

Understanding the Dynamics of Organizational Politics and Career Development: A Conceptual Perspective

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Abstract

This conceptual paper examines the interplay between organisational politics and career development, emphasising how informal influence, political climates, and behavioural patterns shape professional growth. Organisational politics, defined as the strategic pursuit of individual or group interests within workplaces, significantly impacts employees' skill acquisition, adaptability, and access to career advancement opportunities. In contexts where hierarchical structures, socio-political networks, and perceptions of fairness influence decision-making, understanding these dynamics is essential for effective career management. Drawing on theoretical foundations from organisational behaviour, social exchange theory, and the conservation of resources framework, the paper develops a conceptual model linking political behaviours to career outcomes. The model highlights the mediating and moderating roles of fairness perceptions, social capital, and organisational support in shaping the influence of politics on career trajectories. By synthesising extant literature, the study advances theoretical understanding of how employees navigate political environments and leverage opportunities for professional development. Practically, the insights offer guidance for human resource practitioners and organisational leaders seeking to design equitable, transparent, and supportive systems that foster skill development, enhance adaptability, and improve overall organisational effectiveness.

Keywords: Career development, employee advancement, organisational politics, professional growth, workplace behaviour.

Introduction

Organisational politics has become an important subject of scholarly attention in contemporary human resource management and organisational behaviour due to its strong influence on workplace relationships, decision-making processes, and employee outcomes. In organisational settings, politics generally refers to behaviours through which individuals or groups pursue personal or collective interests using informal influence, negotiation, and strategic actions that operate beyond formal organisational procedures (Ferris et al., 2005; Su & Xie, 2023). These informal processes shape how employees interpret fairness, organisational intentions, and the distribution of opportunities, thereby influencing attitudes, motivation, and performance. Consequently, organisational politics often determines access to valued organisational resources such as recognition, learning opportunities, and career advancement.

Within many developing organisational contexts, including Nigeria, the dynamics of organisational politics are particularly significant. Socio-cultural and institutional characteristics frequently reinforce informal networks, patronage relationships, and favouritism in workplace interactions. Such conditions may influence managerial decisions regarding promotions, training opportunities, and reward allocation. Empirical evidence suggests that when employees perceive organisational processes to be politically driven, negative behavioural outcomes such as reduced trust, weakened cooperation, and increased deviant behaviour may occur (Oweisanda, 2024; Ogbozor et al., 2025). In such environments, career advancement may not always reflect competence or performance, but may instead depend on relational influence and alignment with powerful actors within the organisation. These conditions indicate that organisational politics represents a structural feature shaping career outcomes in many Nigerian workplaces.

In spite of the increasing scholarly interest in organisational politics, existing studies largely concentrate on employee attitudes and behavioural outcomes such as job satisfaction, engagement, or turnover intentions (Su & Xie, 2023; Abdi et al., 2025). Comparatively limited conceptual attention has been directed toward understanding how political climates influence career development processes. In practice, informal power structures may determine employees' access to mentoring relationships, professional development opportunities, and skill acquisition platforms that are essential for career

growth. When career systems are influenced by political considerations, networking and allegiance may become more influential than merit, potentially constraining organisational learning and long-term talent development. In this context, the present conceptual study seeks to analyse the influence of organisational politics on career development within Nigerian workplaces. The study focuses on how informal influence, fairness perceptions, and behavioural patterns shape employees' opportunities for learning, professional growth, and advancement. Drawing on Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) and contemporary organisational politics literature, the study conceptualises mechanisms through which political climates may either facilitate or constrain career development, with implications for human resource management practice and organisational effectiveness.

Literature Review

Concept of Organisational Politics

Organisational politics refers to behaviours through which individuals or groups attempt to influence decisions, control resources, and shape outcomes to serve personal or collective interests, often emerging in contexts of ambiguity, competition, and resource scarcity (Hochwarter et al., 2020; Muiruri, 2023). Contemporary research emphasises perceived organisational politics (POP), capturing employees' subjective interpretations of self-interested actions, favouritism, or manipulation within the workplace (Abdi et al., 2025). Employees' perceptions, rather than the objective presence of political behaviour, shape attitudes and responses, influencing motivation, commitment, stress, and career decisions (Malik & Sillah, 2025). While early studies framed organisational politics as largely detrimental, recent scholarship presents a more nuanced view, recognising both constructive and negative outcomes. The effects of organisational politics are contingent on contextual factors such as organisational culture, ethical standards, leadership behaviour, and employees' political skill (King, 2022; Tziner et al., 2024). When managed ethically, political behaviour can facilitate coordination, negotiation, and influence that support organisational objectives.

Informal Influence and Power Play

Informal influence and power play are central mechanisms of organisational politics, shaping employees' access to career-enhancing opportunities. Informal networks, alliances, and patronage

systems often determine visibility, access to information, and control over resources, influencing promotions and development prospects (Ferris et al., 2007; Weissenrieder, 2020). Networking allows employees to cultivate relationships with influential actors who provide sponsorship, advocacy, and task support, facilitating career advancement. However, access to these networks is uneven, with women and minority groups often excluded in male-dominated contexts (King, 2022). Political skill which includes social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking competence, and sincerity enables individuals to navigate these structures effectively (Tziner et al., 2024). Patronage, cronyism, and coalition-building can outweigh merit-based criteria in promotion and reward decisions (Abdi et al., 2025; Malik & Sillah, 2025). Thus, informal influence serves both as a pathway to career mobility and as a source of inequality, highlighting the dual nature of organisational politics.

Fairness and Trust

Perceptions of fairness and trust are critical in shaping employee responses in politically charged workplaces. High levels of perceived organisational politics (POP) often undermine trust and provoke scepticism towards procedural and distributive justice (Hochwarter et al., 2020). When employees believe that promotions, rewards, or recognition are driven by political considerations rather than merit, they experience dissatisfaction, emotional strain, and reduced organisational commitment (Abdi et al., 2025). Trust functions as a psychological resource that can mitigate these negative effects. When political behaviour is perceived as transparent, ethical, and aligned with organisational goals, employees tend to remain engaged and cooperative (Su & Xie, 2023). Conversely, low-trust environments encourage counterproductive behaviours such as gossip, withdrawal, and sabotage, which exacerbate organisational strain (Garcia-Pereyra et al., 2025). The interplay between POP, fairness perceptions, and trust is therefore pivotal in determining employee attitudes, motivation, and engagement, especially where informal power dynamics prevail (Ha, 2023).

Political Climate and Organisational Culture

The organisational political climate (OPC) captures employees' shared perceptions of the prevalence, legitimacy, and intensity of political behaviour within the workplace (Landells & Albrecht, 2019). OPC shapes how individuals interpret political actions and influences collective outcomes such as engagement, stress, and career development (Hochwarter et al., 2020). Organisational culture

moderates these effects by embedding norms that either legitimise or constrain political behaviour. Gendered political climates are particularly salient in male-dominated settings, where women face structural and cultural barriers to recognition and advancement (King, 2022; Weissenrieder, 2020). Broader cultural orientations, including collectivism, hierarchical values, and context-specific norms like Zhongyong, can mitigate or amplify political effects on employee well-being and engagement (Su & Xie, 2023; Muiruri, 2023). Transparent communication and inclusive decision-making further reduce negative political perceptions, fostering trust and collaboration. Political climate and culture thus jointly shape the expression and outcomes of organisational politics.

Visibility and Frequency of Political Actions

The visibility and frequency of organisational political behaviours significantly shape employee motivation, engagement, and well-being. Highly visible actions, such as lobbying for promotions or influencing resource allocation, signal how power operates and whether opportunities are accessible (Malik & Sillah, 2025). Frequent exposure to manipulative or exclusionary politics can trigger perceptions of resource threat, generating stress, disengagement, and reduced commitment, consistent with Conservation of Resources theory (Hochwarter et al., 2020). However, employees respond differently depending on individual capacities; those with high political skill, resilience, or psychological resources may interpret political environments as challenge opportunities, leveraging them for career advancement (Tziner et al., 2024). Research suggests a nonlinear relationship between perceived organisational politics (POP) and engagement, with moderate political activity potentially stimulating adaptive behaviour and strategic participation (Su & Xie, 2023). Thus, the visibility and recurrence of political actions can act as both stressors and career-enhancing opportunities depending on context and individual attributes.

Constructive versus Destructive Political Behaviour

Organisational politics can manifest as destructive or constructive behaviour, with contrasting impacts on employee development. Destructive politics, characterised by manipulation, blame-shifting, favouritism, and gossip, heightens stress, reduces performance, and increases turnover intentions, undermining trust and cohesion (Abdi et al., 2025; Malik & Sillah, 2025). Conversely, constructive political behaviour involves ethically sanctioned strategies aimed at achieving organisational

objectives, including coalition-building, advocacy, negotiation, and constructive conflict management (Eldor, 2017; Ferris et al., 2007). When supported by political skill, organisational justice, and managerial endorsement, constructive politics enhances collaboration, visibility, and access to developmental opportunities (King, 2022; Weissenrieder, 2020). Encouraging functional political engagement allows organisations to leverage influence processes to foster employee growth while minimising the negative consequences of self-serving or manipulative behaviours.

Concept of Career Development

Career development is a continuous, multidimensional process through which individuals acquire skills, expand competencies, engage in lifelong learning, and advance across career stages within organisational and labour-market contexts (Akkermans & Kubasch, 2020). Modern scholarship emphasises its dynamic, non-linear, and socially embedded nature, shaped by individual agency and organisational context, including culture, leadership practices, political climate, and fairness perceptions (De Vos et al., 2021). In politically complex environments, access to developmental resources is rarely neutral; informal power, managerial discretion, and network ties mediate opportunities for training, recognition, and career progression (Abdi et al., 2025). Consequently, career outcomes reflect both performance and positioning within organisational political structures. Career development encompasses skill enhancement, advancement, satisfaction, adaptability, and mentorship, highlighting how organisational politics intersects with professional growth trajectories.

Skill Enhancement and Learning Opportunities

Skill enhancement is a fundamental component of career development, encompassing formal training, informal learning, and continuous competency improvement. Access to developmental opportunities is frequently influenced by organisational politics, particularly where resources are scarce and competitively allocated (Su & Xie, 2023). Informal networks often determine which employees are selected for training programmes, high-visibility projects, or international assignments that enhance career prospects (King, 2022). Perceived political bias in access to learning may reduce motivation, generate disengagement, and lower investment in skill acquisition (Hochwarter et al., 2020; Ha, 2023). Employees with high political skill, including social astuteness, networking ability, and interpersonal influence, are better positioned to navigate political environments and secure opportunities (Tziner et

al., 2024). This duality demonstrates that organisational learning, though nominally neutral, is frequently shaped by political considerations that privilege insiders and marginalise others, underscoring the need for transparent, inclusive development systems to ensure equitable skill enhancement.

Career Advancement and Promotion

Career advancement and promotion represent key indicators of professional growth but are highly susceptible to political influence. Informal alliances, perceptions of loyalty, and favouritism often shape promotion decisions, resulting in trajectories driven by political alignment rather than performance (Malik & Sillah, 2025). Employees embedded in influential networks experience faster advancement and greater mobility, whereas those outside dominant coalitions, particularly women and minority groups, face structural disadvantages in male-dominated environments (Abdi et al., 2025; King, 2022). Politicised promotion systems erode trust, weaken organisational commitment, and undermine perceptions of fairness (Garcia-Pereyra et al., 2025). Even high-performing employees may encounter stagnation without network access (Su & Xie, 2023). From a social exchange perspective, political interference disrupts reciprocity expectations between effort and reward, increasing withdrawal and turnover intentions. While political skill can aid individual advancement, systemic politicisation compromises meritocracy and long-term organisational effectiveness.

Career Satisfaction and Commitment

Career satisfaction reflects employees' appraisal of their progress, recognition, and alignment between effort and reward. In politically charged settings, perceptions of fairness strongly influence satisfaction, motivation, and organisational commitment (Hochwarter et al., 2020). Political bias in evaluation, promotion, or reward systems often generates dissatisfaction and reduces affective commitment (Ha, 2023). Fairness perceptions can buffer the impact of moderate political activity, whereas persistent exposure to destructive politics increases emotional strain, cynicism, and disengagement (Malik & Sillah, 2025). Conversely, constructive political behaviours, including ethical advocacy and coalition-building, foster relational trust and support satisfaction and engagement (Su & Xie, 2023). Current research often neglects individual psychological resources, such as resilience and self-efficacy,

highlighting the need for integrative approaches that consider both personal and contextual factors in shaping career satisfaction and commitment.

Career Adaptability and Employability

Career adaptability denotes the capacity to manage transitions, respond to uncertainty, and maintain employability amid evolving organisational demands (Akkermans & Kubasch, 2020). In politically complex workplaces, adaptability is crucial for interpreting ambiguous signals, managing relationships, and responding to shifting power dynamics. Destructive organisational politics can impede adaptability by generating uncertainty, anxiety, and defensive coping strategies, undermining employability (Garcia-Pereyra et al., 2025). Conversely, employees with strong political acumen and network capital demonstrate enhanced adaptability, accessing information and developmental support proactively (Tziner et al., 2024). Political environments influence employability by mediating access to mentoring, learning, and social capital. However, literature remains limited regarding cultural and institutional variations, particularly in emerging labour markets with embedded political norms, highlighting the need for context-specific research on adaptability and employability.

Mentorship, Recognition, and Professional Growth

Mentorship and recognition are key drivers of professional growth but are often mediated by informal influence and political alignment. Mentors frequently select protégés based on perceived similarity, loyalty, or network affiliation, disadvantaging those outside dominant political circles (King, 2022). Visibility, essential for recognition and career progression, is also shaped by political alliances that affect task allocation, leadership attention, and performance acknowledgment (Abdi et al., 2025). Empirical evidence shows that politically connected employees receive greater sponsorship, leadership exposure, and development opportunities, reinforcing cumulative career advantages (Malik & Sillah, 2025). While mentoring can mitigate political disadvantage, it may itself be embedded in political structures, reproducing inequality (Su & Xie, 2023). This highlights the importance of formalised, inclusive mentorship systems to reduce bias and promote equitable professional development.

Theoretical Underpinning

Social Exchange Theory

Originally articulated by Blau (1964), Social exchange theory (SET) posits that social behaviour is guided by reciprocal exchanges evaluated through fairness, trust, and mutual obligation. Employees assess whether resources such as training, promotions, mentorship, or task assignments are distributed equitably relative to their effort (Hochwarter et al., 2020). In organisational politics, perceptions of inequity or self-serving behaviour may reduce engagement in developmental activities, undermining learning, commitment, and performance (Abdi et al., 2025; Su & Xie, 2023; Ha, 2023). Conversely, constructive political behaviours aligned with mutual expectations foster trust, cooperation, and active participation in career development (King, 2022). Social exchange theory provides explanatory power by linking fairness perceptions to employee investment in professional growth, though it may overlook emotional and contextual nuances of organisational life.

Political Skill Theory

Introduced by Ferris et al. (2005), Political Skill Theory (PST) defines political skill as the ability to understand others, influence effectively, and achieve objectives through social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking, and apparent sincerity. High political skill allows employees to navigate politics successfully, accessing mentorship, visibility, and promotions even in highly political environments (Tziner et al., 2024; Malik & Sillah, 2025). While emphasizing individual agency, critics note potential ethical concerns and the normalisation of manipulation (King, 2022). Political skill theory explains divergent career trajectories among employees in similar roles.

Organisational Justice Theory

The proponent of Organisational justice theory is Greenberg's (1987) focuses on how fairness perceptions shape attitudes, motivation, and behaviour, covering distributive, procedural, and interactional justice. Organisational politics can erode justice perceptions when promotions or resources appear influenced by cronyism or favoritism (Garcia-Pereyra et al., 2025; Su & Xie, 2023). Transparent, equitable political processes, however, enhance engagement, commitment, and developmental behaviour. Organisational justice theory clarifies how fairness mediates the relationship between politics and career outcomes.

Combining social exchange theory, political skill theory, and organisational justice theory provides a robust lens to examine organisational politics and career development. social exchange theory highlights reciprocity expectations, organisational justice theory explains fairness-mediated responses, and political skill theory emphasises individual agency (Hochwarter et al., 2020; Malik & Sillah, 2025). Together, these theories account for why politics may constrain development for some employees while enabling it for others, forming a strong conceptual basis for the study.

Empirical Review

Empirical studies consistently highlight organisational politics as a pervasive and multidimensional influence on career development across sectors and international contexts. Research from Asia, Europe, Africa, and North America demonstrates that employees' perceptions of organisational politics shape access to career-enhancing resources such as training, mentoring, recognition, and promotional opportunities (Su & Xie, 2023). Most studies employ cross-sectional surveys and structural equation modelling to explore mediators and moderators, including psychological well-being, social capital, job satisfaction, and organisational support, which influence how political perceptions translate into career outcomes (Malik, 2024; Obeng, 2025; Turek, 2022). Quantitative evidence indicates that high perceived organisational politics often undermines positive work attitudes and career motivation. For example, Su and Xie (2023) found that organisational politics reduced engagement among Chinese university employees, while studies in healthcare and higher education report increased turnover intentions and diminished professional commitment under politically charged climates (Ogbozor et al., 2025; *Frontiers in Education*, 2025). These findings illustrate the broader impact of political environments on career sustainability.

However, political skill theory provides a more nuanced understanding. Political skill, defined as the ability to manage influence and navigate informal networks, enables employees to access developmental opportunities even in adverse political contexts (Tziner & Ben-David, 2024). The effectiveness of political engagement often depends on contextual moderators such as social capital, organisational culture, and ethical norms, where strong networks can mitigate negative impacts and enhance career outcomes, consistent with Conservation of Resources Theory (Ben-Hador & Hopkins, 2025; Randev et al., 2025). Gender and cultural contexts further shape these dynamics, with women

and marginalised groups often experiencing reduced access to political networks, thereby limiting career advancement (Malik, 2024; Obeng, 2025). Evidence from non-Western contexts highlights that cultural values, work-life balance, and ethical frameworks can either buffer or exacerbate the effects of organisational politics on engagement and turnover (Frontiers in Education, 2025).

In Nigeria, organisational politics similarly influences career pathways, particularly in public-sector and educational institutions. Surveys among Rivers State university employees indicate that coalition building enhances inclusion and professional dedication, while overt power plays reduce engagement and fairness perceptions (Oweisanda, 2024). Studies across Nigerian local governments, academic institutions, and engineering firms further link politicised resource allocation, lack of transparency, and competition over promotions to restricted career progression, increased turnover intentions, and lower organisational commitment (Osazevbaru et al., 2025; Olufayo & Akinbo, 2022; Ogwuche et al., 2024).

In spite of these insights, Nigerian research remains constrained by sectoral focus, methodological homogeneity, and limited longitudinal or mixed-methods studies that capture the evolving effects of political exposure on career trajectories. Qualitative studies, though less common, provide valuable perspectives on the lived experiences of political barriers, particularly among women and marginalised groups (Adeagbo et al., 2023). Across global and local contexts, a consistent pattern emerges: while organisational politics often reduces engagement and satisfaction, it can simultaneously foster adaptability, resilience, and strategic career behaviours among politically skilled employees. These findings underscore the need for integrative, longitudinal research to explore the dynamic interplay between political climates and career development over time.

Research Gaps

Regardless of extensive research, on organisational politics and employee outcomes, significant gaps persist regarding its influence on career development, especially in developing economies. Existing studies largely emphasise the negative consequences of organisational politics, such as turnover intentions, stress, and disengagement, with limited attention to how political behaviours affect learning, skill acquisition, and long-term career progression. Empirical work on the role of informal influence and power play in shaping access to training and developmental opportunities remains scarce. Similarly, while fairness and trust are frequently examined independently, few studies integrate these

constructs with organisational culture to provide a holistic understanding of career development. Research also rarely distinguishes between constructive and destructive political behaviours, obscuring how some actions may facilitate visibility, adaptability, and professional growth, while others hinder development. Methodologically, studies are predominantly cross-sectional and quantitative, limiting causal inference and failing to capture the dynamic nature of political interactions. Longitudinal, qualitative, and mixed-method approaches are underutilised, particularly in African contexts, and research is concentrated in higher education and public sectors, restricting generalisability. Theoretically, most investigations rely on single-theory perspectives, overlooking the dual enabling and constraining effects of organisational politics. There is a need for integrative frameworks that incorporate fairness, trust, political skill, and cultural context to explain career outcomes, alongside practical guidance for managing political behaviours in emerging economies such as Nigeria.

Discussion

This conceptual paper examines the interplay between organisational politics and career development, synthesising theoretical perspectives and empirical findings. Organisational politics shapes employees' access to training, mentoring, promotions, and career satisfaction, functioning as both a constraint and an enabler depending on contextual and individual factors. Integrating social exchange theory, organisational justice theory, and political skill theory, the framework highlights how perceptions of fairness, reciprocity, and legitimacy influence engagement in developmental activities. In opaque or inequitable environments, employees may withdraw from skill-building opportunities, reducing motivation and increasing turnover intentions. Conversely, when political behaviours are perceived as transparent and equitable, they can support professional growth and career advancement. Trust, procedural fairness, and leadership style mediate and moderate these effects. High trust and ethical, transformational leadership mitigate the negative impacts of destructive politics, whereas authoritarian or transactional leadership exacerbates resource inequities and limits career progression. Individual political skill enables employees to leverage networks and influence constructively, turning informal power into developmental opportunities.

For Nigerian organisations, eliminating politics is unrealistic; instead, strategic management that promotes fairness, transparency, ethical engagement, and constructive political behaviours can enhance equitable career development while minimising the adverse effects of dysfunctional politics.

Conclusion

This study conceptually examines the relationship between organisational politics and career development, recognising politics as an inherent feature of modern workplaces. Drawing on theoretical and empirical insights, it highlights how political dynamics influence access to training, mentoring, promotions, and professional growth. Importantly, organisational politics is neither purely negative nor entirely positive; its impact depends on contextual and individual factors. Perceptions of fairness, trust, leadership behaviour, and organisational justice determine whether political environments facilitate or hinder career progression. Destructive political behaviours undermine motivation, engagement, and commitment, whereas constructive, ethically guided political practices supported by political skill enhance visibility, adaptability, and advancement. In developing economies such as Nigeria, organisational politics cannot be eradicated but can be strategically managed. Transparent processes, fairness-oriented human resource practices, and inclusive cultures help mitigate adverse effects while leveraging politics to support sustainable career development and long-term professional growth.

Recommendations

Based on the conceptual analysis, several actionable strategies are proposed to help organisations manage organisational politics and foster equitable, sustainable career development. First, organisations should enhance transparency and fairness in decisions related to promotions, training, and performance evaluation. Clearly defined criteria, open communication of decision-making processes, and regular feedback can reduce perceptions of favouritism and strengthen employee trust in organisational systems. Second, political skill development should be integrated into leadership and career development programmes. Rather than avoiding organisational politics, structured training can equip employees and managers to understand power dynamics, navigate informal networks ethically, and apply responsible influence. Such programmes should emphasise self-awareness, interpersonal sensitivity, and constructive engagement to enable employees to participate in political processes without undermining organisational values.

Third, leaders should actively promote ethical political behaviours that foster collaboration, knowledge sharing, and collective problem-solving. By modelling acceptable conduct, discouraging manipulation or exclusion, and legitimising coalition-building for organisational goals, leaders can create an environment where political engagement supports development rather than impedes it. Finally, organisations must strengthen systems that reward merit and minimise destructive political practices. Objective performance management, independent oversight, and alignment of rewards with competence and developmental effort, particularly in contexts with prominent informal influence such as Nigerian organisations, can balance political realities with merit-based development. Collectively, these measures position organisational politics as a developmental resource rather than a barrier.

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