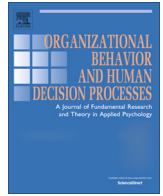




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## Looking back and falling further behind: The moderating role of rumination on the relationship between organizational politics and employee attitudes, well-being, and performance

Christopher C. Rosen<sup>a</sup>, Wayne A. Hochwarter<sup>b,\*</sup><sup>a</sup> University of Arkansas, Department of Management, Walton College of Business, Fayetteville, AR 7270, United States<sup>b</sup> Florida State University, Department of Management, College of Business, Tallahassee, FL 32306-1110, United States

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## ABSTRACT

The current study tested the theoretically relevant, yet previously unexamined, role of rumination on the relationship between politics perceptions and a variety of threat responses. Drawing from Response Styles Theory, it was argued that rumination amplifies the effects of politics by enhancing the influence of negative information on cognition, interfering with problem-solving, and undermining sources of social support. The work stress literature, along with extant politics research, served to identify four variables – job satisfaction, tension, depressed work mood, and employee effort/performance – that served as study outcomes. Across three unique samples, hypothesized relationships were strongly supported, indicating that politics perceptions negatively affected work outcomes of high ruminators, but demonstrate little influence on those who engage in less rumination. Moreover, the nonlinear influences of the focal constructs were considered and the results confirmed atypical relational forms. Contributions, implications for theory and practice, strengths and limitations, and future research directions are described.

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## Introduction

For over a century, scholars have recognized the pervasiveness of politics in virtually all social environments (Atkinson, 1888; Hochwarter, 2012; Yang, 2009). In the organizational sciences, the term politics has been used to refer to illegitimate, self-serving behaviors strategically designed to protect or enhance actor self-interests (Chang, Rosen, & Levy, 2009; Ferris, Russ, & Fandt, 1989). While engaging in political behaviors may have benefits for the individual (Hochwarter, Ferris, Zinko, James, & Platt, 2007) or the work group (Buchanan & Badham, 2008), scholars (Ferris, Adams, Kolodinsky, Hochwarter, & Ammeter, 2002; Mintzberg, 1983) recognize that organizational politics are a prevalent and dysfunctional aspect of many job contexts (Chang et al., 2009).

Over the past three decades, research has been guided by Ferris et al. (1989) theoretical model, which identifies antecedents, outcomes, and moderators of the effects of perceived politics on employee outcomes. Drawing from the work stress literature (e.g., Beehr & Bhagat, 1985), Ferris et al. (1989) argued that

employees appraise politics as a threat to the self because of its potential to impede achievement of personal and professional goals. Accordingly, perceiving politics at work elicits a stress response manifested in unfavorable attitudes (e.g., job dissatisfaction), diminished well-being (e.g., elevated anxiety and tension, depressed mood), and withdrawal (e.g., reductions of time and effort from one's job). Consistent with paradigms of work stress, Ferris et al. (1989) further posited that perceived control and understanding attenuate the deleterious effects of politics, as these factors contribute to employee's ability to effectively cope. Consequently, a number of studies have identified contextual and interpersonal factors predictive of control and understanding (e.g., individual differences such as political skill; situational factors such as LMX; and political behaviors such as impression management) which serve to limit the negative effects of politics (Ferris, Adams, Kolodinsky, Hochwarter, and Ammeter, 2002; Ferris, Hochwarter, et al., 2002).

Emphasizing contextual and interpersonal factors that buffer the effects of politics has contributed to theory and practice; however, this exclusivity has come at the expense of other contributing factors. Specifically, research has yet to consider the influence of *intra-personal*, or internally evaluated (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001), factors when exploring intervening elements. Accordingly, we have an appreciation of what people “do” when faced with politics, but

\* Corresponding author. Address: Department of Management, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306-1110, United States.

E-mail addresses: [crosen@walton.uark.edu](mailto:crosen@walton.uark.edu) (C.C. Rosen), [whochwar@cob.fsu.edu](mailto:whochwar@cob.fsu.edu) (W.A. Hochwarter).

our understanding of what people “think” prior to the enactment of threat responses is minimal (Brinker, Campisi, Gibbs, & Izzard, 2013). Moreover, there is a significant amount of variation in how individuals respond to politics (see Chang et al., 2009). In explaining this modest differences, research to date has generally focused on factors that attenuate the effects of politics, with little discussion about factors that make individuals more sensitive to the harmful effects of work politics. Thus, our knowledge of the boundary conditions of the effects of politics remains largely incomplete.

Considering the relevance of perceived politics to the self and the pursuit of goals (Chang et al., 2009; Rosen, Ferris, Brown, Chen, & Yan, *in press*), it is surprising that prior research has yet to consider the role of self-focus, especially in terms of the propensity to focus attention inward (Brebels, De Cremer, Sedikides, & Van Hiel, 2013; Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975). In particular, research suggests that threats to goal attainment become more pressing when the self is salient (Skitka, 2003), as self-focus determines the salience, intensity, and duration of environmental stimuli (Watkins, 2008). Moreover, self-focus directly influences reactions to cues considered threatening (Brosschot, Gerin, & Thayer, 2006). In support, a growing body of research suggests that self-focus may explain why certain individuals fail to effectively cope with stressors that represent threats to one’s identity (Benight & Bandura, 2004; Brebels et al., 2013; Brosschot et al., 2006; Key, Campbell, Bacon, & Gerin, 2008; Michl, McLaughlin, Shepherd, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2013; Pieper & Brosschot, 2005; Sedikides, Hart, & De Cremer, 2008). Given that cognitive processes associated with self-focused influence how individuals construe and respond to threatening cues (Lyubomirsky, 2001; Miller, Brody, & Summerton, 1988; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2004), the failure to consider their role as a boundary condition represents a significant theoretical gap in the organizational politics literature.

Presently, we draw from Response Styles Theory (RST: Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991, 2004) by identifying self-focused rumination (i.e., a cognitive style associated with negative, chronic, and persistent thoughts about threats to the self) as a critical intrapersonal factor that explains why politics perceptions differentially predict stress-related outcomes (Ciarocco, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2010; Takano, Sakamoto, & Tanno, 2011). Thus, the current study makes two primary contributions to the literature. First, it extends, and broadens, Ferris et al.’s (1989) framework by considering the role of intrapersonal cognitive style in the process that relates perceived politics to strain manifestations. Second, it shifts the focus to understanding factors that amplify the harmful effects of politics, an area where the politics literature is theoretically (and empirically) deficient, despite the importance of understanding conditions (both internal and external) that explain response variability when faced with politics (Chang et al., 2009).

More broadly, the current study provides an opportunity to introduce the construct of rumination to the organizational sciences. Documented pervasiveness and impact notwithstanding (Cropley, Dijk, & Stanley, 2006; Pravettoni, Cropley, Leotta, & Bagnara, 2007), this construct has been largely ignored in work stress research, despite evidence that rumination represents a key intervention point when predicting coping success (Campbell, Labelle, Bacon, Faris, & Carlson, 2012; Key et al., 2008; Sezibera, Van Broeck, & Philippot, 2009). Therefore, in addition to providing insight into which employees are most affected by organizational politics, establishing that rumination plays a role in how individuals experience politics at work will provide information that is useful to researchers and practitioners interested in understanding and managing stress.

## Background and theory

The current study employs the stressor–strains perspective (Beehr & Newman, 1978; Jex, 1998), which identifies taxing job

conditions as demands that elicit “strain” (i.e., negative affective and behavioral reactions deriving from exposure to work stress). In the work stress literature, the focus has primarily been on psychosocial stressors (i.e., nonphysical events and conditions), including job insecurity, work overload, and lack of control (Brockner et al., 2004). The literature on work stress has consistently shown that exposure to such stressors on the job is manifested in a variety of attitudinal, behavioral, and physiological responses (Ganster & Rosen, 2013). With regard to the underlying process that links stressors to strain, Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) transactional model of stress suggests that this process begins with a series of appraisals wherein a stressor is perceived by the individual and then judged in terms of whether the (a) stressor is threatening and harmful to the self and (b) perceived threat exceeds one’s ability to cope with the stressor effectively. Stressors that are identified as harmful, and which also tax coping resources, demonstrate the strongest relationships with strain responses (Lazarus, 1993).

Although the stressor–strain perspective suggests that threat responses vary depending on coping processes and individual differences, there is evidence that employees respond to certain stressors in a relatively uniform manner due to a shared familiarity of the work context and the anxiety found therein (Brief & George, 1995). For example, research affirms that hindrance stressors (i.e., work demands that thwart personal growth by interfering with employees’ ability to achieve goals) are linked to strain reactions, including less favorable attitudes and lower performance (LePine, LePine, & Jackson, 2004; Podsakoff, LePine, & LePine, 2007). Moreover, strain has deleterious effects on psychological well-being because it represents an aversive state that individuals seek to escape (Ganster & Rosen, 2013). As such, employees experiencing strain report elevated levels of depression and anxiety, as well as more negative evaluations of the source of strain (e.g., job dissatisfaction). Moreover, these perceptions trigger withdrawal from work in the form of decreased work effort and, consequently, declines in job performance (Podsakoff et al., 2007; Schaubroeck, Cotton, & Jennings, 1989). Such strain responses have also been included as outcomes in both influential (e.g., Ferris et al., 1989) and contemporary (e.g., Chang et al., 2009) models of organizational politics and are, therefore, the focus of the current research.

## Organizational politics

Described as self-serving behaviors designed to secure advantage over others, organizational politics is conceived as a hindrance stressor that manifests most conspicuously in uncertain work contexts (Ferris & Hochwarter, 2011). Theorists have speculated that, when perceived, employees appraise politics as a threat because (a) politics blur assumed linear contribution–reward relationships (Cropanzano, Howes, Grandey, & Toth, 1997), (b) political activities of others (e.g., suppression of information, taking credit for the work of others) prevent employees from achieving career goals (Chang et al., 2009), and (c) politics are associated with heightened levels of interpersonal conflict, incivility, and deviance (Vigoda, 2002), which drain coping resources and distract employees from completing core job duties. Elaborating on the view that politics represent a psychosocial stressor, researchers have suggested that in highly political work contexts, “the rules of the game change as policies, protocol, and conscientious behaviors are replaced with gamesmanship, unwritten norms, and rewards based on influence” (Hall, Hochwarter, Ferris, & Bowen, 2004, pp. 245).

Thus, political environments tend to be volatile, and the lack of clarity regarding the connection between performance and reward distribution may lead employees to believe that their goals cannot be obtained through ability and hard work alone (Rosen & Levy, 2013). Consequently, employees may feel pressure to engage in political behaviors (i.e., impression management, ingratiation,

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