ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR

Power, Influence and Organisational Politics: A Systematic Literature Review

Amisha Shresth

Faculty of Commerce, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India

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Abstract

This study aims to systematically review existing literature on power, influence, and organizational politics in order to clarify conceptualization, dominant theoretical perspectives, methodological trends, and key empirical outcomes. Following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, a systematic literature review was conducted using the Scopus database. The review reveals that organizational politics is predominantly conceptualized through perceptions of organizational politics (POP) and is strongly associated with negative employee outcomes, including turnover intentions, cynicism, silence, reduced performance, and emotional exhaustion. Power and influence emerge as central mechanisms through which political behaviour operates, often enacted via informal and relational processes. This study contributes to the literature by providing a comprehensive and systematic synthesis of research on power, influence, and organizational politics using the PRISMA framework. It integrates fragmented scholarly discussions by linking conceptual foundations, theoretical perspectives, and empirical findings within a single analytical framework. By highlighting the central role of power and influence in shaping perceptions of organizational politics and their outcomes, the review offers a clearer understanding of political dynamics in organisations and identifies important directions for future research. Understanding political dynamics can help organisations develop leadership capabilities, ethical influence strategies, and resource-protective environments that mitigate the harmful effects of organizational politics.

Keywords: Organisational Politics; Power; Influence; PRISMA; PICOS model

1 Introduction

Politics, defined broadly as the activities that are directed at the acquisition, maintenance, and use of power and influence in organisations, has been a persistent and developing concern in organisational research for many decades (Ferris et al., 2002; Ferris et al., 2019). Earlier work has conceptualised politics primarily as a destructive force that undermines justice, trust, and employee well-being (Ferris and Kacmar, 1992; Ferris et al., 2002), but more recent scholarship recognises both the dark and bright sides of political behaviour and the complex roles that power and influence play in organisational life (Landells and Albrecht, 2017; Malik et al., 2024). This review integrates the literature on power, influence, and organisational politics to map conceptualisations, methods, empirical findings, and gaps. The review focuses on the operationalisation and study of power and influence across contexts. This definitional clarity is important as "Organisational politics" has been operationalised in multiple, sometimes conflicting, ways across studies. Some authors emphasise perception of organisational politics (POP), which is an employee's evaluation of the extent to which workplace behaviour is self-serving and manipulative (Ferris et al., 2002; Ferris et al., 2019). The distinction between power, influence, and political behaviour is reiterated across theoretical treatments and empirical operationalisation (Ferris et al., 2019; Atinc et al.; Bedi et al.). The goal of this review is

to help clarify these conceptual boundaries. One of the major streams of research has been on perceived organisational politics, which is the employees' subjective interpretations of fairness, transparency, and intent behind managerial actions (Kacmar and Ferris, 1991; Andrews and Kacmar, 2001). Empirically, high perceptions of politics have been found to be related to negative outcomes such as emotional exhaustion, job dissatisfaction, reduced organisational commitment and withdrawal behaviours (Cropanzano et al., 1997; Rosen et al., 2009). Other scholars, however, argue that political behaviour is not necessarily dysfunctional and may be adaptive, serving purposes such as facilitating coordination, resolving ambiguity or enabling change in rigid organisational structures (Mintzberg, 1985; Buchanan, 2016). In times of organisational change, restructuring or performance evaluation, the role of power and influence becomes salient because formal rules often do not fully govern decision-making processes (Kotter, 1985; Hardy and Clegg, 1996). Influence tactics, including coalition formation, agenda setting, impression management, and strategic silence, have been documented as key mechanisms for actors to manoeuvre in politically charged environments (Kipnis et al., 1980; Tedeschi and Melburg, 1984). These processes are particularly salient for middle-level employees who occupy the interface of strategic authority and operational accountability and thus act as both transmitters and buffers of political pressure (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1997; Balogun, 2003). Organisational politics is a well-researched area, but the literature is fragmented between theoretical traditions and methodological approaches. Early work was primarily conceptual or qualitative (Gandz and Murray, 1980; Pfeffer, 1981), but the field has increasingly focused on cross-sectional survey designs and psychometric scale development (Kacmar and Carlson, 1997; Hochwarter et al., 2003). Critics contend that this methodological hegemony restricts insight into the dynamic and relational nature of power and influence, which are best understood as evolving processes rather than static variables (Lawrence et al., 2005; Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). Moreover, there is underexplored contextual diversity. Much of the existing literature is situated in Western, private sector contexts, often ignoring public sector, bureaucratic and collectivist contexts where political norms and power structures may vary greatly (Vigoda-Gadot and Drory, 2006; Cooke, 2018). Studies in emerging economies suggest that informal influence, patronage and relational power are more important to the functioning of organisations than formal authority alone (Hofstede, 2001; Rao, 2017). This poses important questions about the universality of dominant models of organisational politics and the need for context-sensitive synthesis. In view of these conceptual ambiguities, methodological imbalances and contextual gaps, a systematic review of the literature is timely and necessary. The objective of this review is to clarify how power, influence and organisational politics have been defined and operationalised, identify dominant themes and patterns, and highlight underexplored areas for advancing the theory and practice of political processes within contemporary organisations through systematic integration of research on the constructs. To reach our objectives, we conducted a systematic literature review following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines.

2 Research questions

1. How have power, influence, and organisational politics been conceptually defined and theoretically framed in the existing literature?
2. What research methods and analytical approaches dominate the study of power, influence, and organisational politics?
3. What outcomes are associated with organisational politics across different organizational contexts?

3 Conceptualisation of power, influence and organisational politics

In organisational research, power is most commonly conceptualised as the capacity of individuals or groups to influence the behaviour, decisions or outcomes of others, even in the face of resistance (Dahl, 1957; Pfeffer, 1992). Early work in social psychology by French and Raven (1959) identified multiple bases of power, including legitimate, reward, coercive, expert and referent, suggesting that power is more than formal authority. On this basis, organisational scholars conceptualise power both as a structural attribute embedded in the hierarchical position and control of resources, and as a relational phenomenon emerging from patterns of dependence among actors (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978; Hardy, 1996). Sociological and critical perspectives take this view further, by conceptualising power as diffuse and embedded in the discourse, routines and norms of organisations rather than residing simply in individuals or roles (Foucault, 1997; Clegg et al., 2006). In this sense, power is exercised through mundane practices that shape what counts as legitimate knowledge and acceptable behaviour within organisations (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). Contemporary research therefore conceptualises power as dynamic, context-dependent and constantly reproduced through social interaction, rather than as a static possession (Lawrence et al., 2012). Influence is generally defined as the process by which power is used to affect attitudes, decisions, or actions (Yukl, 2013). Power, which is potential capacity, influence is the actual attempts or outcomes of that capacity (Kipnis et al., 1980). Research on influence has concentrated mainly on influence tactics such as rational persuasion, consultation, ingratiation, coalition formation, and pressure that people use to gain compliance or commitment (Tedeschi and Melburg, 1984; Yukl and Tracey, 1992). Influence is also seen as intrinsically relational and network-driven. Social network theory suggests that individuals in central or broker positions in informal networks have disproportionate influence independent of formal authority (Brass, 1984; Burt, 1992). This view suggests that influence can flow up, down, and across, allowing actors with no formal authority to influence outcomes through strategic relationships (Krackhardt, 1990; Brass and Krackhardt, 1999). Thus, influence is best understood as a situated, interactive process that translates power into observable effects on the organization.

Organisational Politics is generally considered as intentional behaviour directed toward personal or group interests, often through informal or unsanctioned means (Mayes and Allen, 1977; Gandz and Murray, 1980). Early studies considered politics as largely dysfunctional, associating it with manipulation, favouritism, and unfair decision-making (Drory and Romm, 1990). This view has played an influential role in the development of the perceptions of organisational politics (POP) construct, which focuses on employees' subjective evaluations of political behaviour in the workplace (Kacmar and Ferris, 1991; Vigoda-Gadot, 2003). More recent work has questioned a purely negative view of organisational politics as an inevitable feature of organisational life arising from goal diversity, ambiguity and scarcity of resources (Mintzberg, 1985; Buchanan and Badham, 2008). Thus, political behaviour can serve functional purposes, such as facilitating change, enabling cross-boundary coordination or compensating for rigid bureaucratic systems (Buchanan, 2016). Thus, more recent research has increasingly conceptualised organisational politics as a contextual and ambivalent phenomenon with its effects depending on actors' skills, intentions, and institutional environments (Landells and Albrecht, 2017).

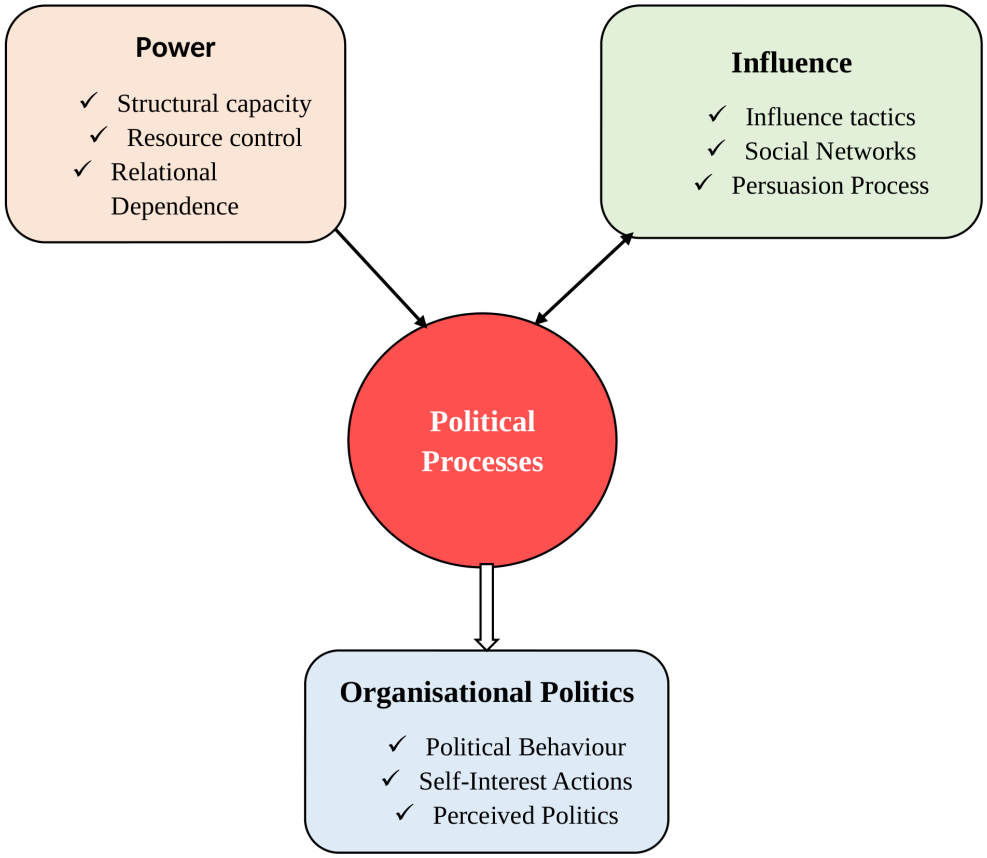

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of power, influence, and organisational politics.

4 Theoreticisation of power, influence, and organisational politics

Power was originally theorised within pluralist and behavioural traditions, where it was understood as the capacity of one actor to get another to do something they otherwise would not do (Dahl, 1957). Power was viewed as observable, intentional, and episodic, and was largely exercised through decision-making authority. But critics said this approach underestimated hidden and systemic forms of power. Later theorising shifted to structural and dependency explanations, most notably in the form of resource dependency theory, which sees power as derived from asymmetric control over critical resources (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). In this sense, power is not only in individual actors, but in organisational structures and interdependencies. This was an important step away from voluntaristic explanations and toward structural constraints and opportunities.

A further theoretical shift came with critical and post-structural perspectives, which challenged the idea of power as something actors "possess". Drawing on Foucault (1977), scholars theorised power as diffuse, relational and embedded in discourse, routines and institutionalised practices. Power works through norms, knowledge systems and taken-for-granted assumptions which constitute the reality of organisations (Clegg, 1989; Hardy and Clegg, 1996). Therefore, contemporary theorisation threatens power as dynamic, socially constructed and continuously reproduced rather than static or purely hierarchical (Lawrence et al., 2012).

Influence has been theorised mostly as the mechanism of power enactment, i.e. the means through which power is exercised in practice. Early theorisation conceptualised influence as a conscious interpersonal act, and thus the focus was on influence tactics that were used to elicit compliance or

commitment (Kipnis et al., 1980). This instrumental view emphasised agency, strategy and persuasion. Later conceptual developments have expanded this view by situating influence in relational and networked contexts. Social network theory reframed influence as a function of actors' positions within patterns of relationships, not formal authority (Brass, 1984; Burt, 1992). Influence is an emergent property of social structure that allows actors to indirectly affect outcomes through brokering, centrality, or coalition building. More recent theorisation includes micro-political and interactionist perspectives that emphasise the negotiated, context-dependent and often subtle nature of influence (Yukl, 2013). Influence is no longer seen as a linear cause-and-effect process, but as a recursive and interpretive process shaped by sensemaking, legitimacy and symbolic action (Weick, 1995; Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). Thus, influence mediates between individual agency and structural power, transforming latent power into visible organisational effects. Organisational politics was initially conceptualised as a deviant or dysfunctional phenomenon, when individuals pursue self-interest outside of established organisational rules (Mayes and Allen, 1977; Gandz and Murray, 1980). This view corresponded with rational-bureaucratic models, seeing politics as a deviation from efficiency and fairness. With the development of the field, scholars theorised organisations more and more that exhibited ambiguity, plural interests, and scarce resources (Mintzberg, 1985; Pfeffer, 1992). From this perspective, politics is not an anomaly, but a normal form of organising, especially in complex and loosely coupled systems. A major theoretical contribution was the perceptual turn, which framed organisational politics as a subjective experience rather than an objective set of actions. The Perceptions of Organisational Politics (POP) framework conceptualises politics as a social construction through employees' interpretations of fairness, transparency and intent (Kacmar and Ferris, 1991; Vigoda-Gadot, 2003). This shift put cognition, meaning-making and context center stage. More recent theorisation takes a processual and ambivalent view, and acknowledges that organisational politics can produce both negative and positive outcomes depending on the skills and intentions of actors and institutional contexts (Buchanan and Badham, 2008; Ferris et al., 2019). Thus, politics is theorised as a mediating process through which power relations and attempts at influence are enacted and contested over time.

5 Methodology

The present study examined the trends in organisational politics and the theoretical evaluations of power, influence and organisational politics using qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods methodology. Study literature was sourced from the academic database (Osunbor and Oforbruku, 2023). The first step of this inquiry was a search in Scopus for relevant publications. The academic database was searched using keywords to determine the level of knowledge on the study's variables (Abomeh et al., 2024). The goal of this study is to expose patterns, the views of key authors, and scientific research concerning organisational politics. Most of the data used in this research were collected from secondary sources, which are journal articles published in reputable journals. The core strength of this work is the textual analysis of data based on social capital theory and resource dependence theory used to question conflicting topics. This review was performed according to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to ensure rigour, transparency, and reproducibility.

5.1 Eligibility criteria

The PICOS (Population, phenomenon of interest, context, outcome, study design) framework was used to define eligibility:

i. Phenomenon of Interest: Power, influence, and organizational politics, as defined by scholars.

ii. Context: studies focused on social capital theory, resource dependence theory, and awareness.

iii. Study design: empirical studies (Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method), theoretical studies, conceptual studies, and review articles published in English.

5.2 Study selection process

The initial search yielded 62 records. After removing duplicates, 58 records remained. Titles and abstracts were screened against the eligibility criteria, resulting in 28 studies for full-text review. A rigorous full-text assessment for eligibility was conducted, which excluded 12 studies that did not explicitly focus on organizational politics or provided insufficient data on power and influence. Finally, 16 studies were deemed eligible for inclusion in the qualitative and quantitative synthesis.

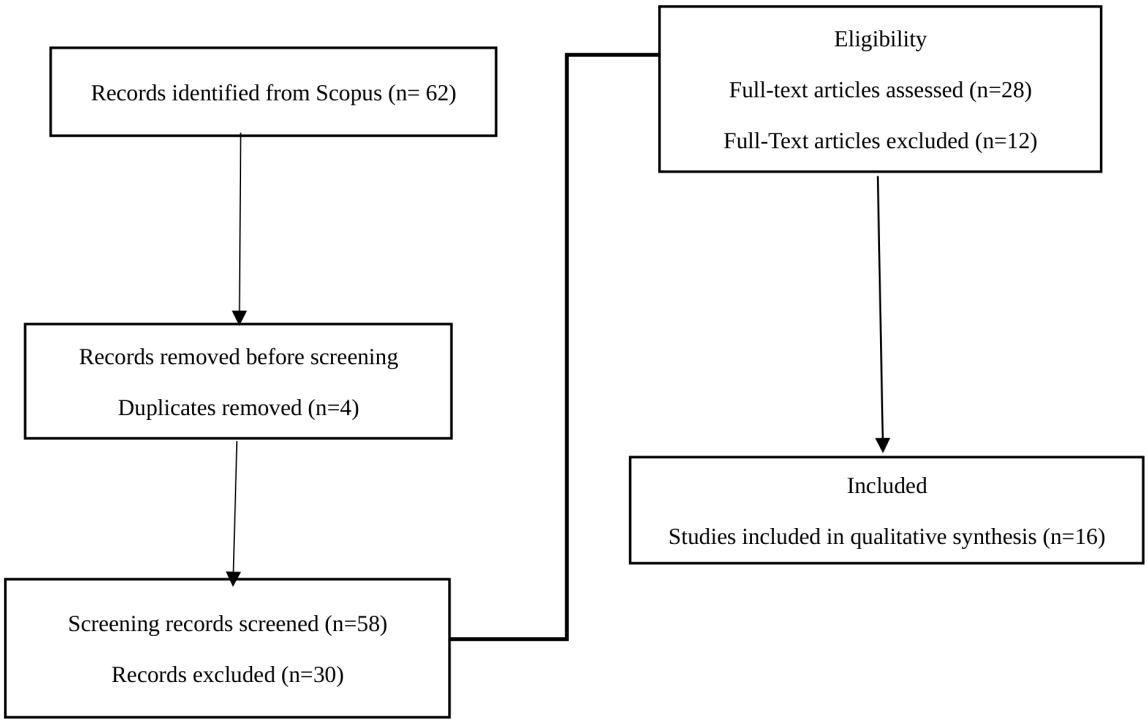

Figure 2. The process of literature review.

5.3 Data extraction and analysis

Data from the 16 studies were extracted into a standardised matrix, capturing: author(s) and year, research objectives, and methodology. A thematic analysis approach was employed, following the process of Abonmeh (2012), Omoankhanlen et al. (2018), and Abomeh and Agbonifo (2021). The research questions and the theories reviewed guided the analysis.

Below is some of the literature that is suitable for our study.

Table 1. Summary of selected studies on power, influence and organisational politics.

S.no.	Authors'	Year	Journal	Objectives	Methodology	Theory	Findings
1.	Singh, S. & Randhawa, G.	2022	Development and Learning in Organizations	To examine the direct and indirect effects of perceived organizational politics on turnover intentions, with organizational cynicism as a mediator.	Quantitative survey of 252 public and private sector bank employees in India; SEM	Social exchange theory, Organizational Politics Theory	Perceived organizational politics significantly increases turnover intentions, both directly and indirectly through organizational cynicism, highlighting politics as a critical attitudinal stressor.
2.	Munyon, T.P., Houghton, J. D., Simarsl, N., Dawley, D. D., & Howe, M.	2021	Journal of Applied Social Psychology	To investigate whether organizational politics limits the positive effects of authentic leadership on follower outcomes.	Two multi-sample quantitative studies (n=265; n= 175); regression analysis	Political Influence Theory	Organizational politics weakens the positive relationship between authentic leadership and job satisfaction, OCB, and performance, suggesting that political contexts erode leadership effectiveness.
3.	Tripathi, S. & Tripathi, D.	2023	International Studies of Management & Organization	To examine how power value influences manipulation tactics through political will and hierarchy.	Quantitative study in the Indian public sector; SEM and moderated mediation analysis	Power-Approach Theory; Values Theory	Political will mediates the relationship between power value and manipulation tactics, and hierarchy strengthens this relationship, demonstrating how power values translate into political behaviour.
4.	Nyathi, M.	2024	Human Resources Management and Services	To review the literature on perceived organizational politics and highlight its positive and functional influences	Integrative literature review (66 studies from Scopus, WOS, Google Scholar)	Multifaceted (Micro-Macro Politics framework)	Organizational politics is a neutral construct; positive labeling of politics can enhance motivation, satisfaction, and performance, challenging the dominant negative bias.

S.no.	Authors'	Year	Journal	Objectives	Methodology	Theory	Findings
5.	Zhong, R., Tang, P. M., & Lee, S. H.	2024	Personnel Psychology	To examine how negative gossip about supervisors affects employee work engagement under political contexts.	Three experience-sampling studies; multilevel modeling	Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory	Negative gossip has dual effects: it increases sense of power but also heightens image-maintenance concerns; perceived organizational politics amplifies the negative effects on engagement.
6.	Lavanya, R. S. & Sowmya, G.	2025	Development and Learning in Organizations	To explore how organizational politics can be harnessed for ethical leadership and learning	Bibliometric review of 715 Scopus-indexed articles (1965-2025)	Political Skill Theory	Political skill is a critical leadership competency; ethical leaders who understand politics can foster trust, learning, and psychological safety.
7.	Pasricha, P. & Nivedhitha, K. S.	2025	Asia Pacific Journal of Management	To examine the impact of perceived organizational politics on innovative behaviour via employee flourishing.	Three-wave, multi-source survey in India and Canada; PROCESS macro.	Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory	Perceived politics reduces innovative behaviour through reduced flourishing; servant leadership buffers these effects, with cultural differences across countries.
8.	Mohamed, M. A., Farah, M. A., & Mohamud, I. H.	2025	Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education	To review global research trends on organizational politics in universities (1990-2024).	Systematic literature review (13 Scopus & Wos articles)	Power and Governance Perspectives	Organizational politics strongly influence decision-making, faculty relations, and governance; limited research exists on student outcomes and external political forces.
9.	Randev, K.K., Jha, J.K., & Shukla, K.	2025	International Journal of Productivity and Performance Management	To examine how perceived organizational politics undermines employee performance via opportunistic silence.	Survey of 203 employees in Indian high power-distance organizations; PLS-SEM	Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Theory	POP acts as a job demand that triggers opportunistic silence, which in turn reduces task performance, particularly among lower-level employees.

6 Findings and conclusion

A systematic literature review was carried out, synthesising the results of 16 articles selected from an initial pool of 62 articles indexed in Scopus following the PRISMA protocol. The findings reveal a number of consistent and theoretically meaningful patterns relating to power, influence and organisational politics. The literature shows a strong emphasis on perceived organisational politics (POP) and most studies conceptualise politics in terms of employees' subjective interpretation of fairness, transparency, and self-serving behaviour. POP is consistently associated with negative employee outcomes such as turnover intentions, organisational cynicism, emotional exhaustion, reduced job satisfaction, and lower task performance across various organisational contexts. These effects are particularly strong in high power-distance and hierarchical settings, where political behaviour increases fear, silence, and withdrawal responses. They also suggest that power and influence are the main mechanisms through which organisational politics operates. Power is not limited to formal authority, but is also often exercised through informal influence processes such as manipulation, coalition building, gossip and opportunistic silence. Several studies have found that people with high power values or political will are more likely to engage in strategic influence behaviours, particularly within rigid hierarchical structures. Then the double, context-specific nature of organisational politics. Much of the literature depicts politics as a hindrance stressor that drains employee resources. However, emerging evidence suggests that politics may also have functional or enabling effects when combined with political skill, ethical leadership, or servant leadership. In these situations, political awareness and influence skills assist employees and leaders in dealing with ambiguity, protecting resources, and sustaining performance.

The review also establishes that power is best understood as a dynamic and relational capacity, influence as the process through which power is enacted, and organisational politics as the behavioural manifestation of these dynamics. The dominance of perceptual approaches, and especially POP, has increased our understanding of employee experiences, but it has also limited theoretical diversity by emphasising outcomes over political processes. The review emphasises the need for methodological pluralism and the inclusion of qualitative and longitudinal designs to capture the evolving and relational nature of political behaviour. Future research should focus on middle-level employees, public sector organisations and emerging hierarchical and institutional structures.

In sum, this review makes a contribution to organisational scholarship by providing an integrated conceptual and theoretical framework that frames organisational politics as neither inherently negative nor positive, but as a contextually contingent phenomenon shaped by power, influence and human agency.

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