational politics. For example, building relationships was variously perceived as ‘sucking up’ (reactive), ‘pandering’ (reluctant), ‘building relationships so they can be called upon in future’ (strategic), and ‘working through other people’ (integrated). Although some researchers have previously acknowledged that individuals view organizational politics differently, the present research goes some way toward establishing a taxonomy of broad level perspectives. The taxonomy can hopefully be used to help organizations capture an understanding of baseline levels of organizational politics and to serve as a framework for developing initiatives aimed at achieving more integrated, balanced, and shared perspectives on organizational politics.

The second key finding of this study is that organizational politics is represented in 13 broad political behaviors, subsumed under five major categories. The five major categories are (1) build and use relationships, (2) observe and interpret the decision-making context, (3) manipulate

and undermine others, (4) control decisions and resources, and (5) build your personal reputation. These categories provide insight into what might be the most salient dimensions of contemporary organizational politics and accommodate a more balanced perspective on organizational politics. Numerous researchers (e.g., Hochwarter 2012; Fedor et al. 2008; Zanzi and O'Neill 2001) have argued there is a need for such a perspective. Indeed, the present research supports Ferris and Treadway's (2012) recent contention that political behavior should encompass the constructs of political behavior, influence tactics, self-presentation, impression management, and interpersonal influence and that "the overlap between these constructs far exceeds the differences between them" (p. 7). The present findings, for example, align with and integrate Allen et al.'s (1979) eight categories of political behaviors (e.g., 'support building for ideas' and 'associating with the influential'), Kipnis et al.'s (1980) influence strategies, and Bolman and Deal's (2003) list of basic skills of an effective politician (e.g., networking and forming coalitions, setting agendas, mapping the political terrain, and bargaining and negotiating). The five categories of political behavior also align with the literature on organizational power and power bases (Bass 1960; French and Raven 1959; Hersey et al. 1979; Landells and Albrecht 2013; Mintzberg 1983; Pfeffer 1992; Raven 1965). As such 'build and use relationships' aligns with connection power (Hersey et al. 1979), 'observe and interpret the decision-making context' aligns with information power (Raven 1965), 'manipulate and undermine others' aligns with coercive power (French and Raven 1959), 'control decisions and resources' aligns with positional power (Bass 1960), and 'build your personal reputation' aligns with personal power (Bass 1960). The findings also extend the work of Landells and Albrecht (2013) where organizational political climate was defined as "shared perceptions about the building and use of power bases in practices and workarounds regarding policies and procedures to influence decision-making, resource allocation and the achievement of individual, team and organizational goals" (p. 2). The behavior category of 'observe and interpret the decision-making context' suggests that the definition should be extended to include 'interpretation, building and use of power bases.'

Another key finding of this research is that organizational members perceived organizational politics to have both positive and negative consequences at individual and organizational levels. Participants who viewed politics through a reactive or reluctant lens described negative impacts on the organization such as lower productivity, loss of focus on organizational goals, conflict, tension, divisions, and uncertainty. Participants also described negative consequences for individuals including pushing people out of the organization, frustration, unhappiness,

stress, cynicism, and resistance to change. These negative consequences largely echoed the consequences described in past research, although the focus on productivity—both increased and decreased, organizational progression—both supporting and stalling, and increased frustration has not previously been reflected in quantitative research. Participants who viewed politics through the strategic or integrated lens described positive impacts. The positive consequences reported were quite varied and included higher productivity, organizational progression, increased communication, higher innovation, and career progression. These positive consequences have not been clearly captured in existing organizational politics research.

Overall, a key implication for this study is that the most widely used model and measure of perceptions of organizational politics (POPS: Ferris and Kacmar 1989, 1992; Kacmar and Carlson 1997; Kacmar and Ferris 1991) is not capturing organizational politics as understood by many organizational members. Therefore, as stated by Fedor and Maslyn (2002, p. 273), "when it comes to empirically investigating both the positive and negative sides of political behavior, we only assess one side due to the fact that currently available scales reflect a predominantly negative bias (e.g., Kacmar and Ferris 1991)." The findings of the present study suggest that a more balanced measure of organizational politics may reveal both positive and negative outcomes for individuals and organizations. Although a limited number of researchers (e.g., Fedor and Maslyn 2002; Maslyn et al. 2005; Fedor et al. 2008) have attempted to develop measures of both positive and negative politics perceptions, the measures have not been widely validated or adopted and the 'positive' items could reflect a more positive perspective.

The current study has implications for theorizing about organizational politics. While some qualitative research methods focus on discovering theory from data (e.g., Glaser and Strauss 1967), qualitative approaches such as interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith 1996) allow for qualitative data to be reconciled with existing theory. In light of this research, we argue that a theoretical framework must allow for different lenses on organizational politics, incorporate core dimensions of organizational politics, accommodate varying perceptions at different levels of analysis, and account for positive and negative consequences of organizational politics. For example, Dipboye and Foster (2002) draw on Kelly's (1955) Personal Construct Theory to explain that organizational members may rely on differing personal constructs to understand organizational events, including politics.

Given the positive dimensions of organizational politics, the emerging fields of positive organizational behavior and positive organizational psychology provide potentially useful theories and models for understanding both the

perceived functional and dysfunctional dimensions of organizational politics. As an example, Albrecht and Landells (2012) suggested constructs such as organizational politics could be positioned as a challenge stressor as well as a demand stressor within Job Demands-Resources Theory (Bakker and Demerouti 2014). The results of the current study suggest that some organizational politics can be regarded as a resource (opportunity) and as a demand (threat), depending on the organizational context and personal experience that shapes the lens through which employees perceive their political climate.

### Practical Implications

Practically, the current study has implications for leaders and managers of organizations. This research has highlighted that it cannot be assumed when two people are talking about ‘organizational politics’ that they are talking about the same phenomenon. It is important to understand each individual’s perspective on organizational politics. Do they view it only at a distance as something to be avoided? Do they view it as a useful strategy? Is it central to their philosophy of work? Any discussion of organizational politics needs to begin with understanding each person’s perspective on organizational politics.

The findings of this study also indicate that individuals may progress through different stages of perspectives on organizational politics as their understanding of organizational politics matures. This may suggest that organizations could implement initiatives that develop an understanding of the different perspectives on organizational politics and potentially ‘move’ individuals from a ‘reactive’ or ‘reluctant’ perspective to a ‘strategic’ or even ‘integrated’ perspective. However, further research is needed to establish whether one lens is more effective than the other and whether it leads to better individual and organizational outcomes and performance.

More broadly, organizations could potentially assess the extent to which the varying perspectives are present in their organizations. These insights could lead to deeper understanding of the types of politics that exist within organizations. For example, if most employees view politics through a ‘reactive’ lens and avoid politics, what insights does that provide about the individual needs as well as the politics within that organization?

Perceived politics clearly has significant impacts on individuals and organizations. Negative individual and organizational consequences were commonly reported by individuals with a ‘reactive’ or ‘reluctant’ lens. Yet positive individual and organizational outcomes were commonly reported by individuals with a ‘strategic’ or ‘integrated’ lens. If politics is pervasive and occurs to a lesser or greater extent in all organizations, perhaps the

lens on organizational politics is most strongly associated with the negative outcomes. If this is the case, perhaps the most useful intervention is not to try to eliminate organizational politics, rather it could be to work with individuals to reframe their perspective on organizational politics.

### Future Research

The findings suggest numerous future research opportunities, including both qualitative and quantitative studies. For example, existing measures of perceptions of organizational politics could be extended to reflect the five behavior categories reported in the current study. Existing measures of political influence (e.g., Kipnis et al. 1980) could usefully inform such measures to ensure items are less negatively loaded than the measures of organizational politics that are currently commonly used. Measures could also be developed to operationalize the different lenses of organizational politics described in this paper and to identify their prevalence across different occupational and organizational settings. Large sample confirmatory factor analytic studies will be necessary to establish the validity, reliability, and generalizability of such measures.

Having established valid and reliable measures, the direct and indirect effects of behavioral categories and lenses on important individual, team, and organizational outcomes could then be established. For example, future research could aim to determine the behaviors and lenses that are most closely associated with psychological safety, employee voice, and individual, team, and organizational innovation and performance. Furthermore, the current research findings suggest a potential progression, or maturation, through the different lenses. Longitudinal research could be undertaken to investigate the extent to which lenses change over time and identify what leads to these changes. Differing perspectives at different organizational levels and in different organizational contexts could usefully be examined. The relationship between individual differences and the different lenses on organizational politics could also be investigated. For example, how does a regulatory focus of either promotion or prevention (Gorman et al. 2012; Higgins 1997; Lanaj et al. 2012), locus of control (Rotter 1966), self-determination (Deci and Ryan 1985), need for power, or need for achievement (McClelland 1961), and positive or negative affectivity (Watson et al. 1988) relate to each lens?

### Limitations

As with any empirical research, the current study had a number of limitations. Firstly, interview respondents self-selected for participation. Therefore, the study may consist

of participants who hold a strong view of organizational politics, whether positive or negative. Secondly, it is possible that participants did not share their honest or complete perspectives or that they responded in a socially desirable way when being interviewed by a perceived ‘expert’ in organizational politics. However, the volume, diversity, and quality of the data suggested that this was not the case. The procedural emphasis on valuing honest responses, the promise of confidentiality, and assurances that all opinions are equally important no doubt contributed to the quality of the data.

In the context of quantitative analysis, 14 participants would be an insufficient sample to enable researchers to draw conclusions. However, as previously noted, it is widely acknowledged that IPA can yield rich insight into employee perceptions of their organizational experience with as few as a handful of participants. The quantity and quality of the present data attests to the utility of IPA as a qualitative data collection and analytic technique. However, the current study involved mostly well-educated individuals from three Australian organizations. Future qualitative research is required to replicate and extend these findings with potentially larger samples drawn from diverse industries, organizations, occupations, and cultures.

Despite every effort to remain objective in the conduct and analysis of this research, it is possible that biases of the researchers influenced the interpretations and that other researchers would draw different conclusions, determine different themes, and propose different categories. Nevertheless, by adhering to established qualitative processes we have endeavored to analyze the data in a transparent, valid and replicable manner and to explain our analytical processes. We are confident that our approach has yielded a deeper understanding of organizational politics.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this qualitative study demonstrates that organizational members perceive organizational politics positively as well as negatively. Therefore, organizational politics research, theorizing, models, and measures need to accommodate varying conceptualizations of organizational politics—both positive and negative conceptualizations. This study demonstrated that organizational politics can manifest itself as positive political behaviors such as building and using relationships, observing and interpreting the decision-making context, and building personal credibility. Organizational politics can also lead to positive consequences including increased productivity, organizational progression, increased communication, and higher innovation. The ‘dark side’ (Ullah et al. 2011) of organizational politics was also borne out by this research with

organizational members describing a wide range of deviant, manipulative, and self-interested political behaviors that resulted in significant negative impacts such as individual frustration, higher intention to leave, reduced productivity, and loss of focus on organizational goals.

Going forward, we should discard the notion that organizational politics is confined to manipulative, self-serving, non-sanctioned behaviors. Instead, it should be recognized that politics encompasses specific behaviors that are viewed differently by different people according to their perspective on organizational politics.

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