

Political Alignments in Organizations:  
Contextualization, Mobilization, and Coordination

Samuel B. Bacharach

Cornell University

Edward J. Lawler

Cornell University

*Power and Influence in Organizations* edited by Roderick M. Kramer & Margaret A. Neale, 67-

88

The authors thank Valerie McKinney for critical assistance and comments on the manuscript.

## Abstract

This chapter develops a framework for conceptualizing and analyzing enduring political alignments in organizations. We address the following key questions: (a) What processes promote political alignments, in particular ones that are likely to be recognized and identifiable by members of an organization? and (b) What are the major forms of political alignment? Repeated coalitions among the same actors are the central mechanism that generates enduring, identifiable political alignments. The power relations within and between coalitions determine the nature of the political alignments. Overall, political alignments are construed as microinstitutions that generate coordinated efforts to influence organizational strategy, policies, and practices.

## Defining Organizational Politics

It is probably an understatement to say that the existing literature on organizational politics is highly fragmented and piecemeal. Although there have been a number of broad theoretical works (Bacharach & Lawler, 1980; Clegg, 1990; Mintzberg, 1983; Pettigrew, 1973; Pfeffer, 1981), they all approach organizational politics from their own perspective, without taking account of each other. Unlike many other areas of organizational theory (e.g., institutional theory and organizational ecology), there is little active dialogue across the various perspectives and no core set of problems or issues that have been subjected to empirical analysis or theoretical debate. As a result, there is relatively little coherence, much less cumulative theory and research, within the organizational politics tradition.

There is an array of interesting empirical works on organizational politics in a number of disciplinary areas, including political science, education administration, international relations, and social work, but there is little dialogue or cross-fertilization across these disciplines. “Organizational politics” in this literature is a broad rubric of disconnected concepts and research studies, unified primarily by the vague notion that power and influence are important issues for research and theorizing. After more than 30 years of periodic bursts of interest—at least since Cyert and March (1963)—there are few hints of an emerging or developing “political theory of organizations” or an approach that stands alongside resource-dependence, institutional, or organizational ecology theories.

A pervasive problem for scholars interested in organizational politics is the conception of the phenomenon itself. What are the domain boundaries of organizational politics? What is not subsumed by this term? How does one discern what is and is not political action? Answers to

these questions have run the gamut. Some approaches cast organizational politics as the use of “nonsanctioned” means and ends; others treat it as upward forms of influence or as self-serving tactics of influence such as ingratiation (Ferris et al., 1993; Ferris, Russ, & Fandt, 1989; Mayes & Allen, 1977; Mintzberg, 1983; Porter, Allen, & Angle, 1981); still others conceptualize politics as decision criteria that produce departures from rational decision making (Pfeffer, 1981). All these definitions treat organizational politics as beyond or on the fringe of formally rational and legitimate modes of operation in an organization. We define organizational politics more broadly as follows: Organizational politics are the efforts of individuals or groups in organizations to mobilize support for or opposition to organizational strategies, policies, or practices in which they have a stake or interest.

Organizational politics, therefore, are at the center of organizational processes and a principal way that “people things get done” in organizations rather than being limited to the unsanctioned or nonrational domains. “Power” is the key resource used and the “objects” it is directed at are longer term organizational directions (strategy), rules for achieving shorter term objectives (policy), and the informal, customary “ways of doing things” in the organization (practices).

We have argued elsewhere (Bacharach & Lawler, 1980) that any broad theory of organizational politics should be based on the analysis of power, power perception, and power tactics. Thus, our perspective on organizational politics is embedded in a power framework; that is, we accept that power is the critical niche for any political theory of organizations, and that any such theory must be explicit on the role of power. Also, we accept that intentional, goal-directed action in organizations is based partly on the desire to enhance power capabilities and to use these power capabilities to impact strategies, policies, and practices. Accordingly, we treat

political action as purposive behavioral moves or countermoves to influence the perceptions of others and thus, at least indirectly, to influence organizational policies, strategies, and practices.

From a political perspective, organizations are arenas in which actors are interdependent, purposive (instrumental or goal-oriented), and take into account the actual and prospective actions of others inside and outside of the organization (responsiveness). Organizations are created to serve some sort of collective purpose or interest (Olson, 1965), however, and as a result, organizational members do not just take account of their own interests and those on which they are dependent; they also take account of the collective endeavor, whether they work in support or in opposition to prevailing collective goals. Indeed, the cognitive aspects of taking the collective into account—namely, the organization as a whole—differentiate political action taken by an actor as a member of an organization from many other forms of political action. That is, our analysis of political action in organizations is based on three key assumptions: (a) Actors (individuals or groups) want to influence strategies, policies, and practices likely to impact their interests; (b) their interests and their view of what is collectively rational for the organization are intertwined; and (c) they develop, maintain, and use power to promote strategies, policies, and practices viewed by them as in their own or the organization's interests or both.

Embedded in these three assumptions is an "action" orientation rather than a purely structural orientation to organizational politics. In the tradition of Max Weber, we view organizational politics as the actions of actors that, although framed by the structural context and often constrained by personality, exist in the domain of volitional action. For Weber, the key to organizational politics is the notion of "meaningful social action" (the basic unit of Weberian sociology)—that is, the subjective meaning that actors give to their positive and negative decisions (Aron, 1987, p. 282). The meanings of these social actions are constantly negotiated

and renegotiated within organizations. A Weberian might claim that organizations are political because structures cannot predict all situations, leaving much uncertainty in the midst of which meaning and action are negotiated by the participants. Thompson (1967) placed such uncertainty at the center of organizational life:

Uncertainty appears as a fundamental problem for complex organizations, and coping with uncertainty, as the essence of the administrative process. Just as complete uncertainty and randomness is the antithesis of purpose and of organization, complete certainty is a figment of the imagination, (p. 159)

The combination of uncertainty and bounded rationality (i.e., the fact that cognitive limits make it impossible for any individual to make purely rational decisions on the basis of complete information) has important consequences. The criteria that are applied in making decisions and the methods used to carry out tasks are always the source of ambiguity and conflict and subject to negotiation. Furthermore, under the assumption of bounded rationality, it becomes difficult to specify all goals and means; therefore, ambiguous goals and means become subject to negotiation by organization members. The selection of goals, means, and the strategy to achieve them becomes a source of ambiguity and thus a potential focus for political action within organizations (Bacharach & Mundell, 1993; Bacharach, Mundell, & Masters, 1995; Pfeffer, 1981).

Many tactics for using power involve acting alone (Blegen & Lawler, 1989; Kipnis & Schmidt, 1983; Lawler & Bacharach, 1976), but many also involve acting in concert with others. Our focus is the latter—joint action with others. The primary purpose of this chapter is to theorize how political alignments come about, what forms they take, and what consequences they have for those included in them and for the larger organization. Political alignments are emergent microinstitutions. We specifically develop the concept of "political alignments" to capture the enduring relations that promote action in concert with the same others repeatedly.

Political alignments constitute a structural or relational context for mobilizing joint, collective action in support of certain organizational strategies, policies, or practices over others and for combating efforts of competitors to achieve advantageous power positions in the organization. Individuals are the catalysts or key actors in political processes, but subgroups and the alignments among them are a critical foundation. Individuals have goals, are responsive to others, and are aware of their identity and responsibility as organizational members. Political action essentially promotes collective goals and interests in line with those of individuals and their subgroups. Thus, it is important to stress that organizational politics are manifest, empirically, in the actions of individuals. To influence organizational strategies, policies, or practices, individuals make several decisions or choices: whether to act alone or with others, how to mobilize resources or others, and how to coordinate or align their actions with others. There are three main problems: contextualization, mobilization, and coordination.

The first problem faced by an individual attempting to influence the organization is whether to act alone or in a group. We term this "contextualization." The power and influence of any single actor—whether a group or individual—is limited by the fact that there are many individuals and groups in organizations, and each needs the support and cooperation of at least some others to significantly shape organizational strategies, policies, or practices toward their own interests. This, of course, may be more characteristic of decentralized than centralized organizations, but it likely applies to the latter as well. Finding others with similar values or policy preferences, anticipating where opposition will come from, and devising tactics that will overcome or mitigate that opposition are essential tasks for actors attempting to change or, for that matter, prevent changes in, organizational strategy, policy, or practices. We term this the "problem of contextualization," the process by which individuals take into account the context of

the actions of others and the organization itself and assess the utility of not acting, acting alone, or acting in concert with others.

The mobilization issue is essentially a question of how to use the resources available for the purpose of influencing organizational policies. The resources involved in acting alone include individual properties, such as knowledge, experience, and persuasiveness, and positional properties, such as authority. The mobilization question is how to put these to use, tactically, for the desired ends. The resources involved in acting with others are known social similarities, interpersonal ties, and social networks. Coalitions are the primary method of collective mobilization, and they essentially transform adherents or proponents (e.g., those individuals "on similar wavelengths") into allies or constituents—that is, individuals who recognize their common interests and are willing to devote resources (time, phone calls, and contacts) to a common effort (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Coalitions develop against a backdrop of structural differentiations, including departmental or divisional memberships, job categories or hierarchies, professional affiliations, seniority, demographics (age distributions), and social identities (ethnicity and gender), all of which constrain and define the interests and preferences that actors have regarding the organizational strategies, policies, or practices. Many coalitions are tacit and hidden from view (Bacharach & Lawler, 1980; Cyert & March, 1963).

The third problem faced by actors is coordination—how to align individual or coalitional actions with anticipated actions (or reactions) from other individuals, groups, or coalitions in the organization. For coalitions to form and be effective, they need to solve the problem of how to produce enough joint benefit in terms of influence in the organization beyond what individual actors anticipate they could receive from going it alone. Coordination entails transaction costs. Minimally, these are the time and effort that could be devoted elsewhere, but greater transaction

costs may be incurred to resolve disagreements, to introduce more explicitness into tacit understandings, or to guard against opportunism by one or more participants. Political alignments are a microinstitutional "solution" to the coordination problem. Such alignments are defined as ongoing alliances involving mutual expectations of joint action among the same actors on multiple issues over time. Alignments emerge from repeated coalitions among the same actors across time, and they are likely to be widely inferred (or suspected) but unacknowledged patterns of coordination built on perceived similarities, ties, and trust. Alignments economize on transaction costs by being readily available means for individual actors to jointly influence organizational strategies, policies, and practices and do so without much explicit negotiation or exchange. They can be construed as informal, subtle institutions that regularize coalitional responses to future issues. Political alignments essentially are an institutionalized substratum of organizations.

In our framework, contextualization, mobilization, and coordination are key moments in an organizational political process, indicating how individual interests are transformed into coordinated group action that affects the strategies, policies, and practices of an organization. Contextualization, mobilization, and coordination are key junctures or crossroads leading toward or away from organizational change. We address these three moments on a theoretical level, asking three questions: (a) What are the bases on which actors form or join coalitions in organizations? (b) How do coalitions mobilize resources (people, effort, and ties)? and (c) How do coalitions transform interdependent actors with differential power into ongoing political alignments that can be called on easily and quickly when important issues emerge in an organization? To address the first question, we integrate and apply notions of subjective expected utility to decisions about whether to attempt influence. To address the second question, we

distinguish four coalition processes: insulation, cooperative exchange, absorption, and negotiated exchange. To answer the third question, we suggest how coalitions and political alignments are promoted by relative and mutual dependencies among potential allies.

### **Expected Utility Theory**

A simple way to examine why individuals join coalitions is to compare the magnitude of the resources controlled by individual actors to that of the resources controlled by the coalition. In this context, we could easily hypothesize that the greater the proportion of total organizational resources controlled by an actor, the less likely it is for that actor to join a coalition. An actor who is critical to the production process (e.g., one who has control of a key technology and is not easily replaceable) may be very influential in organizational decisions and therefore not likely to join a coalition. High resources imply high influence, which is inversely proportional to the likelihood of joining a coalition. Only when actors are convinced that a coalition will have greater influence in organizational decisions than they would individually are they likely to join the coalition. This rational-choice process can be captured parsimoniously by treating expected utility as a cognitive schema by which actors make this calculation.

Subjective expected utility theory assumes that in any relationship, parties attempt to maximize their gains, but built into this assumption is the idea that actors in organizations operate, for the most part, in a "live-and-let-live" world. As long as their gain is maximized, they care little about the gains of others. They cooperate when needed and compete when needed. In an analysis of organizational politics, such an orientation seems particularly important. On the one hand, it assumes that no organizational actor is particularly interested in the total annihilation

of other actors in the organization. On the other hand, it assumes that actors will not go out of their way to cooperate on every issue for the sake of organizational harmony and the gain of the total organization. Some issues will push actors to close cooperation or to competition. We assume, however, that organizational actors generally operate somewhere between cooperation and competition. This means that actors will view resources as neither zero-sum nor infinite.

A second assumption of subjective utility theory is that actors will subjectively attach a utility to different lines of action by estimating the magnitude of outcomes attached to each option and weighing these magnitude estimates by the probability of achieving these outcomes. In Weberian terms, parties will synthesize and summarize the "meaning" of the key aspects of the situation and the potential relationship in terms of outcome magnitudes and outcome probability estimates. The choice of option is not based simply on magnitude but rather on the magnitude multiplied by probability. In an organizational context, subjective expected utility theory suggests that actors in organizations compare the magnitude of working within a coalition to working outside a coalition. If, for example, the resource involved is a pay increase, the magnitude may be viewed as the expected pay increase if an actor works outside versus inside a coalition. The probability factor is the probability of achieving the magnitude expected as a member of a coalition versus the probability of achieving the magnitude expected as an individual actor. Therefore, actors will form a coalition when the magnitude of outcomes expected as part of a coalition, multiplied by the probability of achieving these outcomes as a coalition, exceeds the magnitude of outcomes expected when operating as a single actor multiplied by the probability of achieving these outcomes as a single actor. This is a straightforward application of rational-choice principles (Elster, 1986).

Although, on the one hand, applying subjective expected utility theory to the question of whether actors join coalitions may seem to provide a somewhat standard rational-choice answer, on the other hand, the components of this theoretical approach crystallize how actors socially construct the political environment in which they operate as well as the political opportunities and obstacles that they may face. For example, workers who engage in nonroutine decision-making activities may view their control of uncertainty as critical to the organization and thus feel that they have such a strong power base that they need not join any coalition. Alternatively, workers engaged in highly routine, non-problem-solving activities may view themselves as expendable and therefore feel a greater need to join a coalition. Furthermore, the very probability of achieving one's goal may be constrained by historical and environmental conditions. For example, the past success or failure of particular coalitions, in changing environmental conditions, may not predict future success or failure. Therefore, subjective expected utility offers a useful way of identifying relevant components (e.g., magnitude and probability) that are socially constructed with the historical and cultural materials embedded in the organization.

### **Coalition Processes**

By definition, coalitions include some actors and exclude others. They simultaneously (a) bind some actors together within the coalition and (b) divide or distinguish them from actors outside the coalition. In this sense, coalition processes in organizations should generate patterns of inclusiveness and exclusiveness, and one result is the partitioning of organizational members into distinct informal groupings. To the extent that these groupings recur and are perceived by members as real, they become organizationally situated political identities that structure social

contacts and interaction within and outside the organization. Examples of such political identities are "old guard," "young turks," "central office," and "Day Hall." These are meaningful and important identities that have associated expectations about attitudes, orientations, allegiances, competencies, and behaviors. An organizational political identity is a social identity in Tajfel and Turner's (1986) terms, but the bases of social categorization are perceived strategy and policy stances or orientations within the organization. Borrowing from social identity theory, the impact of coalitions on the relations of actors within the coalition (forms of inclusion) should be related to the effects on relations to those outside (forms of exclusion). The distinction between being included and excluded is critical to the strength of the social identity (Brewer, 1993; Kramer, 1993).

Once actors have joined a coalition, what remains problematic is how the coalition will enhance the actors' commitment to collective action—that is, how the coalition will ensure that it is capable of mobilizing the resources of all constituent actors. The decision to join does not guarantee mobilization of one's resources for the coalition. That is, the rational calculation made on the basis of subjective expected utility theory to join the coalition (the contextualization issue) does not preclude the need for a coalition to normatively integrate an actor into its distinctive social category (the mobilization issue).

The mobilization question often depends on whether actors identify with the coalition, and as such, successful coalitions are those that establish mechanisms that enhance this collective identity. A clear example comes from the labor movement. By distinguishing between union membership and union participation, often members will be able to calculate, using the schema of expected utility, that joining a union is in their benefit. Because they do not identify with the union beyond this rational calculation, however, they are unlikely to give of their time and labor

(i.e., resources) unless there are dire circumstances (i.e., a major strike). In this instance, the union as a coalition has failed to bind the actors together within the coalition and, at the same time, divide or distinguish them from actors outside the coalition. They identify with the union some of the time, but most of the time they identify with the work organization.

Overcoming the problem of coalition mobilization through the enhancement of identification is the sociological mechanism by which coalitions overcome the free-rider phenomenon (Kramer, 1993). The more individuals identify with an individual subgrouping (i.e., a coalition), the more likely they are to commit resources to that group and the greater that group's collective power becomes. Specifically, when individuals feel a sense of social identity, this will inevitably enhance the solidarity of the group and thus enhance group power (Hechter, 1987). If organizations are viewed as being composed of social categories that stand in power and status relation to one another (Hogg & Abrams, 1990, p. 14), and coalitions are viewed as one of these social categories, we accept that these categories do not exist in isolation but rather in contrast to one another (Brewer, 1993). To transform the power of individuals into collective power through identity and group solidarity, coalitions establish mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion of members, which sharpen the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion between coalitions.

There are conceivably two basic relations of inclusion and two basic relations of exclusion that coalitions can produce. For inclusion, the two relations are absorption and cooperative exchange. Absorption refers to a situation in which one group essentially absorbs another, making it indistinguishable within the political processes of the organization. A small subunit, not central to the organization, may routinely ally with a larger, more central unit and thereby be perceived as "in the camp" of the larger unit whenever relevant policies are at issue.

The smaller unit would remain distinct organizationally but not be perceived as a distinct, independent actor on the political landscape of the organization. Absorption occurs when there is highly unequal power dependence that effectively subordinates one group to another.

Cooperative exchange is based on reciprocity and refers to relations in which actors or groups achieve mutual, joint gains through social exchange. Mutual dependencies provide each actor or group of actors the potential to offer and receive something important from joint action. Neither is subordinate to the other, and both retain a separate political identity in the organization beyond the joint one that could be generated if they coalesce frequently with each other. A coalition between finance and marketing to influence the development of a new product, for example, would tend to involve cooperative exchange rather than absorption and call on existing organizational identities without creating a new one.

In addition to relations of inclusion within the coalition, there are relations of exclusion between members of the coalition and outsiders. Insulation and negotiated exchange are two important relations of exclusion. Insulation refers to the degree of distinct separation and independence between those inside and outside the coalition. Coalitions insulate their members by accentuating task, functional, or other organizationally relevant differences, making it legitimate for those subunits to "go their own way" and operate with nearly complete autonomy. Insulation reflects and strengthens low interdependencies between subunits of an organization and is especially common in highly decentralized and loosely coupled organizations. All things being equal, insulation should strengthen the distinctiveness of the coalition members' political identities, a condition that produces stronger favoritism toward one's own group and discrimination toward those outside (Brewer, 1993). Negotiated exchange between the coalition and outside individuals or groups tends to occur when mutual dependencies are high and the

policy issues have mixed-motive properties. Here, the connections between the coalition and those outside are likely to involve relatively explicit agreements or understandings.

Inclusion and exclusion imply a range of tactical options for those forming coalitions to use them to influence organizational policies. Absorption is a tactic for larger, more central units to build stronger and stronger power bases vis-a-vis other contender units in the organization. Insulation is a tactic for maximizing autonomy and may be common for units at the technical core, given their centrality, or for those on the periphery of the organization with narrowly specified purposes. Finding areas of common fate or joint benefit with others and forming coalitions on the basis of cooperative (reciprocal) exchange is particularly useful for units attempting to manage unpredictability in dense networks of interdependence. Negotiated exchanges are tactics for groups facing major adversaries with relatively equal power. Negotiated exchange is a way to manage or resolve policy disputes and to protect one's interests while accommodating the interests of powerful others.

The crucial underlying condition for relations of inclusion and exclusion is the power or dependence relation. The tendency of repeated coalitions to generate different forms of inclusion and exclusion is contingent on the degree of power-dependence inequality within the coalition and mutual or total dependence outside the coalition. Power is defined here as a capability or potential that may or may not be used by actors and, if used, may or may not be effective (Bacharach & Lawler 1980, 1981; Molm, 1990). Using power-dependence theory, the power of *A* is based on the dependence of *B* on *A* and vice versa (Bacharach & Lawler, 1981; Cook & Emerson, 1978; Emerson, 1972; Lawler, 1992; Molm, 1987). The relative power of actors (or power differences) within the coalition is distinguished from the total power in these relations (average power or cohesion in Emerson's terms). The distinction of relative and total power

applies to the capability only, and it integrates zero-sum and non-zero-sum features. Relative power is the zero-sum dimension, and total or mutual power is the non-zero-sum dimension. The importance of the non-zero-sum component is that it incorporates the idea that actors can each increase their power simultaneously—that is, an increase in one actor's power does not by definition produce a decrease in the power of others. The fundamental reason for this is that the relations in question are embedded in a larger social context involving actual and potential relations with others.

We suggest that relative dependencies or power differences are of prime import within the coalition, whereas mutual dependencies are of prime import to relations with those outside the coalition. This makes sense because the fact of repeated coalitions implies mutual dependence beyond some minimal threshold; the issue within the coalition is how its constituent groups or actors deal with equalities or inequalities of power dependence. The issue with regard to relations outside the coalition is whether there is sufficient mutual dependence to provide an incentive to negotiate accommodative agreements. It should also be noted that the relations within and outside are theoretically orthogonal. Absorption or cooperative exchange within the coalition has no necessary bearing on whether relations to the outside are insulated or negotiated. One reason for this is that different dimensions of power—relative versus total (mutual)—relate to different processes.

The power relations among recurring allies should have important effects on the forms of inclusion. Absorption will be a primary integrative mechanism that sustains the coalition when coalitions reemerge from issue to issue, and those who form them have unequal relative power. Cooperative exchange, however, will be a primary integrative mechanism when the actors or

groups that form the coalition have equal relative power. This may be stated in propositional form as follows:

*Proposition 1:* Repeated coalitions among actors or groups with unequal relative power produce the absorption of the least powerful actor or group by the more powerful actor or group within the coalition.

*Proposition 2:* Repeated coalitions among actors or groups with relatively equal power produce cooperative exchange relations between the actors or groups within the coalition.

Propositions 1 and 2 deal with the internal dynamics of the coalition (specifically regarding whether inclusion entails absorption or cooperative exchange) based on the relative power of its constituent actors or groups. What also must be specified, however, is how the coalition postures itself vis-a-vis other actors, groups, or coalitions in the organization. That is, will the coalition insulate itself or will it engage in negotiated exchange? This can be predicted best by examining the degree to which a coalition that forms repeatedly has high or low mutual dependence vis-a-vis other actors, groups, or coalitions in the organization. A coalition with high mutual dependence is more likely to feel a need to negotiate with other actors, groups, or coalitions, whereas a coalition with low mutual interdependence will be more likely to turn inward and insulate itself. This may be summarized by the following propositions:

*Proposition 3:* Low mutual (total) dependence with other actors or groups in the organization will lead a repeated coalition to insulate itself from other actors, groups, or coalitions in the organization.

*Proposition 4:* High mutual (total) dependence with other actors or groups in the organization will lead a repeated coalition to engage in negotiated exchange with other actors, groups, or coalitions in the organization.

## **Political Alignments**

Alignments emerge as microinstitutions if the same coalitions repeatedly form over time to deal with political issues. The impact of repetition is crucial but also a matter of degree. An alignment begins to exist when the actors in it expect to collaborate on such issues in the future, and it is reified and objectified when those inside and outside of it perceive its existence and likely persistence. Although this requires repeated coalitions among the same actors, the following question arises: How many instances of the same coalition are necessary? Berger and Luckmann (1967) suggest that only one repetition of a behavior is necessary to generate "incipient institutionalization," and if we can view the early stage of political alignments similarly, two instances will start the process. This may be more likely for strategy issues because these tend to arise less often than policy disputes and to be more important when they do arise. Thus, we surmise that one repetition of a coalition is sufficient for strategy issues, but more than one is necessary for political alignments organized around policies or practices.

The general hypothesis is that predominant forms of political alignment in an organization vary with the degree of power inequality in relations of the organization and the average degree of interdependence among these relations. Power inequality derives from the degree that (a) actors provide resources of unequal value or importance to others in the organization and the organization as a whole, (b) they have differential access to alternative or

substitutable sources of value, or both. The average or total dependence is based on the degree that actors are linked together in complex webs of interdependence, such that they cannot accomplish their tasks without support from or coordination with many other individuals or groups in the organization. Using power-dependence theory, we argue that variations in power inequality and interdependence will jointly determine the predominant form of political alignment. For example, organizations composed of distinct centers or separate business units with relatively equal power and low interdependencies among them should promote different kinds of political alignment than organizations with large power inequalities and high degrees of interdependence among subunits.

To specify fundamental effects of power on political alignments, we dichotomize the dimensions of power dependence into low versus high unequal power and low versus high total power and then cross-classify these dimensions. This yields four forms of political alignment that we term confrontational, accommodative, patronage, and cooptive (Table 4.1).

---

Insert Table 1 Here

---

### **Confrontational Alignments**

Alignments tend to be confrontational when a few actors with relatively equal power contend repeatedly over the basic strategies and direction of an organization. If coalition processes create distinct, hostile "camps" with relatively equal power, confrontations often may produce "crises" when important policy or strategy issues are debated. This type of political alignment is grounded in the insulation processes that ostensibly occur when the actors have

relatively equal power and neither is highly dependent on the other (i.e., low average dependence on one another). The ideal type is a highly decentralized organization in which there are relatively few actors vying for power and influence, and the actors are not very interdependent. In this context, (a) political alignments pit the same actors against one another over time, creating distinct political camps; (b) none of the alliances achieve dominance or do so for any length of time; (c) conflicts are typically more serious than the policy issues that produce them because actors are prone to view them in distributive (zero-sum) terms; and (d) the actors develop distinct political identities that are recognized and that create widely shared expectations for those actors in the organization. In this context, third-party interventions from within or outside the organization are prime means of managing conflicts and keeping them within acceptable bounds, although if interdependence is very low, they tend to avoid conflict by minimizing contacts.

### **Accommodative Alignments**

This form of alignment results from power conditions that promote cooperative exchanges among actors in the coalition: highly interdependent actors with relatively low power inequalities. The ideal type is a highly decentralized organization in which the distinct subunits have strong incentives to collaborate in mutually acceptable and satisfying ways. Under such conditions, conflicts occur periodically, but these are likely to be resolved through negotiation by the actors themselves, without the need for third parties. Political alignments will tend to congeal actors with the greatest incentives to exchange information, resources, and so on, and informal divisions and distinct political identities will take shape around these "pockets of cooperation."

Generally, when conflicts occur, they tend to involve misinformation, miscommunication, or misperception rather than fundamental differences of interest among aligned groups. Areas of common ground can typically be built on through negotiated exchange and used to minimize the effects of distributive issues. Thus, if negotiation is needed for some conflicts, it will be integrative rather than distributive in form. The cooperative exchange within coalitions under these conditions is likely to set the stage for negotiated exchange between coalitions.

### **Patronage Alignments**

This form of political alignment develops out of the absorption processes that ostensibly occur when there are large relative power inequalities and low interdependencies on average among actors. The prototype is a centralized, hierarchical organization in which those with little power have few ties to each other but strong ties of dependence to superiors. Superiors are analogous to "patrons," who serve the needs of subordinates in return for strong loyalty. The internal political identity is transformed into an organizational identity that patrons and subordinates share. This kind of alignment should crosscut the higher and lower levels of the organization, induce high degrees of voluntary compliance, create the appearance of little or no conflict, and foster myths of unity and consensus. At the extreme, this type of political alignment entails a "personality cult" around the leader that infuses the entire organization. Less extreme forms include a recurrently enacted pattern or norm of paternal superordinate- subordinate relations, manifest in familial metaphors for the organization. With a patronage alignment, the most problematic conflicts occur among multiple patrons, but these tend to be resolved behind the scenes to sustain myths of unity and consensus. If the number of powerful actors becomes

large, this alignment could evolve toward the confrontational form because patrons will build independent power bases.

### **Cooptive Alignments**

In the context of large power differences, those with greater power may elicit and maintain cooperation through selective incentives. Cooptive alignments also have their source in absorption processes but, in this case, higher power inequality is combined with higher degrees of mutual dependence within and across organizational levels. Those with greater power have an incentive to coopt select actors with lower power to solidify their power position vis-a-vis other high-power actors and to prevent collective mobilization by those with less power. Cooptation divides or forestalls potential opposition while also strengthening each higher-power actor's dealings with other powerful actors in the organization. Importantly, those coopted have alternatives and, therefore, can change allegiances in the future; this creates a defection problem for those with greater power, but it is solvable with selective incentives. Coalitions that produce cooptation alignments tend to require periodic, if not continual, negotiation, and the power inequality should make them somewhat more fragile than accommodative alignments.

Given the previous characterization of each form of political alignment, we can specify four more propositions based in part on the earlier propositions:

*Proposition 5:* Power-dependence conditions (low power inequality and low interdependence) that produce cooperative exchange within coalitions and insulation

from outside actors, respectively, will generate confrontational political alignments. (This proposition combines Propositions 2 and 3.)

*Proposition 6:* Power-dependence conditions (low power inequality and high interdependence) that produce cooperative exchange within coalitions and negotiated exchanges with those outside will generate accommodative political alignments. (This proposition combines Propositions 2 and 4.)

*Proposition 7:* Power-dependence conditions (high power inequality and low interdependence) that produce absorption within coalitions and insulation from those outside will generate patronage forms of alignment. (This proposition combines Propositions 1 and 3.)

*Proposition 8:* Power-dependence conditions (high power inequality and high interdependence) that produce absorption within coalitions and negotiated exchanges with those outside will generate cooptive political alignments. (This proposition combines Propositions 1 and 4.)

## Conclusion

Unlike structuralists, who emphasize the rational order of organizations, or reductionists, who marvel that organizations can actually sustain themselves (Weick, 1976), a political perspective views the organizational system as a process of power-based negotiation and renegotiation (Strauss, 1978). The failure to develop a theory of organizational change may in fact be explained by the tendency of having ignored the volitional actor within an organizational setting and the microinstitutional processes that emerge from volitional actors and action. Barley and Tolbert (1997) have argued that the history of institutions can often be cast as the history of negotiations. Similarly, DiMaggio (1988) has maintained that if we want to understand institutional change, we need to focus on the role of interests—that is, we need to focus on how interests play themselves out through the negotiations and politics in the organizational arena. It is through political process that volitional actors pursue their interests in concert or in conflict with other actors. Indeed, to pursue political action, it is inevitable that actors in the organization align themselves with others. The history of such alignments becomes the history of organizational change (Michels, 1962).

Underlying our argument is the notion that organizational life cannot be explained effectively by either (macro)structures or (micro)phenomena alone. One way of bridging the micro-macro distinctions is to examine under what conditions actors join coalitions and when these coalitions will be institutionalized through the emergence of enduring political alignments. As such, the political perspective we offer in this chapter contends that individual interests and schema, although constrained by the structures and environments of organizations, are the beginning of an institutionalization process, and that coalitions and alignments transform these

cognitions into organizational forms and structures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). A theory of change that is therefore political in its nature must, in our opinion, be both micro and macro in its orientation. Thus, we return to the basic assumption that has guided most of our work— that is, that for organizational politics the Weberian notion of "social action" is a crucial theoretical frame.

Table 1

**TABLE 4.1 Types of Political Alignment by Relative and Total Power**

<i>Power Inequality</i>	<i>Total Power</i>	
	<i>Low</i>	<i>High</i>
Low	Confrontative alignment	Accommodative alignment
High	Patronage alignment	Cooptive alignment

## References

- Aron, R. (1987). *Main currents of sociological thought*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bacharach, S. B., & Lawler, E. J. (1980). *Power and politics in organizations*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bacharach, S. B., & Lawler, E. J. (1981). *Bargaining, power, tactics, and outcomes*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bacharach, S. B., & Mundell, B. (1993). Organizational politics in schools: Micro, macro and logics of action. *Education Administration Quarterly*, 29, 423-452. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0013161X93029004003>
- Bacharach, S. B., Mundell, B., & Masters, F. (1995). Institutional theory and the politics of institutionalization. In R. Ogawa (Ed.), *Advances in theory and practice of educational policy*. Greenwich, CT: JAI.
- Barley, S., & Tolbert, P. (1997). Institutionalization and structuration: Studying the link between action and institution. *Organizational Studies*, 18(1), 93-118. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/017084069701800106>
- Berger, P., & Luckmann, T. (1967). *The social construction of reality*. New York: Doubleday.
- Blegen, M. A., & Lawler, E. J. (1989). Power and bargaining in authority-client relations. In R. G. Braungart & M. M. Braungart (Eds.), *Research in political sociology* (pp. 168-186). Greenwich, CT: JAI.
- Brewer, M. B. (1993). Social identity, distinctiveness, and in-group homogeneity. *Social Cognition*, 11, 150-164. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1521/soco.1993.11.1.150>
- Clegg, S. R. (1990). *Modern organizations*. London: Sage.

- Cook, K. S., & Emerson, R. M. (1978). Power, equity, and commitment in exchange networks. *American Sociological Review*, 27, 721-739. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2094546>
- Cyert, R., & March, J. (1963). *Behavioral theory of the firm*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- DiMaggio, P. (1988). Interest and agency in institutional theory. In L. Zucker (Ed.), *Institutional patterns in organizations: Culture and environment* (pp. 3-21). Cambridge, MA: Ballinger.
- DiMaggio, P., & Powell, W. (1991). Introduction. In W. Powell & P. DiMaggio (Eds.), *The new institutionalism in organizational analysis* (pp. 1-38). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Elster, J. (1986). Introduction. In J. Elster (Ed.), *Rational choice theory* (pp. 1-34). New York: NYC Press.
- Emerson, R. (1972). *Sociological theories in progress*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Ferris, G. R., Brand, J. F., Brand, S., Rowland, K. M., Gilmore, D. C., King, T. R., Kacmar, K. M., & Burton, C. A. (1993). Politics and control in organizations. In E. Lawler, B. Markovsky, K. Heimer, & J. O'Brien (Eds.), *Advances in group processes* (pp. 83-111). Greenwich, CT: JAI.
- Ferris, G. R., Russ, G. S., & Fandt, P. M. (1989). Politics in organizations. In R. A. Giacalone & P. Rosenfeld (Eds.), *Impression management in the organization* (pp. 143-170). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Hechter, M. L. (1987). *Principles of group solidarity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hogg, M., & Abrams, D. (1990). *Social identifications: A social psychology of intergroup relations and group processes*. London: Routledge.

- Kipnis, D., & Schmidt, S. (1983). An influence perspective on bargaining within organizations. In M. Bazerman & R. J. Lewicki (Eds.), *Negotiating in organizations* (pp. 303-319). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Kramer, R. M. (1993). Cooperation and organizational identification. In J. K. Murnighan (Ed.), *Social psychology in organizations* (pp. 244-248). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Lawler, E. J. (1992). Power processes in bargaining. *Sociological Quarterly*, 33, 17-34. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.1992.tb00361.x>
- Lawler, E. J., & Bacharach, S. B. (1976). Outcome alternatives and value as criteria for multistrategy evaluations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 34, 885-894. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.34.5.885>
- Mayes, B. T., & Allen, R. W. (1977, October). Toward a definition of organizational politics. *Academy of Management Review* 2(4), 672-678.
- McCarthy, J. D., & Zald, M. N. (1977). Resource mobilization and social movements: A partial theory. *American Journal of Sociology*, 82, 1212-1241. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/226464>
- Michels, R. (1962). *Political parties: A sociological study of the oligarchical tendencies of modern democracy*. New York: Free Press.
- Mintzberg, H. (1983). *Power in and around organizations*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Molm, L. (1987). Power dependence theory: Power processes and negative outcomes. In E. J. Lawler & B. Markovsky (Eds.), *Advances in group processes* (pp. 171-198). Greenwich, CT: JAI.
- Olson, M., Jr. (1965). *The logic of collective action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Pettigrew, A. M. (1973). *The politics of organizational decision making*. London: Tavistock.

- Pfeffer, J. (1981). *Power in organizations*. Marshfield, MA: Pitman.
- Porter, L. W., Allen, W., & Angle, H. L. (1981). The politics of upward influence in organizations. In B. M. Staw & L. L. Cummings (Eds.), *Research in organizational behavior* (Vol. 3, pp. 109-149). Greenwich, CT: JAI.
- Strauss, A. (1978). *Negotiations: Variety, context, processes and social order*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behaviour. In S. Worchel & W. G. Austin (Eds.), *Psychology of intergroup relations*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall.
- Thompson, J. (1967). *Organizations in action*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Weick, K. (1976). Educational organizations as loosely-coupled systems. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 21, 1-19.<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2391875>