

Received: 6 March 2024
Accepted: 31 March 2024
Published Online: 31 March
2024

Reviewing Editor: Waiphot
Kulachai, Suan Sunandha
Rajabhat University,
Bangkok, Thailand

REVIEW ARTICLE

The Role of Leadership Styles in Shaping Organizational Politics in Thai Public Organizations

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Abstract

Despite the known impact of leadership styles on organizational politics, limited research has been conducted within Thai public organizations, creating an opportunity for further investigation. This paper aims to fill this research gap by exploring the effect of leadership styles, autocratic, democratic, transformational, and transactional on the scope and dynamics of organizational politics in these settings. Leveraging leadership theory and empirical research, the study provides a detailed analysis of how leadership styles influence political behaviors in Thailand's unique cultural and institutional landscape. Our findings underscore the pivotal role that leadership plays in managing organizational politics effectively. The paper concludes by suggesting directions for future research, emphasizing the need for empirical studies to unravel the varying impacts of different leadership styles on both visible and hidden political behaviors in Thai public organizations, thereby enriching our understanding of this complex relationship.

Keywords: autocratic leadership; democratic leadership; leadership styles; Organizational Politics; Thai Public Organizations



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1. Introduction

Leadership styles significantly affect organizational dynamics, and the relationship between leadership and organizational politics has long been a focus of scholarly inquiry. Organizational politics is a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing informal, unofficial, and sometimes clandestine efforts to gain power, influence decision-making, or achieve personal or group goals within an organizational setting (Kacmar and Carlson, 1997). Although it is a ubiquitous phenomenon in every organization, its manifestation, interpretation, and implications can drastically vary across different cultural, institutional, and leadership contexts (Ferris et al., 2007). The context of Thai public organizations presents a distinctive case for exploring the influence of leadership styles on organizational politics. Thailand, characterized by its unique mix of traditional and modern features, provides a rich cultural and institutional landscape. The Thai culture, heavily influenced by Buddhist principles, promotes values such as respect for hierarchy, a preference for indirect communication, and a strong emphasis on maintaining social and workplace harmony (Hofstede, 2010). These cultural norms significantly impact the dynamics of Thai public organizations, shaping attitudes toward authority, decision-making processes, and conflict-resolution mechanisms (Komin, 1990). Simultaneously, the institutional structure of Thai public organizations, marked by centralized authority and complex bureaucratic procedures, can lead to the concentration of power and scarce resources (Painter, 2006). These structural factors often drive competition and promote political behaviors within organizations, creating a unique backdrop against which leadership styles interact (Boon-itt and Rompho, 2012). Leadership styles, ranging from autocratic and transactional to democratic and transformational, can significantly impact the nature and intensity of organizational politics (Vigoda-Gadot and Drory, 2006). Autocratic and transactional leadership styles, which often involve centralized decision-making and a focus on reward and punishment, can inadvertently create an environment ripe for political maneuvering. In contrast, democratic and transformational leadership styles, which emphasize participation, shared vision, and individual development, can potentially mitigate negative political behaviors (Bass, 1985; Bass and Riggio, 2006).

This paper aims to explore the intersection of leadership styles and organizational politics within the context of Thai public organizations. By integrating insights from leadership theory and empirical evidence from public administration and management studies, we aim to delineate how different leadership approaches shape organizational politics in this unique setting. Understanding this relationship is not just academically intriguing; it holds practical implications for leading and managing Thai public organizations more effectively. These insights can inform leadership development strategies, contribute to creating healthier political dynamics within organizations, and eventually facilitate the delivery of more efficient and effective public services.

2. Leadership Styles and Organizational Politics: Theoretical Perspectives

Organizational politics refers to behaviors that are strategically designed to maximize self-interest, often at the expense of others or the larger organization (Ferris et al., 2007). Leadership styles, on the other hand, describe the approach leaders adopt to guide, direct, and influence their followers (Northouse, 2018). The intersection of these two concepts forms a complex interplay that has been the subject of much theoretical discourse.

2.1 Autocratic Leadership and Organizational Politics

Autocratic leadership, also known as authoritarian leadership, is characterized by a centralization of authority, where leaders exert high levels of control over all decisions and allow minimal input from group members (Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939; Vroom and Jago, 2007). This approach can have a profound influence on the nature and dynamics of organizational politics. In an autocratic environment, leaders tend to tightly control the flow of information and limit the involvement of employees in decision-making processes. Such conditions often foster political behaviors as employees may resort to tactics like ingratiation, coalition building, or other forms of influence to gain access to resources or secure their interests (Eisenbeiss et al., 2008; Calderon et al., 2017). Moreover, the absence of open communication and the diminished role of employees in decision-making processes can breed distrust and create a sense of uncertainty, which can further exacerbate political behaviors (Vigoda-Gadot and Kapun, 2005; Othman et al., 2019). However, it's crucial to note that autocratic leadership is not universally ineffective or harmful. Indeed, in some contexts, particularly during crisis situations or in cases where swift and decisive actions are needed, autocratic leadership can be beneficial (Vroom and Jago, 2007; Goleman, 2000). Nevertheless, the propensity of autocratic leadership to encourage political behaviors might offset these potential benefits, especially in organizations and cultures that prioritize transparency, collaboration, and shared decision-making (Dong, Bartol, Zhang, & Li, 2017). In the Thai context, the autocratic leadership style can interact in complex ways with prevailing cultural norms, which often emphasize respect for hierarchy and authority (Komin, 1990). Such cultural expectations might moderate the negative effects of autocratic leadership on organizational politics by fostering compliance and discouraging overt political behaviors (Pathak et al., 2014). However, these norms could also foster covert political maneuvers, as individuals may seek indirect methods to influence decision-making or secure resources (Tanachartphaisal & Niyomsilpa, 2016).

2.2 Democratic Leadership and Organizational Politics

Democratic leadership, often referred to as participative leadership, signifies a leadership style where leaders involve team members in decision-making processes, fostering an environment of cooperation and collective responsibility (Lewin, Lippitt,

& White, 1939; Somech, 2006). This leadership style directly impacts the dynamics of organizational politics, typically suppressing the rise of politically driven behaviors by fostering a more open and inclusive work environment. A cornerstone of democratic leadership is the emphasis on transparency, open dialogue, and inclusion in decision-making. This approach can effectively reduce feelings of exclusion or marginalization among team members, thereby mitigating motivations for engaging in political behaviors (Vigoda-Gadot, 2007; Hoch, Bommer, Dulebohn, & Wu, 2016). Moreover, democratic leadership often engenders trust within the organization, which can lessen the perceived need for political tactics as employees are more likely to anticipate fair and unbiased decision-making processes (Koopman et al., 2016; Abbas & Raja, 2019). In addition, democratic leaders encourage a culture of learning where team members freely share knowledge and information. This openness hampers the potential for information hoarding or manipulation, common manifestations of political behaviors within organizations (Wang, Waldman & Zhang, 2014). However, democratic leadership is not without potential downsides. In situations where consensus is challenging to reach, democratic leadership can lead to delays and indecision. In some cases, it may even instigate conflict, which could incite political behaviors as individuals vie for influence (Gastil, 1994; Chen, Wang & Huang, 2020). The implications of democratic leadership style become even more intriguing when considered within the context of Thai public organizations. Thailand's cultural and societal norms, characterized by collectivism, harmony, and social interconnectedness, are usually compatible with democratic leadership practices (Komin, 1990; Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1997). In particular, the traditional Thai practice of "kreng jai" – which emphasizes consideration for others' feelings – aligns well with the democratic leader's focus on inclusivity and shared decision-making (Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1997). This compatibility may potentially decrease organizational politics, as the democratic leadership style fosters an atmosphere of inclusion and mutual respect.

2.3 Transformational Leadership and Organizational Politics

Transformational leadership, described by Bass (1985), involves leaders inspiring and motivating their employees to rise above their personal interests and work towards the larger objectives of the organization. This leadership style can significantly impact the dynamics of organizational politics. Particularly, it has been associated with lower levels of organizational politics due to its emphasis on unity, motivation, and the promotion of a shared vision. Transformational leaders inspire followers by appealing to their higher-order intrinsic needs and aligning these with the organization's goals. By doing so, they create an environment where personal and organizational goals become intertwined (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In such a setting, employees are less inclined to resort to political behavior, as their individual success is inherently linked to the organization's achievements (Li et al., 2015). Furthermore, the trust and respect that transformational leaders typically foster among team members can also deter political maneuvering (Schaubroeck et al., 2011). They

emphasize fairness, integrity, and justice, leading to a reduction in perceived organizational politics (Avey, Palanski, & Walumbwa, 2011). Nevertheless, a potential drawback of transformational leadership is the risk of creating a homogenized culture that may suppress diversity of thought and opinion, potentially giving rise to groupthink (Janis, 1971). Under certain conditions, this could instigate political behavior as individuals might resort to covert methods to express disagreement or promote diverse viewpoints. In the Thai context, transformational leadership appears to be highly compatible due to cultural values of respect for authority, social harmony, and a community-centric focus. The cultural and societal practice known as "kreng jai"—consideration for others—can align well with the transformational leader's emphasis on group harmony and shared goals (Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1997). Research by Virakul (2008) on Thai public organizations indicates that transformational leadership positively correlates with job satisfaction, potentially reducing the need for employees to engage in political behaviors. Similarly, a study by Laohavichien, Fredendall, and Cantrell (2009) found that transformational leadership significantly enhanced employee performance and organizational commitment in Thai organizations, which could result in a decreased propensity for organizational politics. These research findings suggest that transformational leadership within Thai public organizations can play a crucial role in mitigating the emergence of organizational politics. However, it is important to bear in mind the need for leaders to maintain a balance between promoting unity and encouraging diverse perspectives to prevent the negative consequences of groupthink.

2.4 Transactional Leadership and Organizational Politics

Transactional leadership, first proposed by Burns (1978), is a leadership style predicated on a system of rewards and punishments aimed at driving employee motivation. Leaders who exhibit this style are principally concerned with task execution, adherence to performance standards, and realization of organizational objectives. As such, transactional leadership can exert considerable influence on the development and execution of organizational politics. Leaders embodying transactional leadership use contingent rewards to motivate employees. They follow a quid pro quo approach, where employees are rewarded for accomplishments and reprimanded for failures (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). While this leadership style can foster effective task execution and high performance, it can also catalyze the emergence of political behaviors. Given that rewards and recognition are tethered to task execution and performance, employees may engage in political tactics to enhance their perceived productivity or to undermine the performance of their peers (Vigoda-Gadot & Kapun, 2005). In addition, transactional leadership could potentially fuel short-term thinking and egoistic behaviors. Since employees might prioritize task completion that yields rewards, they may neglect the broader organizational welfare in favor of individual gains (Bass, 1990). Applying these concepts to the Thai context, the societal structure, characterized by high power distance and a pronounced hierarchical structure, often

supports the practice of transactional leadership (Hofstede, 2001). Thai employees generally anticipate explicit directives from their leaders and might be highly responsive to reward-based incentives. However, this could also amplify competitiveness among employees, creating a fertile ground for political behaviors. Research on Thai public organizations provides further insights. For instance, a study by Srisaeng (2019) on the Thai healthcare sector established that transactional leadership could stimulate job satisfaction and performance. Nonetheless, the research also indicated that this style could inadvertently promote unhealthy competition and organizational politics as employees may overly concentrate on tasks linked to rewards. Moreover, Kitiyakara and Tannock's (2017) research on Thai manufacturing firms revealed that transactional leadership could lead to employee burnout, prompting individuals to engage in organizational politics as a coping mechanism. These studies underscore the need for a balanced leadership approach that blends the high-performance characteristics of transactional leadership with the employee welfare aspects of transformational leadership. In sum, transactional leadership, while promoting task-oriented performance, can also inadvertently instigate organizational politics within Thai public organizations. Therefore, leaders need to be cognizant of these dynamics and consider blending transactional practices with transformational elements to promote a healthier organizational climate.

3. Discussion

This review of the relationship between different leadership styles and organizational politics in Thai public organizations reveals complex dynamics. Leadership, as a key organizational element, undeniably shapes organizational politics, affecting both individuals' behavior and overall organizational climate. As we have discussed, autocratic leadership tends to foster an environment conducive to organizational politics due to its top-down approach, which can stifle employee creativity and initiative (Jing et al., 2014). The significant power distance in Thai culture, coupled with the entrenched hierarchical structure of Thai public organizations, often resonates with autocratic leadership (Hofstede, 2013). However, this leadership style might inadvertently stimulate political behavior as employees navigate the power dynamics to secure their positions and interests. In contrast, democratic leadership, characterized by shared decision-making and open communication, can mitigate organizational politics (Somech, 2003). It promotes a sense of justice and fairness, which reduces the need for employees to resort to political behavior. However, the application of democratic leadership in Thai public organizations requires sensitive cultural adaptation. For instance, leaders need to consider the "kreng jai" factor, which might inhibit open communication and full participation in decision-making processes (Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1997). Transformational leadership, which emphasizes unity, motivation, and a shared vision, can effectively reduce the level of organizational politics (Li et al., 2015). By fostering an environment where personal and organizational goals are intertwined, it

reduces the propensity for political behavior. It appears to be particularly effective in Thai public organizations, aligning well with cultural values of respect for authority, social harmony, and a community-centric focus (Virakul, 2008; Laohavichien, Fredendall, & Cantrell, 2009). Transactional leadership, though effective in task execution and performance enhancement, could encourage political behaviors due to its emphasis on reward and punishment systems (Vigoda-Gadot & Kapun, 2005). This leadership style is often observed in Thai public organizations, given the societal structure characterized by high power distance (Hofstede, 2001). It is important for transactional leaders to balance performance expectations with an emphasis on collective organizational welfare to mitigate the potential rise of organizational politics. In sum, all four leadership styles have their unique impacts on organizational politics within Thai public organizations. While some styles tend to foster politics, others appear to mitigate it. Leaders must recognize these dynamics and strive to adopt a balanced and culturally sensitive leadership approach that prioritizes both performance and employee welfare. More empirical research is needed to further investigate these dynamics and to understand how leadership styles can be optimally adapted for the Thai public sector context. This could offer valuable insights into policymaking and management practices in Thai public organizations.

4. Implications

The intricate relationship between leadership styles and their influence on organizational politics in Thai public organizations offers profound insights with both practical and theoretical ramifications. On a practical level, the findings advocate for the implementation of leadership development initiatives within Thai public organizations. These programs should aim to cultivate a nuanced understanding among leaders of how their leadership approach can significantly impact organizational dynamics, including employee engagement and the broader political landscape. Emphasizing the need for leaders to adapt their styles in response to the cultural nuances and situational demands inherent in the Thai context, such initiatives could foster a more harmonious and effective organizational environment. This approach necessitates a deep dive into the cultural underpinnings of Thai society, such as the concept of "kreng jai," which profoundly influences communication and decision-making processes within organizations. From a policy perspective, the insights gained from understanding the interplay between leadership styles and organizational politics should inform the development of government policies aimed at public organizations. These policies could encourage a balanced integration of leadership approaches, blending task-oriented and people-oriented styles to mitigate negative political behaviors while enhancing organizational efficiency. Theoretically, this exploration opens new pathways for research into how leadership styles interact with organizational politics across diverse cultural landscapes. It challenges researchers to broaden their investigations beyond the leadership styles discussed, potentially exploring the impacts of servant leadership, laissez-faire leadership, or

charismatic leadership within and beyond the Thai context. Moreover, the distinct influence of Thai culture on these dynamics underscores the critical need for cross-cultural studies in leadership, suggesting that the interaction between culture, leadership styles, and organizational politics offers a rich terrain for academic inquiry. Such studies could lead to the development of more flexible, culturally sensitive leadership models, moving beyond traditional paradigms to embrace a more holistic understanding of leadership in a globalized world. Ultimately, the nuanced interplay between leadership styles and organizational politics in Thai public organizations highlights the importance of cultural awareness in leadership practices, advocating for a strategic approach to leadership development and policy formulation that is attuned to the complexities of organizational behavior in specific cultural contexts.

5. Recommendations

The comprehensive review of leadership styles and their impact on organizational politics within Thai public organizations underscores the need for robust leadership training, the cultivation of balanced leadership approaches, and heightened cultural sensitivity among leaders. It advocates for leadership development programs that incorporate an understanding of cultural nuances, such as the 'kreng jai' concept, to foster open communication and effective decision-making. Additionally, policymakers are encouraged to formulate policies that mitigate destructive political behaviors by promoting transparency and fairness in organizational practices. This review also highlights the importance of extending research into other cultural contexts to enrich the understanding of organizational behavior globally. Practical recommendations include implementing fair performance evaluation systems, designing reward systems that encourage collaborative success, and prioritizing clear communication to prevent the emergence of toxic politics. These strategies collectively aim to enhance organizational effectiveness and employee well-being by aligning leadership practices with the unique cultural and organizational dynamics of Thai public organizations, offering a roadmap for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers to navigate the complex interplay between leadership styles and organizational politics.

6. Research Gap and Future Study

This review highlights several research gaps and future directions for studying leadership styles and their effects on organizational politics within Thai public organizations, suggesting a multifaceted approach for upcoming studies. Future research could explore the co-existence and interplay of multiple leadership styles within the same organization to understand their collective impact on organizational politics. Expanding the investigation to include a broader range of leadership styles, such as laissez-faire, charismatic, servant, or paternalistic, could provide deeper insights into their implications for organizational dynamics. Additionally,

incorporating individual differences like personality traits and professional backgrounds into the analysis could offer a more nuanced understanding of how leadership styles influence organizational politics. Employing longitudinal designs would capture the evolving nature of these dynamics, offering a dynamic perspective over time. A deeper examination of specific cultural elements, such as 'kreng jai', and their interaction with leadership styles could enrich our understanding of their impact on organizational politics. Outcome-oriented studies focusing on job satisfaction, employee engagement, and organizational performance in the Thai context are also needed. Cross-cultural comparative studies could reveal universal and culture-specific aspects of leadership and organizational politics, while sector-specific investigations could uncover unique influences across different public service sectors. Lastly, examining the role of organizational structure in modulating the relationship between leadership styles and organizational politics could provide valuable insights for both academic literature and practical management strategies in public administration. Addressing these gaps promises to enhance our understanding of the complex interplay between leadership styles and organizational politics in Thai public organizations, contributing significantly to both theory and practice.

7. Conclusion

This comprehensive review provided a deep exploration into the relationship between various leadership styles - autocratic, democratic, transformational, and transactional - and the ensuing organizational politics within the distinctive context of Thai public organizations. Through a meticulous analysis of diverse scholarly articles and empirical studies, we highlighted the profound impact of leadership styles on the political landscape of organizations, and how these interactions are nuanced by the unique cultural and institutional characteristics of Thailand. In the organizational setting, leadership styles play a pivotal role in molding the political climate. It was revealed that autocratic and transactional leadership styles often set the stage for a politically intense environment, possibly leading to power struggles and conflicts. Conversely, democratic and transformational leadership styles were seen to foster a more cooperative atmosphere, reducing divisive politics and promoting collaboration and open dialogue. However, the review also underscored the importance of cultural nuances and understanding, given the unique cultural concepts in Thailand such as 'kreng jai', and their implications on organizational dynamics. Further, the review unveiled numerous research gaps and future avenues for study. The need for exploring the impact of individual differences, the requirement for longitudinal studies to capture the evolving dynamics of leadership and politics, the investigation of other leadership styles, and the importance of sector-specific research were some of the identified gaps. These areas present rich opportunities for future exploration and underline the need for persistent scholarly inquiry in this domain. In terms of practical implications, the recommendations proposed from this review are intended to assist practitioners, policy-makers, and researchers. These recommendations span from the

improvement of leadership practices and policy formulations, to the redesigning of research methodologies, all with the common goal of augmenting organizational effectiveness and fostering a healthy work environment in Thai public organizations. In sum, understanding the relationship between leadership styles and organizational politics, particularly in the unique context of Thailand, is an intricate yet crucial task. The intricate because of the multifaceted dynamics involved in the interaction between leadership styles and organizational politics. The crucial, owing to the significant implications of these dynamics on the well-being of organizations and their members. This review has aimed to contribute to this understanding, thereby enriching the body of knowledge in the field. The suggested future research directions open new horizons for further academic discourse and hold the potential to significantly enhance practical applications in the field of organizational behavior and leadership.

Author Contributions: KP has made a comprehensive and singular contribution to every aspect of this research. From the initial conception and design of the study, through the meticulous data collection and analysis, to the drafting and critical revision of the manuscript, KP has been the sole contributor. This includes the integration of theoretical frameworks, the interpretation of findings, and the final approval of the version to be published. KP's dedication and multifaceted skill set have been instrumental in bringing this research to fruition, embodying the roles of researcher, writer, and project manager throughout the process.

Funding: This paper received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: I extend my heartfelt gratitude to my friends who have generously assisted me in searching for related articles and resources throughout the course of this study. Their unwavering support, insightful suggestions, and valuable contributions have been instrumental in enriching my paper. Their willingness to share their expertise and time has not only facilitated my access to relevant academic literature but has also significantly enhanced the depth and breadth of my analysis. I am truly thankful for their collaboration and camaraderie, which have made a substantial impact on the completion of this work.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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