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The context-specific development of political reasoning amongst council leaders: Can politics be a disruptive force for good?

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Introduction

Engaging in workplace politics is often viewed as a negative and Machiavellian force that undermines the organisation's long-term goals. However, political activities such as negotiation, persuasion, and networking are considered crucial for leadership roles (Ammeter, 2002). Whilst there is a significant body of research on the political skills necessary for successful leadership (Munyon et al., 2015), increasing research attention is directed at understanding *why* individuals participate in political activity at work (Wyatt et al., 2022). Therefore, whilst the extant literature treats political motives as more trait-like, in this paper, it is argued that by understanding context-specific political reasoning, a more proximal motivational construct, we can provide valuable insights into what guides leaders to play political games, whether for personal gain or a disruptive force for good (Ellen, 2014).

To clarify the political motivations and context-specific reasoning, we posed the following questions: (1) *What drives political leaders' actions in specific contexts?* (2) *How do their positions and seniority affect their motives?* To answer these questions, we analysed the causal reasoning statements of 60 political workers in our qualitative interviews. These workers discussed their political activities within their local council workplace. The sample included 30 officers and 30 councillors, each divided into junior, mid-level, and senior leaders. We used template analysis to identify themes in our participants' political reasoning. This resulted in six templates, allowing us to examine the content of political motivations; their differences and similarities and how they changed with seniority and experience in political work

Therefore, our study advances the field of micro-organisational politics in three ways. Firstly, it highlights the importance of understanding context-specific political reasoning in order to comprehend political motives, revealing that leaders' political motivation is more socially cognitive than previously thought. Secondly, our inductive qualitative methodology thoroughly examines political reasoning, considering the contradictions across positionality and seniority. This goes beyond the current categorical motives (such as self-serving and benevolent) studied in the dimensionality of political motivation. Thirdly, we examine political motivation in the context of political work, defined as "work undertaken by elected or appointed individuals whose roles exist to deliver, support or influence democratic government (Silvester et al., 2021). This study focuses on public servants and councillors in local councils throughout the UK. Thus we both draw from and contribute to the existing knowledge on political motivation and reasoning from political science and vitally, the growing field of study on political workers within organisational behaviour (OB) (Silvester, 2008). This allows us to compare the political reasoning of traditional non-political officers (i.e., public servants) with those whose job requires them to be political (i.e., councillors)

Literature Review

The academic enquiry into *why* individuals participate in political activity has often been seen through the lens of 'political will'. In political science, this motivation is treated as a collective construct (Post et al., 2010), binding together key decision-makers (politicians) and investigating their motivations to support an issue or policy such as climate change or reducing the risks of global disasters (Brinkerhoff, 2016). However, within organisational behaviour, research has concentrated on the individual level, defining political will as "The motivation to engage in strategic, goal-directed behaviour that advances the personal agenda and objectives of the actor that inherently involves the risk of relational or reputational capital" (Treadway, 2012).

In OB research, political will is often viewed as a dispositional factor that precedes political activity, often related to psychological needs (Treadway et al., 2005). However, more recent research has conceptualised political will as a multi-dimensional construct, including dimensions such as instrumental, relational, concern for self, concern for others, and risk (Treadway, 2012). Kapoutsis et al. (2017) validated this framework by developing the political will scale, which reduced the five dimensions to two: self-serving or benevolent stable-like political motives. However, this binary view, which suggests individuals are either motivated by self-gain or a disruptive collective good, has been challenged by scholars such as Blickle (2018), who question the existence of altruism in political behaviour. Although some scholars, such as Doldor (2017), have recognised the maturing nature of the attitudinal dimensions of political will (functional, ethical and emotional), OB research still overlooks the role of individual agency and reasoning in the political motivation process. This paper, however, brings to the fore the impact that leaders' social cognitive reasoning has on their political activity.

Whilst OB has largely neglected the influence of reasoning there is literature within political science that examines political reasoning, which has a rich tradition of examining the process of "seeking, processing and drawing inferences from information" (Lupia, McCubbins & Popkin, 2000) related to political issues, activity or workers. Research in this field has recognised the impact of factors such as education and personality (Sarat, 1975), emotion (Suhay & Erisen, 2018), institutional structures (Frochlich & Oppenheimer, 1996), common heuristics, (Kuklinksy & Quirk; 2000), and the influence of prior beliefs on processing political arguments (Taber & Kucsova, 2009). However, a deeper understanding of the context-specific political reasoning behind leaders' political motivation in the workplace can provide insights into their underlying drivers of organisational politics and

thus the factors that shape informalised and either positive or negative disruptive political activities.

Therefore, based on Westaby's (2005) theory of behavioural reasoning, we delve deeper into the analysis of political reasoning and its impact on leadership. Westaby (2005) extends previous theories on behavioral intention models (Fishbein & Azjen, 1977; Azjen, 1991) to highlight the significance of reason concepts in the motivational process. By examining the causal reasoning statements individuals make about their political behavior, we can gain insights into the context-specific political reasoning of political workers. Moreover, using an inductive qualitative methodology that considers past political events, this study allows us to identify similarities and differences among political workers based on their positionality within the political context.

Method

The political work environment is often overlooked by management, yet it has been shown to be a valuable area of contemporary research (Silvester & Wyatt, 2018). This paper focuses on a sample of 60 political workers, including 30 officers and 30 councillors, from various levels of responsibility in local councils throughout the U.K. (See: Table 1). Officers are in charge of the council's daily operations, while councillors, elected officials, concentrate on shaping the policy direction of their local council. Both political workers engage in politics: officers participate in organisational political activities, as typical in micro-organizational political literature, and councillors are expected to engage in political behaviours such as lobbying to meet the demands of their role (Silvester, Wyatt & Randall, 2014). Thus, this context provides a rich opportunity to study the nature of political reasoning

among two groups of political workers with distinct responsibilities and expectations,
bridging the gap between the different interpretations of political motivation.

Table 1: Sampling Strategy

Officers					Councillors				
	Description	Sample Size	Gender	Average Age	Description	Sample Size	Gender	Average Age	Party
Junior Level	Emerging managers within local government, generally with a level of team management responsibility	10	6 F	36	Newly elected local councillors, whereby this will be the first time they were elected	10	5 F	50	3 Conservative
			4 M				5 M		3 Labour
									4 Liberal Democrats
Mid-level Level	Middle management, with higher levels of responsibility as managing teams but not placed on the senior management team.	10	7 F	53	Councillors that have a raised profile. This includes leaders of opposition parties, vice chair of committees and experienced backbenchers	10	4 F	53	3 Conservative
			3 M				6 M		3 Liberal democrats
									2 Labour
Senior Level	Individuals within the senior management team of local councils. This includes Chief Executives to strategic directors and heads of departments placed on the senior management team.	10	2 F	59	Senior councillors, leaders or elected mayors these individuals are responsible for the overall performance of the council, alongside they will have strategic oversight of the direction of the council.	10	5 F	65	2 Independent
			8 M				5 M		6 Conservative
									1 Labour
									2 Liberal democrats
									1 Housing association

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with all participants using the Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954) to gather specific examples of their political activity by extracting causal reasoning statements. After analysing these political reasoning statements and the larger context within the 723 pages of qualitative data, codes were assigned and grouped together using a hierarchical template analysis (Brooks et al., 2015). The codes represented political reasoning within the political motivation process and resulted in six template analyses, one for each sub-sample.

Findings

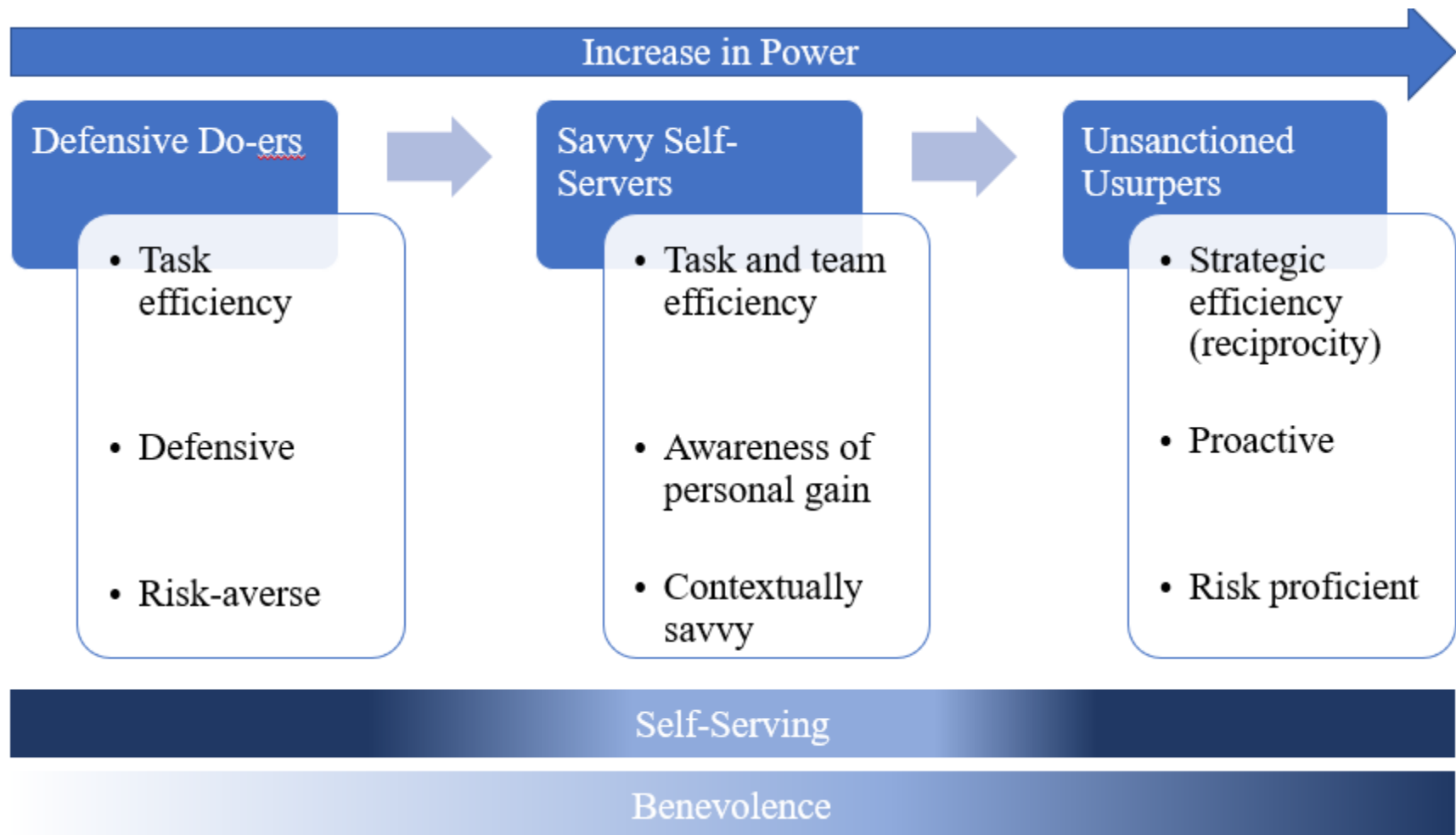
The results of the template analyses can be viewed in Table 2, which presents the templates for junior, mid-level, and senior officers, and Table 3, which showcases the templates for junior, mid-level, and senior councillors. Through the template analysis, the paper highlights the key developments across seniority levels by showcasing the Political Reasoning in Political Work models for both officers within Figure 1 and councillors within Figure 2.

Table 2: Officers Template Analysis

Junior Officers	Mid-level Officers	Senior Officers
1. Role performance 1.1. Professionalism 1.2. Efficiency 1.3. Staff management	1. Role performance 1.1. Professionalism 1.2. Efficiency 1.3. Staff management 1.3.1. Task performance 1.3.2. Staff wellbeing	1. Relationship management 1.1. Maintaining constitutional roles 1.1.1. Maintaining officer impartiality 1.1.2. Maintaining political mandate 1.2. Staff management 1.2.1. Team representation 1.2.2. Team resources 1.2.3. Staff wellbeing
2. Networking 2.1. Friendship 2.1.1 Emotional support 2.2. Support network 2.2.1. Trust	2. Networking 2.1. Instrumental internal relationships 2.2. Support mechanisms 2.3. To gather intelligence	2. Networking 2.1. Instrumental internal relationships 2.1.1. Operational delivery 2.1.2. To gather intelligence 2.2. Share knowledge externally 2.3. Empowerment/mentoring of others 2.3.1. To give back 2.3.2. Potential reciprocity
3. <i>Conform to future-proof</i> 3.1. <i>Learn political culture</i> 3.1.1. <i>Political actors</i> 3.1.2. <i>Power</i> 3.2. <i>Deferential</i> 3.2.1. <i>Avoid being a rebel</i> 3.2.2. <i>Avoid being seen as difficult</i>	3. Achieve Voice 3.1. Knowledge confidence 3.2. <i>Picking your battles</i> 3.3. <i>Strategic deference</i>	3. Strategic Voice 3.1. Knowledge certainty 3.1.1. Expertise 3.1.2. Obstinate opinion 3.2. <i>Picking your battles</i> 3.3. <i>Considered Challenge</i>
4. Establish personal control 4.1. Career control 4.2. Display strengths (exemplification)	4. Establish influence 4.1. Personal influence 4.1.1. Display professionalism (exemplification) 4.1.2. Career reputation 4.2. Team influence 4.2.1. Influencing the team 4.2.2. Leveraging the team	4. Leveraging influence 4.1. Personal influence 4.1.1. Display professionalism (exemplification) 4.1.2. Career reputation 4.2. Team influence 4.2.1. Supporting the team 4.2.2. Leveraging the team
		5. Policy influence 5.1. Personal beliefs 5.2. National political agenda 5.3. Local government model

Note. Italicised font denotes ‘risk’.

Figure 1: Officers' Overarching Dimensions of Political Reasoning



Note. Lighter shading represents a decrease whilst darker shading represents an increase in these motives.

Defensive - Awareness of personal gain - Proactive

The development of political reasoning in the officers' political reasoning in political work model saw a progression from defensive reasoning at the junior level (exhibited by the defensive do-ers) to proactive reasoning at the senior level (exhibited by the unsanctioned usurpers). For instance, political reasoning as a junior officer centered on self-serving motivation that were not disruptive to the organisation:

“You’ve got to choose, make a conscious decision to not question or to question simply in an exceptionally positive way or risk being perceived as someone who is not promotion material.”

However, this pathway in the model highlights a notable progression in reasoning. Senior officers' reasoning was far more proactive, and they viewed politics as a disruptive force that could be used for either self-serving or benevolent purposes. Whereas some, such as Percy, a Chief Finance Officer, discussed self-serving reasoning:

“We had to push strongly for what we individually believed and that there isn’t an acquiescence of a department, that a department head had to fight for resources”

With increased authority, seniority, power and influence some officers at the senior level outlined they were now in a position to engage in political activity, driven by benevolent reasoning such as Chief Executive Officer Bob:

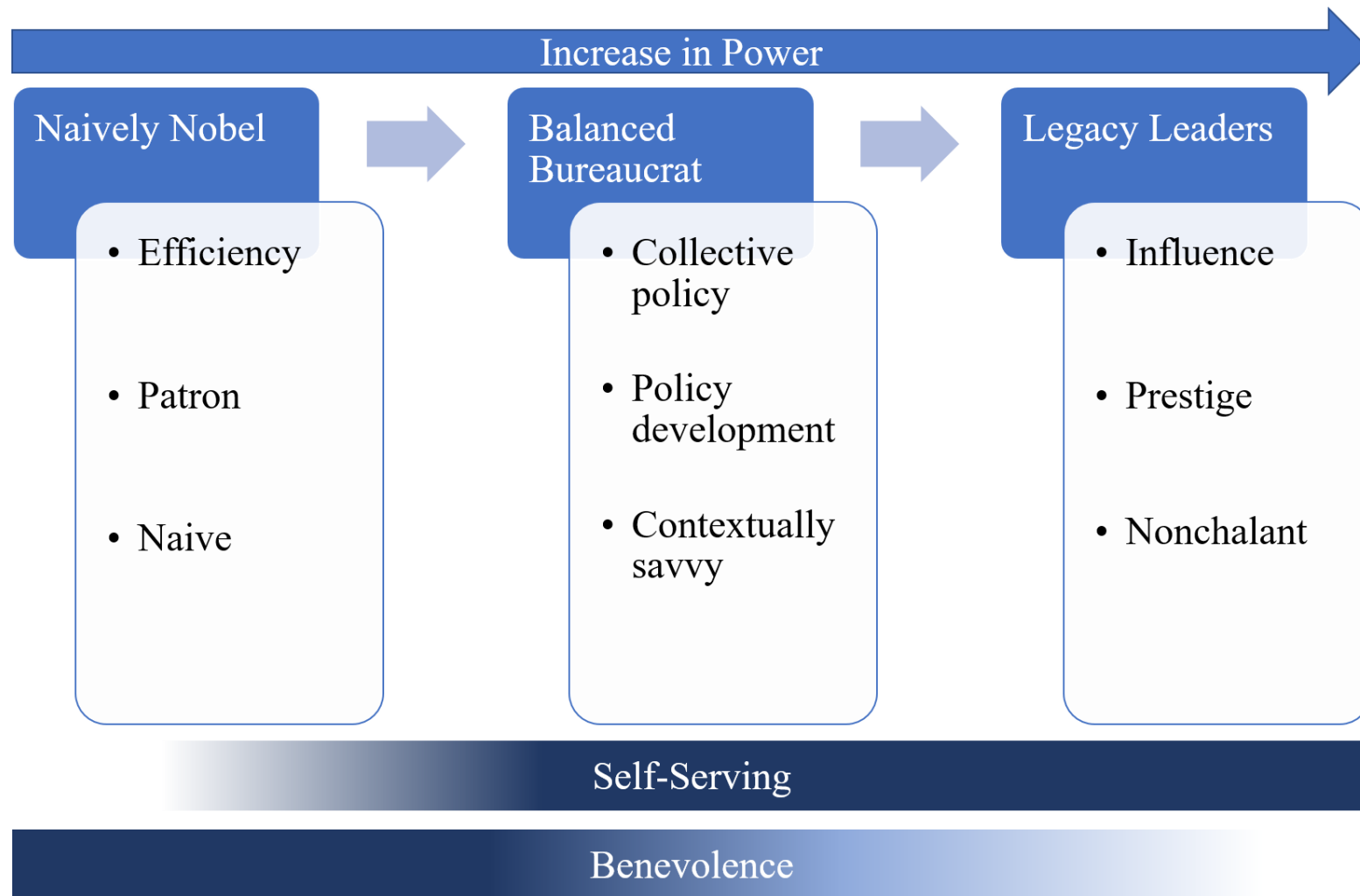
“There’s the Chief Executive of (council) which I mentored, one at another council... [My motivation was} Giving back.”

Table 1: Councillors' Template analysis

Junior Councillors	Mid-level Councillors	Senior Councillors
1. Public service ethic 1.1 Previous Occupations 1.2 Improve their community 1.3 Family ethos 1.4 Self-development/profile	1. Public service ethic 1.1 Previous Occupations 1.2 Improve their community 1.3 Family ethos 1.4 Self-Development/profile	1. Public service ethic 1.1 Previous Occupations 1.2 Improve their community 1.3 Family ethos
2. Representation 2.1 Casework 2.1.1 Individual constituents 2.1.2 Give people a voice 2.2 Tenacity 2.3 <i>Conform to party</i>	2. Representation 2.1 Casework 2.2 Policy priorities 2.2.1 Personal interests 2.2.2 Values 2.2.3 Residents concerns 2.3 Knowledge resolve 2.4 <i>Conformity</i> 2.4.1 <i>To party</i> 2.4.2 <i>To electorate</i>	2. Strategic representation 2.1 Casework 2.2 Portfolio Management 2.3 Community champion 2.3.1 Community contribution 2.3.2 Prestige 2.4 Knowledge resolve 2.5 <i>Compliance of cabinet position</i>
3. Networking 3.1 To fulfil their role 3.2 Growing community network	3. Networking 3.1 To fulfil their role 3.2 To gain influence 3.3 To gather intelligence	3. Networking 3.1 To fulfil their role 3.2 To gain influence 3.3 <i>Cabinet responsibility</i> 3.4 To gather intelligence 3.5 Build image 3.5.1 Collegiate image 3.5.2 Decision maker
4. Learn political culture 4.1 Understand the environment 4.1.1 Formal 4.1.2 Informal	4. Developing, understanding, leveraging influence 4.1 Awareness of strategic influence 4.2 Share knowledge externally	4. Developing, understanding, leveraging influence 4.1 Awareness of strategic influence 4.2 Share knowledge externally 4.3 Connect to powerful political actors

Note. Italicised font denotes risk.

Figure 2: Councillors Overarching Dimensions of Political Reasoning



Note. Lighter shading represents a decrease whilst darker shading represents an increase in these motives.

Patron – Policy development – Prestige

While the junior officers' reasoning was self-serving but not disruptive, junior councillors' reasoning (termed Naively Nobel) centered on benevolent themes. In contrast, the context-specific reasoning of senior councillors (termed Legacy Leaders) focused on their Prestige.

For example, a thematic code within the junior councillors' political reasoning found they were seeking to give their electorate a voice, displayed through Florence a first-term councillor:

“I think that most of what you do is to just be there for them and make sure they know that you will advocate for them”

However, this reasoning was far less apparent at the senior level, where the increased objective and reputational power had developed their reasoning to the extent they outlined their political reasoning was to be a champion for the community, seen in Katrina, a cabinet member:

“Over the years I’ve started to get recognised for my involvement, which keeps me battling”

Discussion

This paper seeks to further the knowledge of political motivation by asking two questions: (1) *What drives political leaders' actions in specific contexts?* (2) *How do their positions and seniority affect their motives?* Firstly, the extant literature portrays political motivation as a trait-like disposition. However, by employing a template analysis of political workers, it became apparent that context-specific political reasoning is a crucial factor. This suggests that a social cognitive assessment of the environment, role and level of seniority significantly influence political motives, as opposed to them being stable and trait-like.

Secondly, by qualitatively investigating political reasoning through interviews, we can transcend categorical motives, such as self-serving or benevolent and delve into the content of political reasoning. Consequently, this study can detect how politics can act as a disruptive force for personal gain, while also uncovering instances, such as among the junior officer sample, where political reasoning aims to safeguard oneself without encroaching on the broader community. Furthermore, political activity can be mutually beneficial, resembling a reciprocal relationship, where the individual reasons that the workplace and themselves benefit.

Third, by scrutinising political reasoning within political work, we could contrast traditional non-political officers, such as public servants, with those whose job mandates them to be politically involved, such as councillors. The micro-organisational perspective turned out to be a useful factor for councillors, whereas it was noteworthy that officers' reasoning extended to the extent of modifying policies, which is beyond their non-political mandate (see: Table

2). As a result, this paper presents a more comprehensive and interdisciplinary account of political motivation than is currently evident in management literature,

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