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## Leader political support: Reconsidering leader political behavior<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

Historically, organizational politics and political leader behavior have been framed and characterized negatively, as self-serving and counter-productive. However, scholars have noted that political acts can achieve positive ends, and have called for further discussions of positive forms of political leadership. Continuing in this recent stream of research on positive perspectives on organizational politics, a framework of leader political support is proposed, suggesting that the positive features of leader political behavior, and testable propositions are developed. The leader political support construct is defined and its antecedents are explicated utilizing a social capital perspective. Additionally, social exchange theory is used to explain the consequences of leader political support. Contributions to both leadership and organizational politics literatures and directions for future research are discussed.

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“Political society exists for the sake of noble actions...”

~ Aristotle

## 1. Introduction

Leadership often is defined as the use of power and influence to direct activities and accomplish goals (e.g., Yukl, 2012). Indeed, because power is a fundamental requirement for getting things done, it is essential for effective leadership in organizations (Pfeffer, 2010). Thus, examination of the acquisition and use of power is critical to understanding leadership (Pfeffer, 1981). Research on influence long has corroborated the link between power and organizational politics, often referring to organizations as political arenas where participants maneuver to build coalitions and acquire power (Mintzberg, 1985). Moreover, Pfeffer (1981) defined organizational politics as activities taken to acquire, develop, and use power to obtain preferred outcomes. This perspective recognizes that formal channels do not always exist that provide necessary resources for goal attainment, and that there are times when formal channels do exist but are less effective or efficient than alternative, informal mechanisms (Mintzberg, 1983; Pfeffer, 1981, 2010).

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Thus, political behavior represents a form of informal influence that is a foundational element of leadership (Ferris & Hochwarter, 2011). Further, scholars have argued that to be effective, leaders must be politically skilled (Mintzberg, 1983; Pfeffer, 1981, 2010), and deft at managing organizational politics (Jay, 1967). Nonetheless, despite being introduced decades ago (e.g., Burns, 1961), only recently have theories of political leadership gained increased attention in the organizational sciences literature (e.g., Ammeter, Douglas, Gardner, Hochwarter, & Ferris, 2002; Ferris et al., 2007; Yammarino & Mumford, 2012).

Classic philosophical writings, as well as the political science literature, consider politics to be a positive phenomenon. For example, we chose to open our manuscript with a quote from Aristotle that captures the notion that political environments actually enable honorable acts. Further, political science scholars (e.g., Pranger, 1968) have argued the positive view of politics and political behavior, noting that the original conceptualization refers to those who collaborate publicly for the common good. Definitions of politics in the organizational sciences largely are void of such positive language. Although countless definitions of politics have been advanced in organizational sciences literature, some key themes are evident in most (Lepisto & Pratt, 2012). Specifically, Lepisto and Pratt noted that definitions of politics and political behavior in organizations tend to include self-interested actions of influence not officially sanctioned by organizations. Thus, because these definitions of power and politics include notions of self-interest and unsanctioned or unsavory actions, and allow for the possibility of manipulation of systems or others for personal gain (Pfeffer, 1981), politics and political behavior historically have been viewed negatively in the organizational sciences (Ferris & Treadway, 2012; Hochwarter, 2012).

Indeed, negative connotations of politics are so strong that scholars have noted that researchers and practitioners often act as if the phenomenon “carries the imprint of the devil” (Simpson, 1994, p. 438). Similarly, Ferris, Perrewé, Anthony, and Gilmore (2000, p. 25), in a play on the etymology of the word, offered, “Only in America do we use the word ‘politics’ to describe the process so well; ‘poli’ in Latin meaning ‘many’ and ‘tics’ meaning ‘blood-sucking creatures.’” As a result, much research has ignored the notion that leaders must behave politically to acquire and wield the power necessary to achieve individual, group, and organizational goals, and has attempted to adopt an altruistic approach focused on positive prescriptions of leadership (Pfeffer, 2010).

This failure to develop political theories of leadership is a failure to recognize organizational reality (Pfeffer, 1981). That is, decades of research have acknowledged that rational models of organizations improperly assume the existence of a single goal or set of goals within organizations (Mintzberg, 1983). Instead, a more accurate depiction of organizations accepts the argument that individuals with competing goals organize around common means (Weick, 1979). Among others, Pfeffer (1981) argued that political models of organizations account for differences in goals that rational models ignore. More specifically, Pfeffer noted that organizational politics arise from conflicts over scarce resources that occur in environments characterized by ambiguity, and between interdependent groups with heterogeneous interests, goals, and beliefs. As organizations continue to adopt flatter, less bureaucratic structures, control over resources is more ambiguous and organizational politicization is even more prevalent (Pfeffer, 2010). Thus, political theories are increasingly important to understanding organizations and leadership.

We contend that there is considerable good that results when leaders behave politically. Despite the decades of focus on the negative aspects of organizational politics (Hochwarter, 2012), there is a distinction in the management literature between “everyday politics” and “extreme political behavior that violates the rules of the game” (Farrell & Peterson, 1982, p. 406). Some scholars recognize the distinction and the positive possibilities of political behavior, and have called for development of political theories of leadership (House & Aditya, 1997). Further, in a recent review of the leadership literature, Bass and Bass (2008, p. 1193) argued, “Political leadership needs to be seen in a positive light as well as a Machiavellian one.”

Although such investigations (i.e., those considering positive aspects of politics and leadership) are becoming more common, most are limited to examinations of the effects of leader political skill (e.g., Ahearn, Ferris, Hochwarter, Douglas, & Ammeter, 2004; Douglas & Ammeter, 2004; Treadway et al., 2004), which have yet to adequately address specific leader behaviors. Further, the few studies of political skill that include leader behavior have focused on transformational and transactional leadership (e.g., Ewen et al., 2013) and Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) (i.e., Brouer, Douglas, Treadway, & Ferris, 2013) rather than on actual political acts of leaders. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to address the positive political behavior gap in the leadership literature.

More specifically, we aim to advance the idea (i.e., raised but not developed by Hochwarter, 2012), that by behaving politically, leaders can do much to address the needs of followers. Therefore, in this paper, we introduce the positive political behavior construct we refer to as “leader political support,” which is considered a vehicle used by leaders to address the needs of followers for reciprocal betterment through the use of organizationally unsanctioned means (Burns, 1961). This mutual betterment is accomplished by leaders' use of political behavior to enable the provision of valuable resources and additional opportunities, or the removal of obstacles hindering goal attainment, for their followers. Further, we provide a framework of antecedents and consequences of leader political support, along with moderators of the proposed relationships. Additionally, we provide testable propositions designed to advance theory and stimulate empirical work on positive aspects of leader political behavior.

Our arguments are grounded in both social capital theory (Adler & Kwon, 2002) and social exchange theory (SET; Blau, 1964). Social capital theory serves as the foundation for the first half of our framework, explicating the antecedents of leader political support. Similar to political behavior, social capital is representative of benefits that accrue from social relations. More specifically, the dimensions of social capital outlined by Adler and Kwon (2002) align well with much of the organizational politics literature in that the development of social capital involves favors that are performed, without specific terms, but with the understanding they will be called upon for reciprocation at some point in the future. Additionally, SET provides an appropriate backdrop for the consequences of leader political support. A fundamental tenant of SET is the inducement of feelings of obligation and indebtedness as a result of one party performing acts that benefit another (Blau, 1964). Thus, because leader political support provides benefits to followers, they are likely to respond in kind in gratitude for the support provided, and in efforts to induce future support from leaders.

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