

**To be or not to be political?**

**Racialized cognitive scripts and political motivation**

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**Manuscript accepted in Human Relations on 28/01/2022**

## **Abstract**

How do employees become politically motivated? In this study, we examine how ethnic minority employees interpret political experiences at work and form motivations to act politically (or not) by uncovering attribution-based political scripts. We propose that cognitive scripts entail learning about the political landscape at work and motivational pathways (personal responses to the political landscape). Adopting a mixed methods approach, we interviewed 40 ethnic minority employees and extracted 810 spontaneous causal attributions about beneficial or detrimental career-related political experiences. Using latent class analysis, we identified how combinations of these attributions formed six political scripts. The content of these scripts revealed that most political experiences motivated participants to opt out of the political arena, unless political activity was legitimized or enabled by senior gatekeepers. Our findings advance scholarship on political cognition, political will, and racialized politics at work by highlighting how the wider organizational political environment shapes employees' political motivation. We also demonstrate how politics can be perceived as racialized and offer practical suggestions for ways organizations can make workplace politics more racially inclusive.

Key words: attributions, cognitive scripts, organizational politics, political motivation, political will, racialized

## **To be or not to be political? Racialized cognitive scripts and political motivation**

Micro-perspectives in organizational politics research have increasingly documented the pervasiveness of political behavior in the workplace (Ferris et al., 2019), adding nuance to the notion of organizations as ‘political arenas’, or spaces in which employees engage in self-serving and unsanctioned acts, such as forming coalitions, creating obligations, or practicing favoritism in order to secure resources and realize their goals (Buchanan, 2008; Mintzberg, 1985). A substantial body of literature suggests that whether political arenas are construed as threatening or advantageous likely depends on individuals’ personality, skill and experience (Hochwarter et al., 2020). Evidence also suggests that certain groups may perceive politics differently; in this study, we focus on ethnic minorities, who may view politics as less palatable and even racialized because they experience challenges in accessing political knowledge held by powerful others (i.e. white men: Charles and Nkomo, 2012; Wyatt and Silvester, 2015). Importantly, the way in which individuals interpret the workplace political environment influences how motivated they are to act politically themselves. Yet, despite most studies framing political behavior as intentional, the cognitive processes involved in how people make sense of political landscapes, and what guides their motivation to act politically, remain a ‘black box’ (Kapoutsis, 2016; Silvester and Wyatt, 2018). The theoretical consequence of neglecting these cognitive processes is that we overlook how political motivation is formed beyond an innate and relatively static desire to be, or not to be political. There is little understanding about how context, positionality or social power, such as ethnicity, shape political motivation. More needs to be known about how individuals make sense of their political surroundings and how spontaneous interpretations of discrete political events can form embedded motivational guides for political action.

To address this lacuna, we asked: *what cognitive processes underpin political motivation?* To answer this question, we drew on attribution theory and the notions of scripts to examine the spontaneous causal attributions made by 40 ethnic minority employees during qualitative interviews about political events they have experienced during their careers. Using the Leeds Attributional Coding System (Stratton et al., 1988), we extracted and coded their attributions and employed latent class analysis to explore quantitatively how commonalities in our interviewees' explanations demonstrated the formation of political cognitive scripts. We then studied the qualitative content of the political scripts to reveal embedded political learning about the political scene or situation, and motivational tracks, or pathways, which indicate the various possibilities that are open to individuals to act (non)politically. Finally, we tested the relationship between the scripts and participants' subsequent quantitative ratings of their political will, a construct that denotes a relatively stable desire to engage in political behavior (Kapoutsis et al., 2017).

Our study contributes to the micro-organizational politics literature in three ways. First, we specify the cognitive processes that drive *how* people form political motives by making sense of their lived political experiences, moving away from dispositional predictors of political motivation typically studied (e.g. Treadway et al., 2005). We make a distinction between political *will*, a relatively stable motivational construct developed in the extant literature, and political *motivation*, which we view as a wider dynamic cognitive process. To explicate this, we draw on attribution theory and script theory, to propose that through experience and learning, individuals' causal explanations of political experiences can form scripts, or embedded knowledge structures about how they expect themselves and others to behave (Cellar and Wade, 1988; Gioia and Poole, 1984). By mobilizing the concept of scripts, we widen the lens of political motivation research by connecting individuals' experience of political events to their motivational responses.

Second, we present a novel methodology for identifying political scripts from attributions for political events. We carried out interviews to capture causal explanations produced as part of our participants' natural speech, rather than the questionnaires more often used in attributional research. We therefore answer calls to examine patterns of explanations for multiple political *events* rather than broader measures of political climate typically used in perceptions of politics research (Hochwarter et al., 2020). Using latent class analysis, we adopted a pattern, rather than the more usual variable-centered approach to analyze the attributions extracted. By combining these qualitative and quantitative techniques we were able to quantify attributions to establish how they form patterns or scripts in naturally occurring accounts, and examine the *content* of those scripts and their association with political will.

Third, we explore the attributions made by ethnic minorities for political events and thus provide evidence for the concept of racialized organizational politics perceptions (ROPP) theorized by Charles and Nkomo (2012); we demonstrate the ways in which political contexts can be perceived as racialized and how individuals believe their ethnicity shapes their agency in navigating the political arena, helping to identify important interventions to remove racialized barriers in the workplace. Furthermore, by sharing the meaning of political experiences, ethnic minorities are likely to develop common scripts regarding politics at work, which makes this sample methodologically valuable for investigating how individual cognitions connect to the development of embedded political knowledge structures amongst groups in the workplace.

### **The cognitive underpinning of political motivation**

#### *Political cognition*

It is vital to understand the cognitive mechanisms involved in how people interpret the messy reality of workplace politics because these processes shed light on how people form

political motivations. Yet, research on how people evaluate and interpret their political work environment has been dominated by studies that use broad measures of political climate (e.g. perceptions of organizational politics: Bedi and Shat, 2013). Treating perceptions of politics as a static evaluation has meant extant research fails to capture the nuances of how individuals interpret numerous different political experiences within their environment. Consequently, Hochwarter et al. (2020) have called for research to examine political events, or specific incidents of political behavior that can present as threats and/or opportunities. They argue that studying how individuals interpret novel and surprising political events can provide insight into how events, observations and political motivations are related.

Despite these recent appeals for more event-based research, there already exist qualitative studies that have investigated employees' subjective interpretations for discrete political experiences. Doldor et al. (2013), for example, interviewed 14 managers about their beliefs, emotions and behaviors in relation to workplace politics. They found that managers were ambivalent about whether politics was functional/dysfunctional, ethical/unethical and pleasant/stressful, and that women were more likely to view politics as masculine, non-meritocratic and ethically dubious. Wyatt and Silvester (2015) interviewed 40 senior managers and found that Black and Minority Ethnic senior managers were more likely to construe informal career incidents as underhand and political, and invested more cognitive effort into understanding politics, compared to their White counterparts. These studies demonstrate how the meaning of political experiences can be shared across groups (Sedeberg, 1984).

Further studies have identified that interpretations of political events are dynamic and develop over time and with seniority. Managers view political activity as acceptable and even necessary for executive effectiveness (Gandz and Murray, 1980). Buchanan examined the lived experience of change agents (Buchanan and Badham, 1999) and of 250 British

managers (Buchanan, 2008) and discovered a ‘political logic of action’ whereby politics were considered by most as acceptable, appropriate and necessary in their roles. Interviewing 38 junior, middle and senior managers, Doldor (2017) found that there were similarities in how they interpreted political experiences, but these varied with seniority and experience, such that managers’ perceptions of politics matured from ‘distractions from real work’ to ‘necessary evil’ and then ‘integral to one’s role’. Doldor (2017) theorized that evolving mindsets and cognitive scripts enable leaders to make sense of the political landscape and their agency within it, and that political maturation (i.e., increased political will and skill) stems from changes in the political scripts underpinning leaders’ political engagement.

Although these qualitative studies have shed light on how managers evaluate organizational politics, and how their willingness to engage in the political arena might mature over time, no studies have examined *how* this cognitive and motivational process unfolds. It has been suggested that cognitive processes connect political interpretation to political motivation, whereby ongoing attempts to evaluate and understand political episodes translate into embedded learning over time about how politics operates in the wider environment, the types of political tactics that are likely to be successful, and importantly, the extent individuals are motivated to act (Silvester and Wyatt, 2018). However, empirical research is required to provide more insight into how individuals’ interpretations of political experiences underpin their political motivations.

### *Political motivation*

Political motivation refers to an individual’s propensity to engage in organizational politics. Mintzberg (1985) described political motivation as individuals’ *willingness* to expend energy on political goals and as an essential antecedent to political effectiveness. Hence, most research on political motivation has focused on the construct of ‘political will’,

defined by Treadway (2012, p. 533) as ‘motivation to engage in strategic, goal-directed behavior that advances the personal agenda and objectives of the actor’. Early studies on political will used dispositional proxies for the construct, such as need for achievement, need for power and intrinsic motivation and have found good support for their relationship with political behavior (Liu et al., 2010; Treadway et al., 2005). Treadway (2012) proposed that individuals’ political will derives from wanting to fulfil either instrumental self-interested outcomes, or relational outcomes by acting politically to improve outcomes for others. Subsequently, Kapoutsis et al. (2017) found empirical support for political will comprising self-serving and benevolent dimensions, suggesting that individuals are motivated to act politically for their own ends, but may also behave politically in order to represent the needs of the wider collective. The political will scale developed by Kapoutsis et al. (2017) has been shown to predict political behaviors such as impression management, ingratiation and voice behavior, although there is less evidence to demonstrate how individuals develop political will and under what conditions they may form self-serving or benevolent political motivations.

To explore this issue, it is important to recognize that political will is considered to be a form of trait-like intrinsic motivation, because it serves as a relatively stable desire to fulfill individuals’ needs for development, competence, and autonomy at work (Blickle et al., 2018). Political will is also thought likely to develop and adapt in relation to different experiences and political contexts (Maher et al., 2018; Treadway et al., 2005). Treadway (2012) suggests, for example, that political will comprises an assessment of risk, where individuals examine the organizational climate for cues which regulate the types of political behaviors they choose to adopt. Similarly, Kapoutsis (2016) put forward the concept of political prudence, suggesting that political actors need to take account of the situational context, the power required, and the costs and consequences of political behavior when



choosing to engage in the political arena. Empirically, Doldor and colleagues (2013; 2017), found that leaders' willingness to engage in organizational politics was underpinned by contextually informed beliefs about the functional outcome, the moral implications, and the emotional experience of their political behaviors and that these beliefs underpinning political will mature over leaders' careers. Overall, this research stream points to the construct of political will being part of a wider motivational process, which encompasses a number of overlooked cognitive mechanisms that involve interpreting political contexts and events.

#### *Linking political cognition to motivation: attributions and scripts*

A fruitful concept to explore the link between political cognition and motivation is that of attributions. Attribution theory suggests that individuals are compelled to explain the causes of significant, novel or surprising events in order to make their environment more predictable (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1985). Attributional theorists (Munton et al., 1999; Weiner, 1985) propose that causal explanations (e.g. ability, luck or effort) can be classified on a number of dimensions: internal (i.e. caused by the actor) or external (i.e. others, or the situation); controllable or uncontrollable; stable (i.e. constant), or unstable (i.e. varies over time); personal (i.e. unique) or universal (i.e. typical of others); and global (i.e. widespread influence) or specific (i.e. small sphere of influence). Attribution theory claims that different patterns of attributions drive individuals' subsequent expectations, and motivation (Harvey et al., 2017; Weiner, 1985).

Growing evidence demonstrates that attributions, as cognitive processes, predict a wide range of organizational phenomena (Harvey et al., 2014) such as: employee turnover intentions (Harvey et al., 2008), followers' perceptions of abusive supervision (Martinko et al., 2011), employees' career narratives (Godshalk and Fender, 2015), and political-like extra-role behaviors (Martinko and Mackey, 2019). However, organizational politics

scholarship has not yet leveraged this theoretical lens in examining individuals' political cognition. This is surprising because political events are likely to elicit attributions as they are usually novel, disruptive, ambiguous, and imbued with power, leading individuals to engage in causal searches to make sense of their experiences (Hochwarter et al., 2020; Martinez et al., 2012). Therefore, consistent with attribution theory (Weiner 1985), attributions for political events can provide insight into the cognitive processes that drive people to be politically motivated.

We propose that by studying commonalities in the attributions made for specific political events, it is possible to identify broader political cognitive scripts (Edwards, 1994), which are indicative of embedded political learning (Ammeter et al., 2002). Cognitive scripts are mental schemas that link sequentially events, objects, roles, emotions and outcomes related to familiar situations (Schank, 1982; Schank and Abelson, 1977) and develop through personal experiences, interpersonal communication and vicarious learning (Gioia and Manz, 1985). Like attributions, scripts enable employees to understand and to respond behaviorally in appropriate ways to ongoing organizational events (Gioia and Poole, 1984). Nevertheless, scripts vary from attributional styles, which are trait-like tendencies to make certain patterns of attributions (Martinez et al., 2012), because they capture experiential learning and develop over time.

Scripts outline expectations, rules and norms about the political scene, such as access to resources, contacts, or assets in the wider environment, and how people, including themselves, will behave (Abelson, 1981; Gioia and Poole, 1984). Scripts can also contain different agentic or motivational 'tracks' capturing knowledge about the various options to personally navigate the event in question (Wofford and Goodwin, 1994). Tracks are often represented in the form of if-then possibilities, such as "If my manager practices favoritism, then I can leave/ complain/ work harder". Scripts therefore contain a motivational element, as

they encapsulate how receptive individuals might be to enact certain behaviors (e.g., political activity: Leddo and Albelson, 1986; Mitchell et al., 2000), but are distinct from political will because they outline a range of political and non-political possibilities for action, rather than a consistent desire for political activity. As such, examining both the political scene and the motivational tracks related to the scene can provide deeper understanding of political scripts and can reveal shared knowledge about how politics operates in organizations and how experiences shape political motivation.

### *Ethnicity and political motivation*

Studies about subjective interpretations of politics discussed in the preceding sections indicate that individual political cognition can be reflective of group experience (e.g., seniority and gender: Buchanan, 2008; Doldor, 2017). In this study we focus on ethnicity, which is important for developing knowledge of political cognition and motivation because, as a stigmatized group, ethnic minority employees are likely to perceive politics as particularly salient, and even racialized (Charles and Nkomo, 2012). Racialized politics signify “the extent to which individuals believe their racial category or identity is influencing their social interactions and shared meanings within the organization, as well as their opportunity to navigate the environment in a way that is favorable to them and members of their racial category or identity” (Charles and Nkomo, 2012, p. 459). For ethnic minority employees, these racialized perceptions stem from several factors: having uneven access to organizational networks vital to accessing information and resources (Bell and Nkomo, 2001; Ferris et al., 2014) and fewer intimate network relationships (Ibarra, 1995) compared to White employees, which creates uneven insight into the ‘rules of the game’ for career progression (Ferris et al., 1996); experiencing stigma threat (Doldor and Atewologun, 2021; Crocker et al., 1991) or racial bias in performance appraisal (Wilson, 2010); and having to

navigate subtle discrimination as part of the informal experience of the workplace (van Laer and Janssens, 2011). Exclusion from these aspects of the political arena contributes to increased workplace stress and fewer opportunities for career progression for ethnic minorities (Ogbonna, 2019; Wyatt and Silvester, 2015; Ferris et al., 2014).

As a result, ethnic minority workers engage in significant cognitive effort to understand their workplace experiences, including wide attributional searches and increased monitoring of the environment to interpret behavioral cues rather than take feedback at face value, due to perceptions of bias (Wyatt and Silvester, 2015). Furthermore, because ethnic minorities may experience politics as rooted in group and sociohistorical contexts, personal interpretations and meanings may be shared as scripts, linking group experiences to the cognition and motivation of individuals (Ammeter et al., 2002; Charles and Nkomo, 2012; Gioia and Manz, 1985). If shared political scripts are shaped by the dynamics of racial exclusion at work, then scripts may affect not just how ethnic minority employees make sense of politics but also the motivational pathways available to them. Giving voice to ethnic minority employees and their experiences of politics can provide insight into how political interactions that may appear neutral are experienced as problematic or discriminatory, making it possible to identify ways in which organizations can better support ethnic diversity in the political arena.

Our aims were therefore: (1) to explore attribution-based political scripts held by ethnic minority employees about political events they have experienced; (2) to examine the relationship between employees' political cognitions about lived political events and their motivation to engage in the political arena, as encapsulated within political scripts; and (3) to explore the relationship between employees' political scripts and their political will.

## Methodology

### *Participants and data collection*

Our participants were 40 non-managerial ethnic minority employees from a range of private and public sector organizations in the UK including the civil service, finance, banking and energy firms. Of the 40 participants, 20 were female, 23 British Asian, 12 Black British and 5 identified as mixed ethnicity. Their average length of career was 15.78 years ( $SD=7.19$ ) and time in current roles was 3 years ( $SD = 3.27$ ). Their average age was 39.29 years ( $SD = 7.99$ ). Methodologically, our ethnic minority sample represented a group who are likely to experience politics similarly and share meanings of political activity, so they provided an opportunity to examine underlying political scripts that were constructed collectively. Our sample was also non-managerial, which is important because extant research has focused on the political experiences of managers who hold roles for which politics is required, whose power and status arguably facilitate their effectiveness in political activity, and who are likely to have more entrenched political scripts as indicated by prior research. By studying non-managerial participants, it was possible to identify how politics is interpreted and political motivations are formed by those whose motivation to be political may be more personal rather than role prescribed; unlike managers, non-managerial employees have less exposure to certain political aspects of the workplace, and are more likely to be in the process of dynamically forming political scripts.

To uncover the link between political cognition and motivation we first used semi-structured interviews to capture the spontaneous causal attributions produced by our participants about political events they had experienced during their careers. This approach varies from most attributional studies in organizational research, which treat attributions as internal, private phenomena and often constrain participants to a set of causal options using questionnaires. Instead, we consider attributions as part of natural discourse, where causal

explanations are used to build shared knowledge about why events occur (Silvester, 2004; Wong and Weiner, 1981). We therefore used interviews because they allow participants to control the attributions they produce and provide a rich insight into their causal beliefs. We began our interviews by asking participants to discuss what workplace politics meant to them. Typically, their explanations were in line with how politics is framed in the organizational literature (i.e., as informal, unsanctioned and self-serving behaviors), although two participants did need steering to discuss *organizational* politics rather than national party politics. To elicit attributions, and take an event-focused approach to organizational politics, we used the Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954), by asking participants to identify and describe specific critical events when workplace politics was beneficial or detrimental for their career. For each event, we asked probing questions about what happened, who was involved, how participants reacted and what were the key lessons they had learned about workplace politics. Interviews lasted on average 40 minutes, were recorded and professionally transcribed, eliciting 678 pages of qualitative narrative data.

Three weeks after their interview, participants were asked to complete a short follow-up questionnaire online which measured their motivation to engage in organizational politics using the political will scale (Kapoutsis et al., 2017). It was then possible to examine how the political scripts, identified from the underlying patterns of attributions for political events, related to self-serving and benevolent political will, as measured by the eight item Political Will Scale developed by Kapoutsis et al. (2017). Sample items include “Engaging in politics is an attractive means to achieve my personal objectives” (self-serving  $\alpha=.60$ ) and “Doing good for others sometimes means acting politically” (benevolent  $\alpha=.78$ ). Participants responded to items using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=agree) - see supplementary material 1 for the full scale.

### **Data analysis and findings**

To examine the cognitive processes that underpin political motivation we adopted a four-stage process to our analysis. First, we extracted attributions and assigned them quantitative codes to denote the attribution dimensions they represented. Then we analyzed these for underlying patterns to identify shared political scripts using Latent Class Analysis. We returned to the qualitative data to examine the content of scripts and identified knowledge structures about the political scene/environment, and associated motivational tracks, thus linking cognition to motivation. Finally, we examined the relationship between each script and the quantitative rating of political will (Kapoutsis et al., 2017) to determine how the dynamic cognitive and motivational mechanisms encapsulated within the scripts were related to the more stable motivational construct of political will.

*Step 1: Coding causal attributions*

We extracted and quantitatively coded attributions for political events from interview transcripts using the Leeds Attributional Coding System (LACS: Munton et al., 1999), which involved five stages (outlined fully in supplementary material 2): identifying the source of attributions (which for this study was semi-structured interviews), extracting attributions, identifying the ‘agent’ and ‘target’ of the event, coding attributions using binary ratings linked to each attribution dimension, and analyzing the data (Silvester, 2004). A total of 810 attributions were extracted from the 40 interviews ( $M=20.28$ ,  $SD=6.50$ ). Interviewees made more attributions for political events that they perceived as being detrimental for their careers ( $M=11.30$ ,  $SD=5.77$ ), compared to those that were beneficial ( $M=8.92$ ,  $SD=6.07$ ). Table 1 reports the percentages, counts, definitions and coding reliabilities for each attributional dimension. Table 2 reports the means, standard deviations and correlations for the study variable and shows that events that were perceived as beneficial and attributed to unstable or short-term causes have a positive relationship with benevolent political will, suggesting they imbue individuals with motivation for behaving politically in order to help others ( $r=.44$ ,

$p < .01$ ). While this analytical step informed us about the prevalence of different types of attributions, it did not capture how these attributions co-vary to form patterns or political scripts.

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*Step 2: Identifying political scripts using latent class analysis*

To establish whether there were shared themes or patterns underlying the attributions, which would be indicative of political scripts, we analyzed the attributions coded in Step 1 using Latent Class Analysis (LCA: Collins and Lanza, 2010) in Mplus 8. Attribution research has typically taken a variable-centered approach, so that each attributional dimension (e.g., stability) is examined separately (cf., Osborne and Weiner, 2015). In contrast, LCA is a pattern approach, which provides the opportunity to explore how attributional dimensions co-vary; for example, how explanations that are attributed to stable, uncontrollable *and* internal causes simultaneously, may be associated with outcomes. In doing so, LCA can identify how different sets of attributional dimensions (i.e., class indicators), form patterns of naturally occurring ‘classes’ or scripts (Osborne and Weiner, 2015). To examine how the scripts differed in relation to political will when controlling for the covariates gender and tenure, we used the manual-BCH approach in Mplus. This method is advocated for analyses of continuous distal outcomes (i.e., political will) because it avoids shifts in classes (or scripts) during analyses and accounts for unequal variances (Asparouhov and Muthen, 2014); we also accounted for the nesting of attributions within participants using the cluster option in MPlus.

We conducted two LCA models on attributions, one for detrimental and one for beneficial events and found for each that a three-class model fit the data best (see supplementary material 3). Table 3 provides the proportion of the attributions that each class



(script) accounted for, and the probabilities for attribution dimensions assigned to each class, as well as example attributions for each script.

*Step 3: Elucidating the content of political scripts*

Because we used interviews to elicit attributions, it was possible to examine the qualitative *content* of the political scripts identified in Step 2, as well as the attributional dimensions that they represented. Together, these data sources enable us to map out how participants interpret political environments ('Political Scene') and how these political cognitions inform their political motivation ('Motivational tracks'). We charted each script's template by (1) examining the attributional dimensions identified through the quantitative LACS coding and grouped through LCA (2) inspecting the qualitative attributions grouped under each script for similarities in their content, and (3) revisiting the raw qualitative interview data surrounding the attributions in the original interviews to explore the scripts' scene, actors and behaviors, including the different motivational tracks, or paths. Table 3 contains a summary of the scripts and below we present the three detrimental and three beneficial political scripts identified.

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*Detrimental script 1 (D1): Navigating clandestine and exclusive political cultures.* This script encompassed 27% of attributions and was characterized by experiences that were attributed to external (100%), uncontrollable (96%), stable (83%), universal (90%) and global (96%) causes and where organizational culture (57%) or colleagues (23%) were most likely to be the perceived as the agents of political events. The script outlined a political scene consisting of clandestine and competitive organizational cultures, where individuals were seen to engage in political behaviors to manipulate or bypass formal systems for their own

gains. Because attributions in this script were largely (90%) ‘universal’, it suggests participants felt these negative behaviors were widespread across their organizations:

Promotion seems to be more about who you know than about merit. There is no formal merit process for assessing people at whether they’re fit to move to another position [...] Everything seems to be based on what ‘the elders’ think, whether you receive the sprinkling of... whether you receive the blessing to go ahead. (P19)

While on paper they look fairly transparent, there’s a lot of underhand dealings if you like and behind the scenes and maneuvering that really settles things before you actually get to the formal process. (P39)

The script referred to political cultures as being difficult to access. The ethnic homogeneity of organizational networks was particularly salient in this script and viewed as a wider signal of an organization’s (lack of) commitment to diversity:

That I think is where it makes a difference, where you have a very homogenous incumbent pool of people, breaking into that becomes hard [...] that can be ethnicity, gender, disability and so forth. So effectively you’ve got a cohort of White middle-aged men largely, they can’t empathize and can’t relate and therefore will be reluctant to see anyone different as being *oh yeah, this person will fit in with us*. (P22)

Because this political scene was considered permanent (stable), the implications of this script were wide reaching (global) for individuals’ careers:

Opportunities arose to people who socialized after work with individuals of the wider organization. There is a lot of people that I started off working with who were at the same grade as me and have progressed quite rapidly within their careers whereas... I’ve not sort of progressed. There is a lot of politics at play. It’s more about who you know rather than what you know. (P17)

The dominant motivational tracks, or agentic pathways outlined by this script comprised being guarded in political interactions with others, considering others as untrustworthy, and choosing to sit on the side lines of the political arena:

I've taken a step back [...] I've not been able to go into politics openly. (P11)

I've become a lot more cynical. The longer you stay in an organization I think you become more in tune to the overall ethos and atmosphere and you can see things for what they're meant to be [...] I've probably become less willing to challenge...I will challenge within my team but you dare not say something too loud. (P5)

This script depicts workplace cultures that are non-inclusive, highly competitive and rife with underhand, self-serving political actors. It frames participants as powerless bystanders in the political scene, motivating individuals to be politically cautious and to withdraw from the political arena.

*Detrimental script 2 (D2): Shielding oneself against managerial (mis)treatment.* This was the largest script for detrimental political experiences, encompassing 60% of attributions. Direct managers (50%) and other managers (38%) were most likely to be agents in this script, and events were attributed to external (100%), uncontrollable (100%), unstable (84%), personal (54%) and specific (56%) causes. The political scene portrayed managers engaging in political behavior, such as favoritism or networking, which resulted in participants suffering as 'collateral damage':

It transpired it was the senior management's friend who had [got the role I went for].

[HR] didn't know anything about it and the senior management just wanted somebody who'd been on the same course as them to get the job instead. (P16)

This script also depicted managers as intentionally causing negative experiences for participants, including attempting to control and bully individuals. Examples included

excluding individuals from workplace events or groups, abruptly changing procedures for their own gain, undermining and scapegoating them and controlling their career:

She more or less excluded me from management team meetings [...] it was a really negative experience because I didn't feel part of the management team. (P3)

So the bullying line manager's manager – that had a negative impact on my career because I was being stopped from applying for posts on the team. (P21)

However, attributions were not significantly personal (54%) which, when reviewing the content of causal statements, reflected that participants often interpreted the negative treatment they received as racially motivated, and therefore targeted blanketly across ethnic minorities, rather than due to their own unique or personal characteristics:

I was the only ethnic minority within that team. Could be the reason. Might not be the reason. I don't know; I'm not in their head. But the way they were behaving towards me there was no rational reason behind it. There was nothing to do with my work because I know that my work is of a high standard, I'm very experienced and in other areas that I've worked I've had very, very... pretty excellent feedback frankly on my work so it's within this particular area I was being... I felt constantly criticized and under observation almost and, yeah, being held back and boxed in. (P38)

In response to these events, participants were motivated to withdraw from their relationships at work, to lose trust in their managers, opt to wait out their tenure and to turn toward formal practices for reassurance:

I document everything now. That's what I've done. Meetings [...] I learnt at later stages document and minute everything, especially when trust has been tarnished. (P32)

Further motivational tracks included individuals looking externally for support, either by circumventing their managers or by fighting perceived injustices via formal grievances or approaching their unions:

There have been barriers put in place or this politics that they're playing at the moment, you have to scratch our back or you have to be within our group for you to go for promotion. If you're not then you're deemed as being one of the outsiders. So, like myself, I had to put in a grievance. (P11)

Overall, this script speaks to the power that managers hold over their subordinates. The script positions employees as rather helpless in the face of their managers' political behavior, which either intentionally or unintentionally has the power to harm employees' careers. This led employees to become either cynical about management or more resolute in their use of formal channels and procedures or waiting-out their manager's reign.

*Detrimental script 3 (D3): Taking the moral high ground and opting out of politics.* This script accounted for 13% of attributions for detrimental political experiences, and was characterized by internal (93%), controllable (62%), stable (59%), personal (92%), and global (75%) causes, where the agent was the speaker (100%). This script depicted a scene where individuals took responsibility for negative political outcomes. Participants discussed how their actions had led to political blunders and were motivated to be frank and forthright rather than employ impression management tactics:

I feel sometimes that I may miss the opportunity to do the politics because I'm quite straightforward [...] if I see something or I don't like it I'll say it and people are like *you just have to be mindful of what you say to who* and maybe it's better but I just need to get a bit more politically savvy. (P14)

If I was a bigger networker, actually said all the right things and actually and was a 'yes' person, that may help. But actually...I'm that person and if I see there's a better way of doing something or there was an issue I will actually say it; and I suppose that doesn't go down well. (P21)

The theme of earnestness was pervasive in this script, where participants described losing out on promotion or workplace opportunities because they viewed politics as immoral.

Attributions were personal (92%), which might indicate that participants felt they were unique (compared to their organizational colleagues) in their moral stance, and causes were often uncontrollable (38%) suggesting this was something participants sometimes considered as inherent in their character. Indeed, many participants talked about this stance relating to their ethnic minority upbringing. The scene referred to politics as a game, while the motivational tracks referred to individuals being guarded with political actors, such as senior managers, and actively choosing not to play, instead focusing on proving their own merit:

For me morally it's incorrect to feel that I should jump above anybody else to get promotion unless I deserved it whereas politically some people – or morally – some people don't think that way and they would do it [...] it's made me think I don't want to be part of a workforce that's like that. (P16)

The way I was brought up, you're judged on your abilities and you get rewarded for the work that you put in - that's my whole thing and this is why I have a problem. I mean it would have been easy for me and in fact it *would* be very easy for me to put my head above the parapet, do as they say, get that job from my mentor and go ahead and retire [...] my pores in my body would not let me do it! No, I couldn't do it. No.

There's no way. There's no way. It's like crossing the picket line. (P27)

Overall, this script positions individuals as motivated to behave openly and sincerely, which was seen as antithetical to being political. This script casts participants as uniquely principled, interpreting politics as unethical, undesirable and dishonorable and as individuals who choose to opt out of playing the game. The next three scripts were derived from beneficial, rather than detrimental experiences with politics.

*Beneficial script 1 (B1): Going with the flow of positive organizational politics.* This script, accounted for 14% of attributions, where beneficial events were attributed to external (98%), uncontrollable (93%), stable (75%), universal (98%) and global (94%) causes, and the agent was most likely the organizational culture (62%). The content of this script described a political scene where politics is explicitly recognized and actively encouraged within organizational culture, as a sanctioned requirement for some roles and a form of healthy competition:

Getting promoted, say, to Partner is very much a political process so it's about having the right people essentially putting their neck on the line to say, "Yeah, you're going to be a good leader"... it's become the norm really so it only impacts you when you've done your work in the year and that whole process of working hard, playing the politics and all that stuff hasn't worked and it's frustrating then but, yeah, if it works obviously positively then you can't really complain, it's a good thing. (P6)

This script not only described politics as embedded in the organizational culture, but also featured organizations as facilitators of political engagement. Attributions often referenced support that was provided to develop political skills via training programs, mentors or formalized network opportunities. Often these opportunities stemmed from positive action development programs and ethnic minority support forums.

The [development] program actually gives you a mentor who's [senior].... and hopefully she will help me to move onto a higher grade. (P25)

I mean as a member of the BAME<sup>1</sup> network, race network, I mean I think I've learned a hell of a lot. (P4)

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<sup>1</sup> Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic – acronym used in the United Kingdom to refer to ethnic minority groups

Participants were motivated to step out onto the political stage by building networks and communities to progress and protect their careers, therefore actively opting into the political culture of their organizations:

[My progression] has actually been quite rapid... So generally, I think it's an important factor to be cognizant of. [...] Our organization is a very political beast. You need to make sure that you've got supporters within the organization and that you know how to network well and that's sort of drilled home from a very early point once you join.  
(P13)

However, one motivational track highlighted the pressure felt by participants to silence their voice, assimilate or fit into political cultures, adjusting their behavior so that they are seen as 'toeing the line':

That's something I find difficult to become - a yes man - so I think it will be tough for me to change but I've started to change slowly to try and say yes and just doing things; and it has actually helped me. (P10)

This script therefore primarily frames personal political action as driven by the wider organizational context, where a positive form of career-enhancing political behavior is sanctioned and prevalent.

*Beneficial script 2 (B2): Allowing senior gatekeepers to play the game on your behalf.* This script encompassed 33% of attributions for beneficial political events. Attributions were made to external (99%), uncontrollable (89%), unstable (98%), personal (83%) and specific (53%) causes, where the agents were most likely to be direct managers (43%), other managers (23%) or mentors (23%) within the organization. This script refers to a political scene where managers provided support for professional development, including nominating individuals for training, promotions and new roles. Political events were often coded



‘personal’ because managers were regarded as having selected the participant for special treatment or sponsorship:

When there’s any mini projects or possible promotions coming up they’d give me the heads-up or give me a call and say, “I think this is something that you need to apply for,” and they’d think of me or try and push me to apply for promotions. (P10)

We got on, he liked me, he wanted to help me get on and therefore he found opportunities for me to move up the ladder ... it was informal, a tap on the shoulder-type thing. (P22)

Motivational tracks framed participants’ agency in the political landscape as nested in their managers’ political actions, where managers and mentors are go-betweens, engaging in networking and influence behaviors on behalf of the speaker. This was often because managers had better access to networks. This participant described how a manager lobbied other senior colleagues to ensure they were allowed access to a development course:

She actually ensured that the passage going through was made easier because she had done the engaging with all the right stakeholders beforehand. (P21)

Participants also perceived this political patronage as temporary or short term (unstable), attributing it to ‘luck’ or ‘fortune’, serving to further displace their impetus for political action:

I was really, really lucky to have managers and senior managers who really supported me and challenged me. (P3)

I was fortunate [...] that I was given opportunities that weren’t open to other people purely on the basis of who I’d worked for previously. (P9)

Despite having ‘outsourced’ political behavior, individuals did report becoming more cognizant of the political arena and the importance of reputation building. Yet their political learning centered on wanting to gain the favor of sponsors and patrons via hard work,

competence and task performance rather than adopting political behaviors to foster such relationships:

His wisdom, his insight and his mentoring helped me a huge deal. [...] He was probably the turning point. [...] I think I now realize that I've been completely in the dark and I think a realistic view of the workplace is that... I used to have a negative view that *oh so-and-so has made it up in high places and they're getting all these jobs* – that used to be the negative view, as in it being unfair, and now I think the positive view of it is where you've worked hard and you are skilled, you are knowledgeable but you're not getting a break because you don't have anyone in an influential position to champion you and now I realize the importance of that, that you do need to get yourself known and recognized by people in a position to help you. (P38)

Attributing political behavior to luck or help from others displaces the political agency of speakers. This script therefore primarily frames managers and mentors as gatekeepers who not just facilitate access to the political arena but legitimize it, assuaging the negative connotations of political behavior. This political script provides the lesson that in order to gain recognition and reputation it is important to distinguish oneself by demonstrating exemplary performance, and if fortunate, more powerful political sponsors may support your career aspirations.

*Beneficial script 3 (B3): Learning the game and crafting personal rules of engagement.*

This script was the largest for beneficial political events, accounting for 54% of attributions. The script was characterized by explanations that attributed beneficial events to internal (96%), controllable (95%), unstable (71%), personal (88%) and global (67%) causes, where the agent was most likely to be the speaker (100%). This pattern points to an effort attribution (internal, unstable: Weiner 1985), which was reflected in the political scene: the

script depicted individuals working hard at political behaviors, such as building relationships, which they legitimized by deeming it essential to successfully fulfil the task requirements of their roles:

I mapped out in my role I knew there are key areas or key people I needed to know within certain areas like training and stakeholder teams so I deliberately made ways to get in there just to know key people within those teams and fairly senior levels in terms of going to networking events I'd go or any lunches I'd go with their teams just to... because I know it's quite bureaucratic in big companies and if you know certain senior managers things get done a lot quicker in my experience. (P10)

In addition to performance outcomes, one motivational track reflected a changing mindset as a result of experience whereby gaining recognition and reputation through political behavior was acknowledged as being important for personal, self-serving career success (e.g. promotion). Participants therefore placed emphasis on upskilling, observing others and proactively seeking political guidance:

I'm a bit more political now in the way I interact with people and recognizing that it's not just about how well you do your work, how well... it's not just about the quality of the output but it's about how you go about doing it. (P19)

I've engaged a mentor, somebody that I can clearly confide in and talk through things and get advice and counselled in terms of what it is that gives you the really edge or maybe breaking some of these circles. (P39)

However, the motivational tracks also highlighted the importance of integrity when engaging in political behavior:

I did an interview and I naturally would take copious notes and then someone else who was at that meeting, say a manager, would maybe test me by "Didn't you say, [name], this, this, this?" No, I didn't and I think I was being tested in a way: do I

agree with them and support them and possibly make their life easier even though it doesn't sit well with me, or do I just keep my integrity and say, "No, I have a different view and here are my notes to show that." And I took the latter approach: "I don't agree that that was how the meeting went down. This is my view" [...] I think from that I was respected because I stuck to my guns. (P4)

The motivational tracks also referred to engaging in formalized political action, such as becoming active in unions, representing others and engaging in political activity to tackle diversity issues:

Previously there might have been small politics in relation to time off allowed for religious events or religious holidays so we've had to fight together with the union to have those days off and I spoke up in a race conference about how members were restricted in celebrating their festive Ede in our culture. (P11)

I wasn't penalized for being honest and being truthful; I was more like whistle blowing. So, they didn't penalize me on that, in fact I was actually promoted. (P34)

Overall, this script underscores learning in the political arena and lays out personal rules of political engagement. The script suggests that politics is acceptable when legitimized through job performance, which gives individuals the go-ahead to engage in more self-serving behavior and to develop political skills to enable them to do this effectively. It also points to the importance of maintaining integrity and using political activity to stand up for personal values (including for issues related to diversity and inclusion at work).

#### *Step 4: Political scripts and political will*

Because we were interested in how the cognitive processes of attribution based political scripts underpinned political motivation, we examined whether the scripts were associated with differences in participants' ratings of benevolent and self-serving political

will, as measured three weeks post interviews. We tested for significant differences between the script-specific means (intercepts) of benevolent and self-serving political will using Wald tests. We also controlled for the effects of gender and tenure. First, we looked at differences between the detrimental event scripts (1-3). Neither gender nor years of experience had significant relationships with benevolent ( $\beta = -.18, p > .05$  and  $\beta = .22, p > .05$  respectively) or self-serving ( $\beta = -.30, p > .05$  and  $\beta = .04, p > .05$ ) political will. Although intercepts were lower for self-serving political will, Wald tests revealed no significant differences between the scripts associated with either outcome (see Figure 1). This finding suggests that political will does not change significantly across detrimental scripts D1, D2 or D3.

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INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE  
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For beneficial political event scripts (B1-B3) analyses of the covariates suggested that neither gender, nor years of experience had significant relationships with benevolent ( $\beta = -.25, p > .05$  and  $\beta = .02, p > .05$ ), or self-serving ( $\beta = -.44, p > .05$  and  $\beta = .00, p > .05$ ) political will. As shown in Figure 2, the intercept for ‘Going with the flow of positive organizational politics’ (B1) was highest in association with benevolent political will (3.81) and this was significantly higher than the intercept for ‘Using gatekeepers to play the game on your behalf’ (B2: 3.33;  $\chi^2 = .48, p < .01$ ) and ‘Learning the game and defining personal rules of engagement’ (B3: 3.45;  $\chi^2 = .37, p < .01$ ), but there was no significant difference between these latter two scripts, or between the scripts when examining self-serving political will. However, when comparing the means of benevolent and self-serving political will outcomes, all three scripts for beneficial political events were more strongly associated with benevolent political will (B1:  $\chi^2 = .99, p < .01$ ; B2:  $\chi^2 = .56, p < .05$ ; B3:  $\chi^2 = .63, p < .01$ ).

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INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE  
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These results indicate that scripts derived from beneficial political events are more associated with benevolent than self-serving political will, and that participants report higher benevolent political will in relation to political scripts derived from organizational environments with positive political cultures.

### **Discussion**

We sought to identify how attribution based political scripts can provide insight into the cognitive processes that underpin political motivation. We conducted interviews with 40 ethnic minority employees, from which we extracted and coded 810 spontaneously produced attributions about political events. Using attributional coding and latent class analysis, we analyzed these attributions for patterns and we identified six political scripts. Returning to the qualitative data, we examined the content of these scripts, connecting how individuals made sense of the political scenes with the motivational tracks they used to navigate them and compared each script in relation to political will. Scripts based on detrimental experiences included: (D1) Navigating clandestine and exclusive political cultures, (D2) Shielding oneself against managerial (mis)treatment, and (D3) Taking the moral high ground and opting out of politics. Scripts for political events that *benefitted* our participants included: (B1) Going with the flow of positive organizational politics, (B2) Allowing senior gatekeepers to play the game on your behalf, and (B3) Learning the game and crafting personal rules of engagement.

Although most studies have focused on the construct of political will to represent political motivation (e.g., Treadway et al., 2005), our study contributes to existing literature by expanding the theoretical lens of organizational politics research to examine a wider, dynamic cognitive process underpinning political motivation beyond the established notion of political will. The scripts we identified are theoretically important because they not only capture individuals' interpretation of workplace political events ('political scene'), but also their corresponding motivation for navigating the political context ('motivational tracks').

The scripts thus enable us to connect the political cognition of lived political events to political motivation to identify the mechanisms in which contextual experiences can shape and develop individuals' political motivation. Looking beyond the dispositional predictors and proxies of political motivation typically studied (e.g., Liu et al., 2010; Shaughnessy et al., 2017), we linked these scripts to political will to identify cognitive processes that may shape individuals' desire to more consistently engage in self-serving or benevolent political actions.

The quantitative analysis of the relationship between the scripts and political will found no statistically significant differences between the three detrimental scripts (D1-D3), suggesting that these scripts led to relatively similar levels of benevolent and self-serving political will. However, our mixed methods approach made it possible to examine the content of the political scripts and the cognitive processes that underpinned this finding. The qualitative data showed that detrimental political scripts involved political scenes that were construed as threatening and unfair and attributed to external and uncontrollable causes, such as divisive political cultures (D1) and malicious managers (D2). As a result, the motivational tracks emphasized regaining control, but rather than seize influence through political actions, the tracks suggest a desire to 'double down' on formally sanctioned and defensive practices, such as becoming guarded and wary of political actors (D1), particularly managers because of their power and political activity (D2), withdrawing from political interactions, keeping one's head down, and focusing on work formalizing procedures to protect from workplace politics (D2). In contrast, script D3 framed individuals as responsible for the detrimental effects of politics, acknowledging that their preference for taking a moral high ground may be ineffective in the political arena, reflecting the importance of attitudes for political behavior (Doldor et al., 2013). Yet, interpreting themselves as uniquely principled, followers of this script were likewise motivated to rely on meritocracy, remain frank and forthright, and demonstrate competence rather than engage in political activity. Therefore, although we

cannot conclusively claim that these tracks caused a lack of political will, the fact that the motivational tracks from all three detrimental scripts comprised motivations to disassociate from politics does explain the lack of statistical differences between the scripts. Our qualitative findings therefore indicate that rather than propelling participants into the political melee (“you stab my back, I’ll stab yours” Buchanan, 2008), negative political experiences motivated study participants to opt out of the political arena.

The beneficial scripts showed no differences in relation to self-serving political will. This finding is important because it suggests that individuals are no more willing to engage in self-serving acts when they perceive control over and have benefited from political events (e.g., script B3), than when they have less control because politics is guided by the culture (B1) or political gatekeepers, such as managers (B2). Instead, beneficial scripts showed the strongest relationships with benevolent political will - chiefly, script B1 -, suggesting that when organizations explicitly acknowledge and expect politics, provide support and opportunities for developing political skills and foster a positive political culture, individuals are more motivated to engage in benevolent political acts for the benefit of the workplace collective. This is reflected in the qualitative motivational tracks which emphasize communal relationships and conforming to the wider organizational climate. Script B2 suggested that positive political events were out of participants’ hands (i.e., external and uncontrollable) and meant they were motivated to displace their political agency onto savvy and powerful gatekeepers. B3 is the only script where participants decided to hone their political skill to proactively navigate political arenas and even then, were more motivated to do so on behalf of others. Motivational tracks within beneficial scripts emphasized submitting to cultural norms, letting others take the wheel and a drive to be communal, and were therefore more associated with benevolent, collective, political activity rather than self-serving political will.



Overall, the motivational tracks across political scripts seemed to spin participants *out of* the informal arena. Even the tracks in B1 were not necessarily unproblematic because while they indicated motivation for political activity, the engagement outlined is a rather mimetic and low-risk reaction to organizational contexts where politics are sanctioned. If both political will and skill development underpin political learning and maturation (Doldor, 2017), our finding that script B1 was most strongly associated with political will indicates a narrower path towards political maturation available for non-managerial employees, compared to samples of managers previously studied; this path relies on the organization sanctioning constructive forms of politics, perhaps because lower level and ethnic minority employees have less access to the variety of experiential and relational learning identified as germane to political learning for (White) managers (Doldor, 2017). The political scripts and political will we identified in our sample of non-managerial ethnic minority employees are in sharp contrast with the political ‘logic-of-action’ theorized by Buchanan (2008) in a study of senior managers who appeared ready to overcome ambivalence towards politics and willing to engage in self-serving political action, perhaps because they felt more empowered by virtue of their roles. These findings expand knowledge about political motivation beyond political will, suggesting it is not just dispositions or attitudes (Doldor, 2017; Treadway et al., 2005) that guide individuals’ political ambitions; it is also crucial to consider how the wider situational context and individuals’ positionality in that context shape political motivation. Our findings demonstrate the important explanatory role of attribution-based political scripts as demonstrative of the cognition that underpins political motivation, where cognitive interpretations of political contexts are linked to motivational antecedents of political will. In doing so, our study shows that political will is an end-point to a wider dynamic cognitive process of political motivation, and reveals the workings of this wider motivational process through the lens of political scripts.

Establishing these wider contextual and cognitive influences on political motivation would not have been possible without our novel, mixed methodology. Our second contribution is therefore a methodological one. Our approach is innovative because we elicited spontaneous attributions during interviews rather than providing participants with hypothetical events and asking them to choose between a set of possible causes, as customary in attributional studies (e.g., Martinko et al., 2018). We were able to identify how combinations of causal beliefs formed scripts using latent class analysis, a technique that - to the best of our knowledge - has not been used in organizational politics research, where studies typically examine the impact of individual variables rather than patterns on political perceptions (Maher et al., 2020). While research has examined evaluations of political environments using quantitative (e.g., POPs) or qualitative exploratory (e.g., Buchanan, 2008) approaches, this LCA based mixed methodology helped us uncover the content of political scripts based on participants' narrative accounts, eliciting robust patterns of political cognition and motivation while also providing rich insight into the context of political events. Thus, we provide a novel methodological toolkit to capture more systematically patterns of political cognition and to connect these to the motivational tracks that underpin political will.

A third contribution of our study was that, by exploring experiences of ethnic minority employees, we have examined a group likely to develop similar political scripts on the basis of shared stigmatized, minority status; and we provided empirical insight into how political events may be construed as discriminatory. In line with Charles and Nkomo (2012) who theorized that politics can be imbued with racial meaning, we provide empirical evidence that employees perceived a great deal of politics to be racialized and out of their control, such as being excluded from racially homogenous networks, racially-motivated bullying by managers, and feelings of being an 'outsider'. These political dynamics were found to exclude ethnic minorities at work (Bell and Nkomo, 2001; Ibarra, 1995; Ferris et al.,

1996; van Laer and Janssens, 2011; Ogbonna, 2019). Our participants made more attributions for detrimental political events than for beneficial ones, suggesting that they found these events more salient; while our data set does not allow us to ascertain whether detrimental political experiences are more frequent for ethnic minority compared to White employees, it does illustrate that ethnic minority employees may experience political events as racially motivated, or particularly ambiguous and requiring greater cognitive effort to understand whether or not they represented examples of racial prejudice (Crocker et al., 1991; Martinez et al., 2012). These findings echo research on subtle discrimination suggesting that recurrent and familiar everyday experiences, which *appear* neutral (e.g., a manager promotes a colleague) may actually represent power hierarches and organizational processes that are exclusionary, racialized and more challenging for ethnic minorities to make sense of (Dietch et al., 2003; Van Laer and Janssens, 2011).

Charles and Nkomo (2012) also theorized that individuals may believe their racial identity influences future opportunity to navigate political environments. This was reflected in the scripts' motivational tracks, which suggest that as a consequence of perceiving politics as racialized, ethnic minority employees feel disempowered in the political arena and may be unwilling to engage in self-serving politics themselves, even if it has been beneficial to them. Construing politics as inherently unfair and reflective/generative of racial inequities, the shared political scripts represented a desire to uphold integrity and focus on competence and merit to progress. Perceiving little power over political events, our non-managerial, ethnic minority participants reported a preference to rely on others to engage in the political arena on their behalf and pursued motivational strategies that formalize and legitimize political processes in order to regain control. However, by its nature politics *is* unsanctioned, illegitimate, and informal; so, while following these tracks may swerve organizational politics in the short term, the long-term implications are that these individuals could remain

excluded from the political arena, which is likely disadvantageous for their workplace experiences and career progression.

The fact that these attributions formed scripts across our sample also suggests these schemas have been developed and shared, reflecting commonalities in racialized political experiences and motivation of ethnic minority employees. Theorizing on racialized organizations claims that when such schemas are shared, they can become templates for organizational treatment of minority groups, setting out who has access to resources and creating racialized structures and justification for racial inequality (Ray, 2019). For example, if ethnic minorities have reduced access to, and agency within, the political arena they may become less-well networked, have fewer links to powerful mentors, and thus suffer impeded career progression. Instead of being taken as indicative of systemic racial disadvantage, this pattern may be misinterpreted as neutral evidence of ethnic minority underperformance, which serves to reproduce unequal treatment (van Laer and Janssens, 2011). Our findings therefore reveal how political scripts derived from racialized political experience may generate and perpetuate racial inequities at work.

#### *Limitations and future research*

We used interviews and the critical incident technique to collect our qualitative data. While this method is useful for eliciting spontaneous attributions from our participants, this process may produce self-serving biases, where individuals shift accountability of negative outcomes onto external uncontrollable causes, including discrimination, to protect self-esteem, yet may take responsibility for positive events (Hoyt et al., 2007; Larson, 1977). Future research should examine how individuals who attribute their own political behavior as advantageous but others' political behavior as detrimental reconcile these contradictions. It should also look to replicate these findings using other methodologies, such as questionnaires

which can use controllable vignettes to establish attributional styles (Kent & Martinko, 1995). Our interviews also discussed political events that had either a detrimental or beneficial impact on participants' own work and career experiences. However, we did not examine political events where others (e.g., colleagues) had experienced positive or negative outcomes. Kapoutsis et al. (2017) argue that political will is not just about achieving self-serving goals but also acting politically to represent others. Therefore, future research needs to examine attributions about outcomes where the targets are not just the speaker, but also a range of work colleagues, subordinates, managers, mentors and network contacts in organizations.

Our sample comprised ethnic minority employees because it is important to develop knowledge about how these individuals experience and navigate politics at work. This group are likely to have a heightened sensitivity to political events and therefore political scripts may be particularly salient (Charles and Nkomo, 2012). Future research should expand on this by exploring the political experiences of specific ethnic groups (e.g., Indian, Black African, White) to further examine and compare racialized politics and the formation of political scripts in groups with varying sociohistorical backgrounds. Future studies could also examine how organizationally-enabled learning in the political arena (e.g., via mentoring or sponsorship) can shape the political scripts of ethnic minority employees.

### *Practical implications*

Our findings suggest that organizational politics can be construed as racialized and importantly, this may impact how motivated ethnic minority employees are to engage in political activity. Given that political behaviors are often regarded as essential for navigating the political arena, this reticence is likely to harm their workplace experiences and career prospects (Ferris et al., 2019). To challenge racialized scripts, organizations could encourage

senior ethnic minority workers who are considered credible and successful to engage in storytelling to share constructive political scripts (Gioia and Manz, 1985), showing how potentially detrimental political scenes can be navigated successfully. However, there is danger of placing too much onus on the victim of racialized politics to change. Instead, organizations should look more systemically to improve the inclusivity of the political arena and provide individuals with equitable opportunities to develop political skills. This is challenging, considering politics is by its nature unsanctioned. However, our findings suggest that organizations can foster positive political cultures when employees behave politically for the collective benefit and where political activities such as networking are explicit and authorized. To mitigate uneven access to politics, organizations should also consider ways to eliminate ethnic biases seeped into the informality of political dynamics, for example by providing education for those with power who may perceive their political actions as neutral and offering more racially-inclusive access to career advancing political processes (e.g. mentoring and sponsorship).

### *Conclusion*

Employees' motivation to be or not to be political is not just about disposition or choosing to become a political actor. The notion of political scripts provides conceptual and methodological tools to examine how personal political experiences shape individual cognition and motivation. Political motivation is also shaped by perceptions of racialized politics and by the organizational context enabling/ restricting access to the political arena. Without organizations disrupting uneven access to the political stage, ethnic minority employees may be left waiting in the wings, watching powerlessly as seemingly 'neutral' political scenes unfold.

### **Acknowledgement:**

We would like to thank the three anonymous Human Relations reviewers and the editor for their insightful comments and guidance through the review process.

### **Funding**

This research was supported by the Richard Benjamin Trust.

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## Biographies

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**Table 1.** Attributional coding of political experiences

Attribution Dimensions	Definition	Example	Beneficial		Detrimental	
			Percent	N	Percent	N
External-Internal $\kappa = .72$						
External (0)	Originates outside the speaker (e.g. situation/others' behavior)	<i>He liked me, he wanted me to get on, → so he found me opportunities to move up the ladder/</i>	48.00	172	87.40	395
Internal (1)	Originates within the speaker (e.g. behavior)	<i>/I've achieved a good reputation ← because I have forged lots of good personal relationships with operators</i>	52.00	186	12.60	57
Uncontrollable-Controllable $\kappa = .70$						
Uncontrollable (0)	Speaker perceives the outcome not to be open to influence	<i>He started bringing his friends in, → so I got moved to a lower position/</i>	44.40	159	90.50	409
Controllable (1)	Speaker perceives cause to be easily changeable	<i>/I got awarded for that work, ← ultimately because I decided to side-step management</i>	55.60	199	9.50	43
Unstable-Stable $\kappa = .70$						
Unstable (0)	Has short term/temporary impact on career outcomes	<i>They [other applicant] had help from the senior management → so I didn't get that [role]/</i>	73.20	262	59.50	269
Stable (1)	Has an ongoing impact on the speaker	<i>I'm very proactive in how I approach work → so my name was highlighted to the head of [division]/</i>	26.80	96	40.50	183
Universal-Personal $\kappa = .61$						
Universal (0)	Speaker considers causes is typical of others/not distinctive	<i>/They tried to undermine my authority ← because everybody obviously wants to get promoted, it's all about trying to do the other person down.</i>	25.40	91	53.30	241
Personal (1)	Speaker considers cause unique to them	<i>/ in fact, to the stage where it's made me think I don't want to be part of a workforce that's like</i>	74.60	267	46.70	211

*that. ← for me, morally [behaving politically is]  
incorrect*

Specific-Global  $\kappa = .68$

Specific (0)	Unlikely to have a wide influence/considered unimportant by speaker	<i>/I didn't get that job ← <u>because the guy, he was very close with the recruiting manager</u></i>	35.80	128	37.40	169
Global (1)	Likely to influence a wide range of career opportunities	<i><u>I wasn't confident I would succeed because of the cliqueness of the organization</u> → so I looked for jobs elsewhere/</i>	64.20	230	62.60	283

*Note.* For coding purposes, causes are underlined, and arrows (→) are used to denote the direction of the outcome. A slash (/) indicates the end of an outcome in the text



**Table 2.** Relationship between political will and attributions coded

*Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations*

		M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1	Gender	.50	.50	-												
2	Career length	15.78	7.19	.12	-											
3	External-internal	.50	.28	-.15	-.02	-										
4	Beneficial	Uncontrollable-controllable	.53	.28	-.28	-.13	.91**	-								
5		Unstable- stable	.26	.25	.10	.15	.00	-.13	-							
6		Universal-personal	.74	.28	.01	.07	.56**	.50**	-.44**	-						
7		Specific-Global	.63	.26	-.06	.04	.25	.12	.38*	-.06	-					
8	Detrimental	External-internal	.13	.16	-.13	-.07	.02	.00	-.07	.02	-.16	-				
9		Uncontrollable-controllable	.09	.15	-.1	-.22	.08	.15	-.18	.03	-.34*	.58**	-			
10		Unstable- stable	.37	.23	-.11	.31	-.28	-.23	.11	-.26	-.20	.30	.20	-		
11		Universal-personal	.49	.27	.16	-.09	.12	.03	.10	.18	.10	.31*	.00	-.25	-	
12	Specific-Global	.60	.25	-.10	.23	.16	-.12	.20	-.10	-.09	.08	.14	.41**	-.10	-	
13	Benevolent political will	3.51	.83	-.11	.14	-.16	-.16	.44**	-.30	.00	-.18	-.13	.03	.06	.16	-
14	Self-serving political will	2.53	.76	-.22	-.06	.09	.12	.02	-.01	.05	-.03	-.16	-.06	.24	-.03	.42**

\*\*p<.01, \*p<.05

Correlation coefficients shown for attributions aggregated to each interviewee (N = 40)

**Table 3.** Political Scripts

Script	Attribution Pattern	Example Attributions	Political Scene	Motivational Tracks
<p>Detrimental Script 1: Navigating clandestine and exclusive political cultures (27%)</p> <p><i>Political cultures are ruthless and it's hard for BAME to break into powerful networks; therefore, I opt out/sit on the side lines</i></p>	<p>Organizational culture (57%), External (100%), Uncontrollable (96%), Stable (83%), Universal (90%), Global (96%)</p>	<p>- <i>/breaking into some of these circles. It's not easy ← because it's not formalized [...] it's all very opaque</i></p> <p>- <i>I see a culture of sort of in the shadows... depending on where people have come from, be it school, university or region or where they have trained together – that sort of thing. → so, if you are coming from elsewhere, it's definitely an uphill struggle, almost an impossible task to break into those clicks and establish yourself/</i></p> <p>- <i>and the behavior and the way the company just naturally operates → so that limits to a degree what you can say, who you can say it to and what you can and cannot do so it's those sort of things, which are some of the political challenges that I've come across/</i></p>	<p>- Organizational environment is highly political</p> <p>- Politics are covert and generally negative, competitive and ruthless</p> <p>- Minorities are excluded and find it difficult to break into powerful networks</p>	<p>- Become guarded about how you act and what you say</p> <p>- Do not trust anyone</p> <p>- Sit on the side lines of the political arena</p>
<p>Detrimental Script 2: Shielding oneself against managerial (mis)treatment (60%)</p> <p><i>Managers are ruthlessly political, will damage your career with their political games; therefore, I cover my back, work against or</i></p>	<p>Direct Manager (50%) or Other Managers (38%) External (100%) Uncontrollable (100%) Unstable (45%) Personal (54%) Specific (56%)</p>	<p>- <i>The rules were kind of changed to say well instead of an interview we'll go by consensus. So, sort of a management team then was set up to look candidates outside the formal sort of normal process → and I lost that job/</i></p> <p>- <i>we had somebody who was moved in as the Team Leader because he was popular, not because he was particularly good, and the result of that was he wasn't able to gain the respect of our team which had been previously a high performing team → and</i></p>	<p>- Managers will prioritize network relationships</p> <p>- Managers will exclude you, prevent you from doing types of work/training</p> <p>- Managers are bullies, on a power trip</p> <p>- Managers' behavior can be racially motivated</p>	<p>- Withdraw</p> <p>- Do not trust managers</p> <p>- Keep head down, wait</p> <p>- Formalize work to cover your back</p> <p>- Circumvent managers</p> <p>- Gain external support</p>

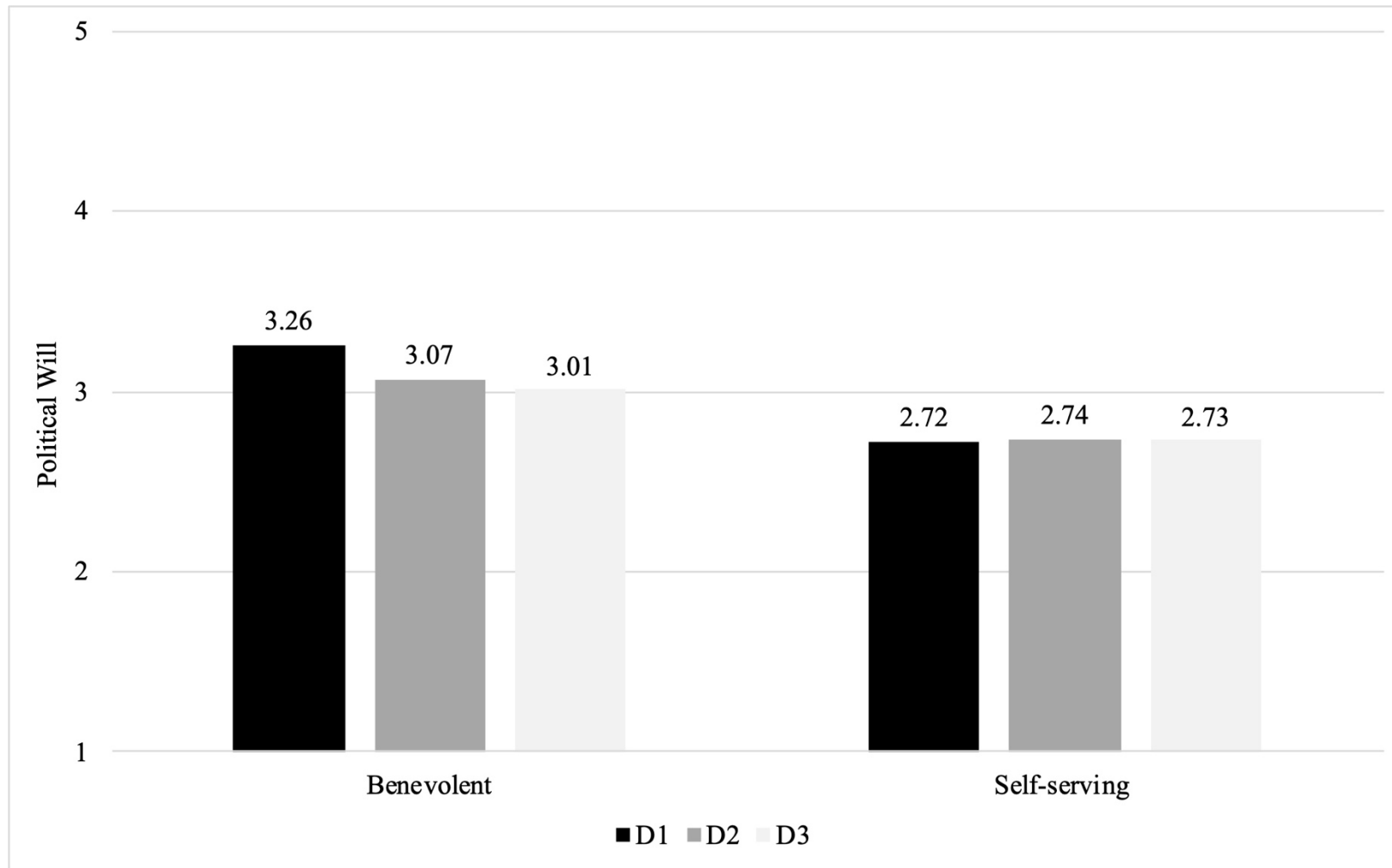
<i>around managers or opt out altogether</i>		<p><i>the team actually ended up being disbanded ... so as a consequence of that I actually moved roles/</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>/I'd been sidelined ← because at the time they took the credit [for the successful project outcome] as managers</i></li> </ul>		
<p>Detrimental Script 3: Taking the moral high ground and opting out of politics (13%)</p> <p><i>Politics is dishonorable and I prefer to remain earnest</i></p>	<p>Speaker (100%), Internal (93%), Controllable (62%), Stable (59%), Personal (92%), Global (75%)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i><u>I just find that I'm not of that temperament, I'm not that kind of person and I think because I'm not displaying those kinds of political behaviors that I think are incongruent for me</u> → I've not gotten on as well as other people have gotten on/</i></li> <li>- <i>...that social club if you like also includes the fact that you're willing to bend the rules and you're willing to bully, you're willing to step on people and <u>morally to me I don't agree with that</u> → so I would not be part of that social club, so I haven't got on.</i></li> <li>- <i><u>My value system exactly doesn't condone the game really and how it's played.</u> → I haven't progressed/...and if you play the game, you'll make great intrinsic moral and ethical value system and that is that and you may not be happy with yourself.</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- People use impression management in how they express their views</li> <li>- Other people play the game to get ahead in their careers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Remain frank and forthright</li> <li>- Be guarded when you interact with senior people</li> <li>- Choose the moral high ground, refusal to be political to achieve promotion</li> <li>- Focus on demonstrating competence</li> </ul>
<p>Beneficial Script 1: Going with the flow of positive organizational politics (14%)</p> <p><i>The organization is explicitly political in a supportive/constructive</i></p>	<p>Organizational culture (62%) External (98%) Uncontrollable (93%) Stable (75%) Universal (98%) Global (94%)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>I have maintained a good network..._ ← [there] is quite a lot of focus on <u>involvement in relationships and connectivity...we work with our clients so it's kind of engrained in the culture of the firm</u></i></li> <li>- <i>[In my first organization] we used to <u>always celebrate success, not necessarily</u></i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Politics is explicit and expected in the organization</li> <li>- The organization will provide support to develop political skills</li> <li>- The organization will provide opportunities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Step out on the political stage and engage in politics</li> <li>- Belief in the communal: surround yourself with good company</li> <li>- Assimilate, toe the line</li> </ul>

<p>way; therefore, I buy into the game, grasp opportunities, invest in relationships.</p>	<p><u>go to the pub all the time but would have kind of like, you know, lunchtime, you know, bring a cake and a cup of tea to a meeting room and if someone's done some really good work you celebrate ... There was much more celebration of success, more opportunities to kind of network, more opportunities to kind of be a bit more social.</u> → I was promoted a couple of times, so I think building that network, a strong support of people around me maybe that helped get those promotions and deliver</p>	<p>to engage in positive political practices</p>	
<p>Beneficial Script 2: Using gatekeepers to play the game on your behalf (33%)</p> <p>Senior people might pick me to support play politics on my behalf so I must demonstrate competence to catch their eye.</p>	<p>Direct manager (43%), other managers (23%), and mentors (23%)</p> <p>External (99%), Uncontrollable (89%)</p> <p>Unstable (98%)</p> <p>Personal (83%), Specific (53%)</p>	<p>- I have like an executive committee of mentors ... ← <u>it's something that the [organization] has always encouraged</u></p> <p>- <u>I'm fairly sure that my manager must have spoken to her manger to see if they could bring the job forward...</u> → within a week they told me that I'd got the job/</p> <p>- so, she, yeah, made sure there were funds available so when I did do my business case it was approved, and I got my [qualification] ← <u>she actually ensured that the passage going through was made easier because she had done the engaging with all the right stakeholders beforehand</u></p> <p>- <u>I mean I was very fortunate that ... I was able to hang on to my mentor</u> → who was very, very supportive and carried on encouraging me [to go for the job]/</p>	<p>- Managers spot talent and nurture political engagement</p> <p>- Managers play the game on behalf of those they pick out for career support</p> <p>- Politics is important for career progression</p> <p>- Let managers engage in politics on my behalf</p> <p>- Need good luck or fortune to get noticed</p> <p>- Demonstrate exemplary task performance to get noticed by managers</p>

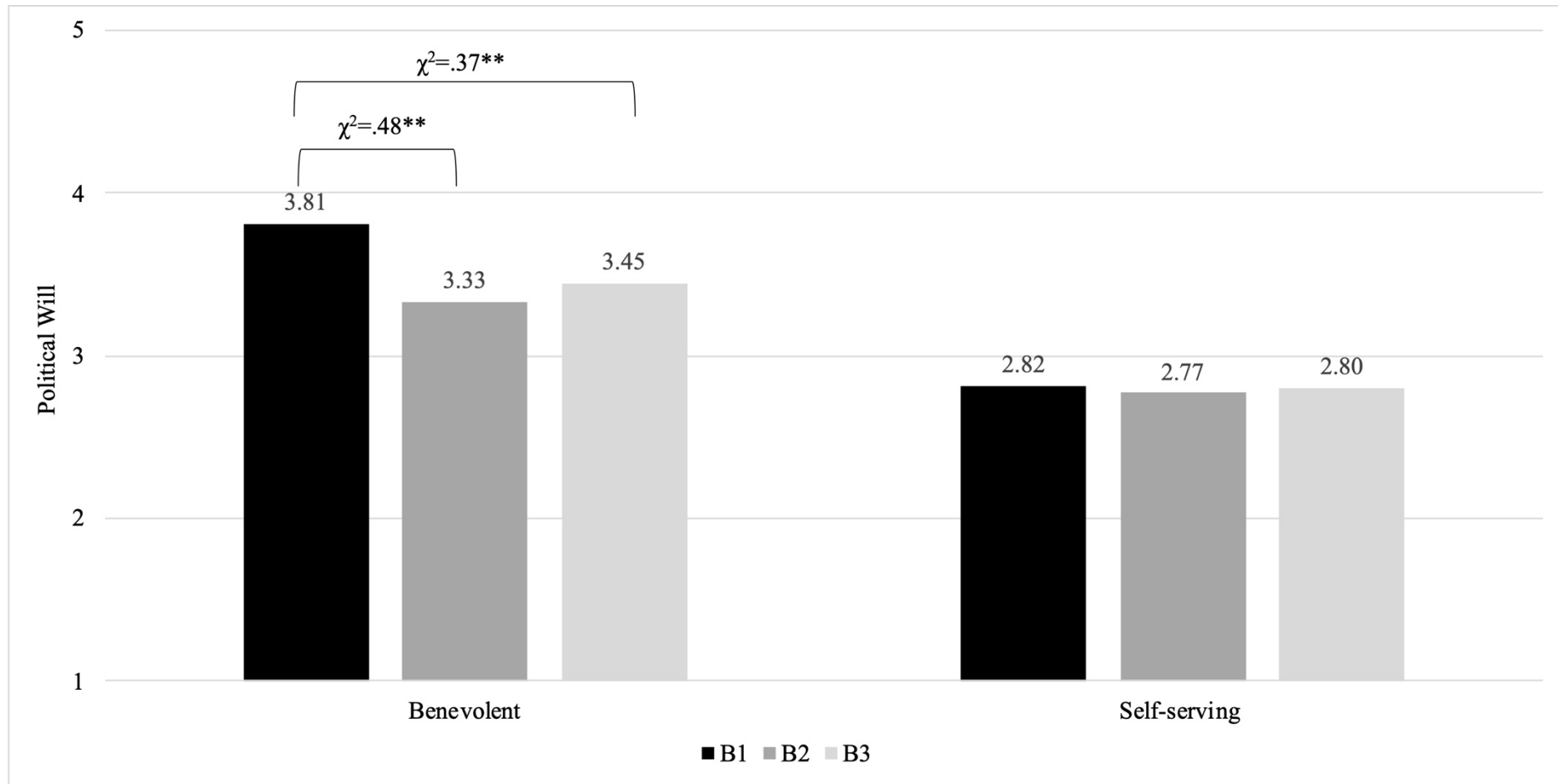
<p>Beneficial Script 3: Learning the game and defining personal rules of engagement (54%)</p> <p><i>I've learnt from difficult political experiences; therefore I seek to be savvier and more skilled in my reactions, and to define my own rules of engagement</i></p>	<p>Speaker (100%), Internal (96%), Controllable (95%) Unstable (71%) Personal (88%), Global (67%).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>I have got more access and more visibility to very senior leaders ← <u>as a result of [networking]</u> so it was me taking the control of the action because I knew that I was a certain size of fish in a quite stagnant bucket if you know what I mean.</i></li> <li>- <i>..you learn a lot about what goes on if you go down the pub with them...I found that really, really, really helpful in terms of knowing... getting the low down on people and on things and on the issues and that kind of thing → ...it was invaluable and it did help me in my work and it did help me raise my profile by, you know, through people that I socialized with from that business area/.</i></li> <li>- <i>I'm certainly more conscious, more informed about [politics] so I try and position myself in a both strategic and tactical fence and take a perspective that there is, you know, other forces that play which may not necessarily be formalized or verbalized or visual so I tend now to take in a lot more than I used to before → ....., it has given me the edge so I can break into some of these circles</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Political behaviors are often required in order to get the job done</li> <li>- Politics can be useful for gaining recognition for good work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Develop political skill to be recognized</li> <li>- Maintain integrity when behaving politically</li> <li>- Use political action to stand up for causes and to represent others</li> </ul>
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*Note.* Percentages represent assigned probabilities. For coding purposes, causes are underlined, and arrows (→) are used to denote the direction of the outcome. A slash (/) indicates the end of an outcome in the text.

**Figure 1.** Relationship between detrimental political scripts and political will



**Figure 2.** Relationship between beneficial political scripts and political will



## Supplementary Material 1: Political Will Scale

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Doing good for others sometimes means acting politically (B)

I would engage in politics to serve the common good (B)

When I am right I am willing to act politically (B)

I would use political tactics to improve my working conditions (B)

Engaging in politics is an attractive means to achieve my personal objectives (SS)

I would employ political tactics to be in my boss' in-group (SS)

Prevailing in the political arena at work would prove my competence (SS)

I would engage in politics to preserve my self-esteem (SS)

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*Note.* B= Benevolent political will, SS = self-serving political will

All items rated on a Strongly Disagree (1) -Strongly Agree (5) Likert scale

Kapoutsis, I., Papalexandris, A., Treadway, D. C., & Bentley, J. (2017). Measuring political will in organizations: Theoretical construct development and empirical validation. *Journal of Management*, 43(7), 2252-2280.

## Supplementary material 2: Coding causal attributions

We used the Leeds Attributional Coding System (LACS: Munton et al., 1999) to code our qualitative data. The LACS was designed to be a non-invasive method of analyzing attributions produced during discourse and has been used to analyze attributions in a range of organizational contexts (e.g., Silvester et al., 2002). The LACS process involves five stages: identifying the source of attributions, which for this study was semi-structured interviews, extracting attributions, identifying agents and targets, coding attributions using binary ratings, and analyzing the data (Silvester, 2004).

Causal attributions were only extracted if they (a) referred to an event that the interviewee identified as being beneficial or detrimental for their career and thus they were the 'target' or 'protagonist', and (b) related to political behavior, which we allowed



participants to define. Importantly, each political event may elicit numerous attributions. Examples of political events identified by participants included networking, favoritism, scapegoating, taking credit for others' work, bullying, mentoring, sponsorship and bending the formal workplace policies/rules. For example, the following excerpt shows a participant who felt they had been disadvantaged in an internal selection process because of managers' favoritism towards other candidates. Following the LACS, the causes are underlined, an arrow is placed pointing in the direction of the outcome, and a slash (/) indicates where the outcome ends:

*I was left to have to find my own way to try and get help in the application process whereas the senior management had actually done the form for the other individual → obviously through fact-finding which I found out about later on. And then that individual got the job and my application process was marked severely down to the lowest mark anybody could possibly get/ as well which, again, when I got... I asked other people for advice on higher grades they commented on the marks being severe but there was nothing else I could do about that. /But it transpired that the person that got the job ← was a person that was part of the social club if you like of the two people that were actually sifting the job.*

Extracted attributions were first coded for 'agent' to identify who or what participants identified as being most likely to cause of political events and included: (1) speaker, (2) line managers (3) other managers such as more senior managers or recruiting managers (4) organizational culture (5) colleagues (6) mentor and (7) other. Table S2.1 reports the percentage and counts of attributions relating to these agents, which show that interviewees were more likely to identify themselves as the agent of political opportunities (54.6%), and their direct managers as agents of detrimental events (30.8%).

**Table S2.1. Agents of Political Events**

	Beneficial		Detrimental	
	Percent	N	Percent	N
Speaker	54.50	195	13.50	61
Direct manager	14.00	50	30.80	139
Other managers	8.40	30	25.20	114
Organizational culture	7.00	25	15.70	71
Colleagues	3.60	13	11.70	53
Mentor	7.50	27	.20	1
Other	5.00	18	2.90	13

Next, each of the 810 causal attributions were binary coded using the five causal dimensions identified by the LACS: Internal-External; Stable-Unstable; Controllable-Uncontrollable; Global-Specific; Personal-Universal. Following Silvester (2004), definitions for each attribution dimension were adapted to the research context and are reported in Table 1 of the manuscript, which shows for example, that attributions were coded as stable on the basis of the cause having an ongoing impact on the speaker versus a short term or temporary impact (unstable). Table 1 also reports the percentages, counts, example attributions, and coding reliabilities for each dimension. To ensure reliability a second coder worked independently to code a random sample of 160 extracted attributions (approximately 20% of the total number of attributions extracted) and inter-rater agreement was assessed using the Kappa co-efficient ( $\kappa$ : Brennan and Prediger, 1981). Kappa values for the causal dimensions ranged from  $\kappa = .61$  to  $.72$  indicating good levels of reliability (Fleiss, 1971). The descriptive percentages and counts suggest that detrimental political events were associated with causes that were external to the speaker (87.40%) and uncontrollable (90.50%), whereas the causes of beneficial events were more likely to be unstable (73.20%) and personal (74.60%). The quantitative codes were used as a basis for the latent class analyses (step 2).

### References for Supplementary Material 3

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