Patterns of Political Behavior in Organizations

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This paper suggests that despite the current renaissance of interest in organizational power and politics, organization theory neglects individual political behavior within organizations. The need for a concern for individual political behavior is explored, and three key dimensions of political behavior are suggested: internal-external, vertical-lateral, and legitimate-illegitimate. A typology based on these dimensions is proposed, and predictions about the different types of political behavior are offered.

Now that organizational scholars have discovered and explored the environment, the new growth stock appears to be organizational politics. A host of recent works (Bacharach & Lawler, 1980; Gandz & Murray, 1980; Mayes & Allen, 1977; Pfeffer, 1978, 1981; Tushman, 1977) have attempted to remedy the neglect of power and politics that scholars such as Mowday (1978) and Madison, Allen, Porter, Renwick, & Mayes (1980) have seen as characteristic of the organizational literature. Despite this upsurge of attention to politics, some aspects of political phenomena continue to be neglected in the organizational literature. This paper argues for the theoretical importance of individual political behavior, proposes three key dimensions of political behavior, and suggests a typology derived from these dimensions. Also, variables useful for predicting the form of individual political actions are suggested.

The current wave of literature on organizational power and politics may be viewed best as a “rediscovery” of politics in organizations. Issues of power and politics within organizations were central to classic organizational writers such as Weber and Michels. The development of scientific management and human relations schools, with their managerial perspectives, diverted attention to motivation and productivity. Only rarely did organizational scholars return to the issues of power and politics—for example, March (1962), and Mechanic (1962)—until the renaissance of such literature in the late 1970s.

It is difficult to account for the timing of this rediscovery. The authors do not share a single paradigm and many of the papers are, in fact, largely descriptive rather than explicitly theoretical. It is suspected, however, that among the factors behind the revival of interest in organizational power and politics is the penetration of organizations by employees socialized into politics during the protests of the 1960s. Further, political behavior in organizations recently has been highlighted against a societal background of decreasing trust in authority and by an increase in journalistic revelations of wrongdoing. Within the scholarly literature there has been an increase in Marxist and conflict theories of organizations (see the special issue of Sociological Quarterly, Winter, 1977). Pfeffer, for example, has observed that the dominant managerial perspective within organizational studies has neglected “one of the most important issues and activities—the conflict in preferences among organizational participants and the resulting contest over the organization” (1978, p. 29). Also, the various attacks—for example, March and Olsen (1976) and Weick (1979)—on the goal approach and the general rational model of organizations may have made political models of organizations seem more rele-

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The new wave of interest in organizational politics and organizational power is composed of several distinct types of work. First, a number of authors (Butler, Hickson, Wilson, & Axelson, 1977-78; Mayes & Allen, 1977; Tushman, 1977) have simply urged that organizations be viewed as political arenas or have provided a conceptual framework to permit such an approach. These calls for political analysis of organizations are an essential starting point. Dachler and Wilpert (1978), although not explicitly concerned with politics, provided a conceptual framework for participation in organizations. The implications of participation for democratization and the diffusion of decision making suggest that this might also be seen as a call for political analysis.

Second, the theme of power in organizations is receiving substantial attention. Although organizational theorists generally have treated power as distinct from organizational politics, the two concepts are linked theoretically and empirically. Madison et al. reported that among their sample of managers “the successful practice of organizational politics is perceived to lead to a higher level of power, and once a high level of power is attained, there is more opportunity to engage in political behavior” (1980, p. 94). Contemporary writers, in returning to the Weberian interests of power and authority, are focusing on bases of power (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1974), loci of power (Madison et al., 1980), influence processes (Mowday, 1978), and the measurement of power. Power typically is explained by linking it to environmental uncertainty and resource control. A limitation of this literature is that it provides only a partial view, focusing on either the upward or downward flow of power. The organizational literature on power would benefit from Gamson’s (1968) widely acclaimed synthesis of the social control and influence literatures on power. Incorporating Gamson’s work would ensure that future discussions of power would be more comprehensive and would permit greater integration of structure, authority, power, and politics.

Among the recent works on organizational politics, actual studies of political behavior are, in fact, quite rare. There are, however, studies of attributions of politicization and perceived organizational politics (Gandz & Murray, 1980; Madison et al., 1980). There also are studies of group behavior, especially interorganizational power relations—for example, Salancik and Pfeffer (1974)—and coalitions—for example, Bacharach and Lawler (1980). Work on political behavior by individuals is scarce although recent research on the filing of grievances (Dalton & Todor, 1979; Muchinsky & Maassarani, 1980) provides a good example.

The relative neglect of individual political behavior in the current wave of interest in organizational research seems strange. Dominant American values stress individualism and American social science typically reflects this with a heavy stress on individual behavior. Furthermore, several early articles on organizational politics (Burns, 1962; Mechanic, 1962; Strauss, 1963) dealt with political actions by individual organizational members. But these early leads have not been followed with much vigor. It is believed that the neglect of individual political behavior has three principle sources: (1) failure to distinguish required job behavior from discretionary political behavior, (2) failure to distinguish calculated from accidental political behavior, and (3) failure to distinguish clearly between macro and micro levels of analysis. Political behavior has been described as providing the “non-rational influence on decision making” (Miles, 1980, p. 154) and as existing as a “backstage” activity (Burns, 1962, p. 260). However, current definitions of organizational politics that focus on the exercise of power (Miles, 1980), the manipulation of influence (Madison et al., 1980), or the mobilization of resources in competition (Burns, 1962) do not clearly distinguish political behaviors from those actions required while filling organizational positions. The present authors agree with Mayes and Allen that “a suitable definition of organization politics must allow exclusion of routine job performance from consideration” (1977, p. 674). Porter, Allen, and Angle (1981) also exclude behaviors that are required or expected from their discussion of organizational politics, treating political behavior as discretionary. The present authors believe that political behavior resides in informal structures and relates to the promotion of self and group interests rather than being part of those formal roles regulated by organizational norms and goals. Further, examinations of political behaviors in organizations should focus on intended or overt actions by members while recognizing that unintended actions or even personal
Idiosyncracies may have political consequences. Friendships and romantic associations occasionally may have indirect consequences for organizational politics, but they should not be a first focus of attention. Finally, existing analyses of organizational politics blur the distinction among different units of analysis by talking about the power of individuals, units, and interorganizational networks in the same discussion. By combining macro and micro levels of analysis at the initial stage of discussion, organizational scholars fail to consider the critical issues of the distinctiveness or similarity of correlates of politics for each level of analysis as well as the linkages between different levels.

**Individual Political Behavior**

In order to focus attention on individuals, it is suggested that the term political behavior be reserved for political activities by individual organization members. Political behavior in organizations may be defined as those activities that are not required as part of one’s organizational role but that influence, or attempt to influence, the distribution of advantages and disadvantages within the organization. This definition draws on Froman’s (1962) resource conceptualization of politics. It provides a definition of individual political behavior general enough to encompass such diverse examples of organizational politics as whistleblowing, filing of grievances, using symbolic protest gestures, spreading rumors, leaking information to the media, and filing lawsuits.

These political behaviors within organizations, although widely recognized by organization members, have not been integrated into organizational theory. Development of an organizational analogue to political participation in societies promises to have important implications for theory development. A brilliant example of an organizational analogy drawn from another social unit is Albert Hirschman’s (1970) seminal work, *Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*. Political scientists and political sociologists have long recognized that one of the most basic political acts is the “personalized contact” (Verba, Nie, & Kim, 1971) in search of either a social or an individualized outcome. Hirschman (1970) referred to this type of interest articulation as “voice” and demonstrated that it could be applied with equal utility in various social groups. In a recent exposition, Kolarska and Aldrich (1980) refined voice by distinguishing between indirect and direct voice. Direct voice refers to appeals to authorities within the focal organization; indirect voice refers to appeals to outside authorities or agents. In subtle ways voting is an essential part of many organizations. Zaleznik (1970) argues that the flow of capital funds and subordinate enthusiasm for manager’s projects constitute referenda. Further, the process of leadership selection and control of authority in business and other organizations can resemble, under some conditions, the campaign and election procedures of other political communities (Lipset, Trow, & Coleman, 1956). When problems arise with internal processes, proxy fights and boardroom showdowns often are the organizational counterparts to recalls and ethics committee investigations. The incorporation of these and similar groups of behaviors not only supplements the rational model but also links organizational theory to a rich empirical tradition.

**Patterns of Political Behavior**

Given the great variety of political behavior within organizations and the substantial amount of work remaining to be done in mapping its diversity, it is premature to propose an exhaustive set of dimensions of political behavior. Instead, proposed here is the consideration of three key dimensions of political behavior that are clearly useful in classifying political activities in organizations: the internal-external dimension, the vertical-lateral dimension, and the legitimate-illegitimate dimension. These dimensions represent distinct continuua along which political activities may be ordered. They reflect tactical choices that organizational members make in seeking resources or mobilizing available resources to influence the distribution of advantages and disadvantages within the organization.

The internal-external dimension of political behavior is concerned with the focus of resources sought by those engaging in political behavior in organizations. In cases such as whistleblowing, lawsuits, leaking information to the media, or forming alliances with persons outside the focal organization, organization members attempt to expand the resources available for mobilization by going outside the boundaries of the organization and...
attempting to involve "outsiders." Internal political behaviors, on the other hand, employ resources already within the organization, as in the exchange of favors, trading agreements, reprisals, obstructionism, symbolic protest gestures, "touching bases," forming alliances with other organization members and, in coercive organizations, riots and mutinies. It seems likely that organizational members may progress from internal to external activities as they come to believe that success is possible only if resources outside the organization can be mobilized. As Kolarska and Aldrich note, however, appeals to outside authorities or interest groups (indirect voice) may be resorted to for a variety of reasons:

People may use indirect voice after direct voice fails, when they are afraid of using direct voice, when they do not believe in the effectiveness of direct voice or when they do not know how to use direct voice (1980, p. 44).

It is contended here that external political behavior will be attempted more often by lower participants in organizations or by those with lower levels of power because they are most likely to expect defeat if conflicts are resolved without introducing outside resources. As Weinstein has observed, whistleblowing may be seen as "attempts to change a bureaucracy by those who work within the organization but do not have any authority" (1979, p. 2).

Hierarchy is a dominant feature of most organizations and the vertical-lateral dimension of political behavior recognizes the difference between influence processes relating superiors to subordinates and those relating equals. Such political activities as complaining to a supervisor, bypassing the chain of command, apple polishing, and mentor-protege activities are best seen as vertical political behavior. Mechanic's (1962) discussion of sources of power of lower organizational participants points out that implicit trading agreements often develop between physicians and ward attendants in situations in which attendants relieve the M.D.s of many obligations and duties in return for increased power over patients.

Lateral political behaviors have received less systematic attention but would include exchange of favors, offering help, coalition organizing, and talking to an occupational peer outside the organization. Some examples also can be found in the leadership literature under discussion of lateral relations (Hunt & Osborn, 1981; Osborn & Hunt, 1974; Sayles, 1964).

These "exchanges" between a leader and those at or near his own organizational level, outside his own chain of command, are quite often important but often neglected. While we call this aspect of leadership "lateral relations," perhaps a more common term is "politics." Regardless of the label used, these exchanges can build discretion by providing a more consistent flow of varied resources, reducing uncertainty and/or increasing independence or autonomy (Hunt & Osborn, 1980, p. 57).

Dalton's (1959) classic study of managers recognized the importance of discretionary lateral political behaviors. Employees of the Milo Company were quickly socialized regarding the importance of Masonic and Yacht Club memberships. When executives are appraised for promotion, political skills are considered in addition to formal competence because of the need to "utilize and aid necessary cliques, and control dangerous ones" (Dalton, 1959, p. 181). In his discussion of lateral relations among purchasing agents, Strauss observed that "to some extent agents operate on the principle of 'reward your friends, punish your enemies,' and are involved in a network of exchange of favors—and sometimes even reprisals" (1963, p. 174). Lateral political actions may occur at all levels of organizations although it seems likely that those at lower levels, lacking substantial resources, may be highly motivated to increase their power by joining forces with peers. In large pyramidal organizations, middle level management would seem to have the most opportunities to engage in vertical political behaviors.

The final dimension, legitimate-illegitimate, acknowledges that in organizations, as in states, distinctions are made between normal everyday politics and extreme political behavior that violates the "rules of the game." Though unofficial and unauthorized, organizational politics is widely recognized as a reality by organizational participants, especially those who like to feel they are "playing hardball." The rules of the game that develop in organizations typically rule out certain kinds of actions as too dangerous or threatening to the organizations. Kolarska and Aldrich report, for example, that research in Poland "uncovered the existence of a set of moral norms regulating interorganizational exchange. One norm concerned the impropriety of using forms of voice such as
lawsuits, press leaks, and appeals to supervising organizations (indirect voice)” (1980, p. 52). Such norms, of course, change and evolve, and one would hardly expect a young executive to respond to a symbolic office protest with quite the horror of the stereotypical gray flannel-suited manager. Political behaviors widely accepted as legitimate would certainly include exchanging favors, “touching bases,” forming coalitions, and seeking sponsors at upper levels. Less legitimate behaviors would include whistleblowing, revolutionary coalitions, threats, and sabotage. During the Vietnam War, another illegitimate activity received considerable publicity—the killing of officers in military units (“fragging”). Legitimate politics typically is expected to be engaged in by those at upper levels of organizations and by those who are strongly committed to the organization. Illegitimate political behavior is likely to be action taken by alienated members and by those who feel they have little to lose.

**A Typology of Political Behavior**

A cross-tabulation of the three dimensions of political behavior (internal-external, vertical-lateral, and legitimate-illegitimate) permits the development of a multidimensional typology of political behavior in organizations. Cross-classifying these three dichotomized dimensions yields an 8-celled collocation. Despite the renewed interest in organizational power and politics, no other system has emerged that explored the variety and interrelationships of these behaviors. The typology offered by Mayes and Allen (1977) organized organizational politics relative to normal job behaviors, but it did not deal with specific political behaviors. The examples provided in Figure 1 are not exhaustive of all political actions in organizations, but they include those forms of political behavior that have received scholarly and journalistic attention. In addition, the three dimensions are sufficiently general to make the typology inclusive of all forms of organizational political behavior.

It is contended that the four types of political behavior included in the “legitimate” category include the vast majority of all organizational political actions. Cell I behaviors, which are normal internal political behaviors, would, it seems, be most frequent in organizations with large differences in rewards, in tall organizations, and in those in which participation in decisions is limited. Under such conditions obstructionism is a common tactic by which lower participants resist organizational policies and decisions through inaction or excessive adherence to rules. Lateral political behaviors, such as those described in Cell II, can be expected to increase under loose supervision, if there is more equal positional power, and in nonline-and-staff organizations (Cleland, 1967).

External-vertical behaviors such as lawsuits or indirect voice (Cell III) generally occur in areas in which the legitimacy of conflict is well established. The growth of work related regulatory agencies such as N.L.R.B., E.E.O.C., and O.S.H.A. is an indication of increasing social recognition of the need to provide institutionalized means for resolv-
ing recurring disputes. Through occupational and informal contacts with those outside the focal organization (Cell IV), organizational members frequently gain access to information and other power resources. Such contacts, though not required, are accepted behavior for higher participants.

Unlike legitimate political behaviors, illegitimate actions pose the very real risk of loss of membership or extreme sanctions. Mutinies and riots are the most dramatic examples of vertical-internal illegitimate behavior (Cell V). Related but frequently overlooked are symbolic protests by organizational members. Unorthodox dress, button wearing, and “blue flu” may be miniature forms of organizational revolt. A form of illegitimate behavior that, in contrast, has attracted great journalistic attention is whistleblowing (Cell VII). This action, which also has been called “internal muckraking” (Peters & Branch, 1972), occurs when organizational members go public and release to the media details of organizational misconduct, neglect, or irresponsibility that jeopardize the public interest.

Organizational defections (Cell VIII) occur when executives move to a competitor or begin their own firms, abandoning loyalty to the first firm. In cases of organizational duplicity, however, there is dual membership and uncertain loyalties. A classic example is the dedicated journalist who dons “bunny ears” to write a good story.

Predicting Types of Political Behavior

Empirical studies of the process by which individuals select the types of political behavior in which they engage have not been conducted. An exchange framework, however, permits certain predictions about such choices. An exchange approach is especially appropriate to the study of political behavior because exchange theory emphasizes the person-organization relationship and also stresses the distribution of scarce resources (advantages and disadvantages). The use of four abstract concepts allows one to describe, from the perspective of the organizational actor, the context of the political exchange. Furthermore, these four abstract variables permit the incorporation of a substantial amount of previous research.

Investments

Investments encompass those resources that organizational participants commit to a relationship in the expectation of increased future benefit (Farrell & Rusbult, 1981). Typically, workers become invested in a firm as they acquire nonportable training, friendship, and seniority. These “side-bets,” as Becker (1960) calls them, decrease an individual’s propensity to leave an organization by increasing the cost of exit. The present authors believe that investments also lessen the likelihood of an individual engaging in illegitimate political behavior because such behavior places the investments at risk and there exist expectations of better outcomes in the future. Those with low investments, on the other hand, have little to lose by illegitimate political behavior. In some cases investments can be induced. Kolarska and Aldrich cite the action of authorities who attempt “to socialize the dissidents into the special organizational knowledge of the inner professional circle” (1980, p. 51).

Investments may have other effects in directing political behavior. Vertical behavior may be increased, Mechanic (1962) argues, because investments in specialized skills and knowledge produce dependence; in this manner upper level participants lose power to technical staff. The likelihood of internal or external political behavior also can be shaped by the extent of investments. When investments are high and portable as in professions or what Thompson (1967) calls “late-ceiling” occupations, employees seek advantage by going outside the organization. In early-ceiling occupations, however, individuals “seek leverage in the negotiation process through collective action” (Thompson, 1967, p. 113).

Alternatives

Alternatives are readily available opportunities to obtain rewards from other associations. The quality of an individual’s alternatives is improved when there is a favorable labor market, when the person has acquired scarce skills or knowledge, and when the individual makes an extensive search for alternatives. In some organizations, however, alternatives may not exist or may be extremely limited. Prisons virtually eliminate alternatives for specified periods of time, as do most military units, especially ships at sea. Employees in isolated company towns may be captives of their employer. In general, poor alternatives prevent members from leaving the organization and thus increase the likelihood of in-
ternal protest. Hirschman has argued that "the voice option is the only way in which dissatisfied customers or members can react whenever the exit option is unavailable" (1970, p. 33).

As alternatives are unrealized associations, subjective perceptions play a key role in the absence of objective data. Classic organizational cosmopolitans frequently exercise disproportionate influence within the focal organization because it is difficult for other members to assess precisely the magnitude of external power bases. Another perceptual distortion occurs when alternatives are limited: "a lack of alternatives raises people's perceived investments in an organization and increases the potential payoff of voice" (Kolarska & Aldrich, 1980, p. 53). Even perceived increases in investments should result in more structured low-risk political behaviors.

When the available alternatives are very different types of associations offering nonparallel sets of rewards, as when an individual exchanges corporate membership for the risks and challenge of independent entrepreneurship (Perrucci, Anderson, Schendel, & Trachtman, 1980; Wright, 1980); illegitimate external behaviors may become more likely.

So far only a few journalistic and legal studies have been reported that describe cases of individuals in business firms and government agencies who regarded the public interest as overriding the interest of the organization they served and decided to "blow the whistle"—to inform public or legal authorities that their organization was involved in corrupt, socially harmful, or illegal activity....While there were unique features in every case, the whistle-blowers seem to have had in common a strong sense of professional standards, a high level of personal self-esteem, and social support from a spouse or close friend, which enabled them to overcome both the subtle pressures and overt threats of blacklisting, social ostracism, and dismissal (Janis & Mann, 1977, p. 273).

Trust

Trust refers to the perceived necessity for influence (Gamson, 1968). When lower participants hold high levels of trust, they express the belief that authorities will produce desired outcomes without the participants taking any action. Those with low trust, however, hold no expectation of receiving such desired outcomes. The trust concept, prominent in discussions of society and the state (Gamson, 1971; Miller, 1974), also can be applied to political behavior within organizations. The salience of politics is associated with the level of trust of organizational members: "If there is an extraordinarily high degree of trust, such as participants assuming that each is acting in each other's interests, then there need be little concern with issues of control and governance" (Pfeffer, 1978, p. 38). Trust is very closely related to perceptions of organizational dependability (Alutto & Belasco, 1972; Buchanan, 1974; Spencer & Steers, 1980).

In addition to helping predict the overall level of political behavior, trust helps dictate the form of such behavior. High levels of trust should be associated with the exercise of legitimate political behavior because to do otherwise is to risk backlash from authorities expected to produce desired outcomes. In contrast, those with low levels of trust experience few restraints to extreme actions. Thus Gamson observes that an appeal to the disaffected that they are hurting their cause by illegitimate behaviors will fall on deaf ears: "to point out to poor negroes in urban ghettos that riots are resented is a rather irrelevant communication to a group which feels there is little likelihood of obtaining favorable actions from authorities in the absence of such riots" (1968, p. 169). Beyond suppressing the level of political behavior in general and inhibiting illegitimate actions in particular, high trust should reduce vertical political behaviors. To the extent that trust is directed at higher authorities, there is little reason for those who already expect desired outcomes to expend resources in attempting vertical influence. Lack of leader control over some advantages, zero-sum conditions, or organizational retreatment may produce lateral political behaviors even in high trust environments.

Efficacy

Efficacy is generally treated as the perceived ability to influence (Gamson, 1968). Thus it refers not to the need to engage in political behavior, but rather to the expectation that one's political actions will yield desired outcomes and thus be worth the costs of action. Those who perceive their efficacy within the organization to be low will, in the long run, engage in little political behavior. It may be that new organizational members (or those who have changed units within the organization) and those who experience low levels of efficacy will respond by intensified efforts to gain political influence. Unless such actions result in increased
levels of perceived ability to influence, however, the level of political behavior would be expected to decline as members come to define their actions as futile.

External political behaviors frequently are pursued when it is impossible to engage in internal political behavior or when there is little expectation of success through internal actions (Kolarska & Aldrich, 1980). Individuals with low internal efficacy may go outside the organization either to seek additional resources or simply to leave the organization. Hirschman observed that “the decision whether to exit will often be taken in light of the prospects for the effective use of voice” (1970, p. 37). In his view, exit may serve as a “last resort after voice has failed.” In addition to shaping the internal-external flow of political activity, efficacy affects the selection of legitimate or illegitimate forms of political behaviors. It is believed that those organizational members with high levels of efficacy will tend to engage in legitimate political behaviors as they have a vested interest in maintaining the organization and thus they will play within the rules and avoid threatening the organization.

Implications

In calling for a focus on individual political behavior in organizations, a supplement to the rational model of organizations is suggested. Those organizational theories that draw on the rational model, although they provide a useful simplification of organizational reality, inevitably explain only a portion of the behavior that occurs. Organizational life involves contradictions because it encompasses two organizational realities: the rational and the political (Miles, 1980). Although these two realities may involve contradictions, they frequently complement one another. Burns has observed that “members of a corporation are at one and the same time cooperators in a common enterprise and rivals for the material and intangible rewards of successful competition with each other” (1962, p. 258).

Identifying the internal-external, vertical-lateral, and legitimate-illegitimate dimensions of political behavior provides added insight to the current understanding of organizational behavior, and it offers options for future research. It now appears that research in the rational tradition seems to focus almost exclusively on internal legitimate political behaviors. As the typology presented here indicates, however, this hardly exhausts the range of political activity that may occur in organizations. The handful of existing studies that have looked at such phenomena as whistleblowing (Parmerlee, Near, & Jensen, 1980; Perrucci et al., 1980), organizational dissent (Stanley, 1981), and organizational protest (Lipset, 1971), now may be more clearly related to the full range of political behavior in organizations. Illegitimate political behaviors, though uncommon, provide a rich site for future research. Not only are they of interest in themselves, but they provide insight into organizational norms and values.

The integration of a focus on political behavior in organizations with the rational model can enrich the understanding of such key organizational problems as effectiveness. The rational view always has assumed that efficient means-ends chains are the route to organizational effectiveness. The present authors believe that successful management of political activity in organizations is equally necessary for producing organizational effectiveness. In some instances, political activity is a precondition of rational administrative behavior. Bargaining has been shown to maintain organizational structure (Burns, 1962), and successful coalition formation within the executive structure, Zaleznik (1970) argues, helps avoid paralysis in decision making. Political tactics also may serve as a direct managerial tool, as in Mowday’s (1978) finding that selective filtering of information and exchanging favors were associated with high effectiveness among elementary school principals. In light of such findings, to attempt to explain organizational effectiveness without incorporating political variables is to guarantee no more than partial success.

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