



The impact of self-monitoring and perceived organizational politics on self-interested voice: A trait activation perspective

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How to cite: Zhou, Y., & Zong, B. (2024). The impact of self-monitoring and perceived organizational politics on self-interested voice: A trait activation perspective. *Social Behavior and Personality: An international journal*, 52(12), e13673

This study applied trait activation theory to explore the behavior of employees who adapt to the perceived organizational politics (POP) in their workplace, making them better positioned to voice their opinions. We conducted a three-wave time-lagged survey of 311 employees and supervisors to test our proposed model. The results showed that self-monitoring and POP interacted to influence self-interested voice behavior through self-serving cognition, and this indirect effect was positive when POP was high and did not exist when POP was low. This study has theoretical implications by contributing to the literature on voice, self-monitoring, and POP. In addition, it has practical implications for managers who value employees' work experiences and want to leverage collective wisdom to ensure organizational development.

Keywords

self-monitoring, perceived organizational politics, self-serving cognition, self-interested voice

Article Highlights

- Employees who were highly attentive to the external work environment did not necessarily reduce their voice behavior in a political workplace.
- Employees with high self-monitoring tended to develop self-serving cognition and utilize their self-interested voice in environments with high levels of perceived organizational politics.
- This study introduced novel factors that motivate employees to speak up for their own interests, depicting what kind of employees may engage in more self-interested voice behavior in what situations and why.

Employee voice is a form of informal and voluntary communication initiated by employees to raise suggestions, concerns, or ideas about work-related issues to drive improvement or change in organizations (Morrison, 2014), and it has been found to play a pivotal role in enhancing organizational effectiveness (Farh & Chen, 2014). There has been substantial research on the antecedents that facilitate or discourage employees from speaking up. Employees' *perceived organizational politics* (POP), a pervasive organizational social factor that reflects the illegitimate self-serving political activities of leaders, coworkers, and subordinates in workplaces (Ferris & Treadway, 2012), can discourage employees from voicing their opinions within organizations (see, e.g., Bergeron & Thompson, 2020; Liu et al., 2021) due to the uncertain consequences of doing so (Li et al., 2020). Employees who tend to raise concerns or suggestions regarding organizational affairs in such a workplace setting may not only potentially waste their time and effort but also risk retaliation from others (Milliken et al., 2003). From this perspective, POP appears to be a toxic context for employees that may impede their personal development, possibly contributing to increased work pressure, higher turnover intention, and decreased satisfaction (e.g., Chang et al., 2009; Hochwarter et al., 2020). Given the pervasiveness of

organizational politics, to foster development both at organizational and individual levels it is important to discover which kind of individuals can adapt to such an environment and are better positioned to voice their opinions.

Although it may initially seem counterintuitive, this study suggested that for employees with a high level of self-monitoring who are highly attentive to the external environment, POP may not necessarily hinder their inclination to voice concerns or opinions; it might even stimulate more voice behavior. We proposed this counterintuitive viewpoint on the following grounds: First, although POP presents inherent risks due to unwritten rules and power dynamics (Li et al., 2020), it also offers opportunities for employees to gain various resources, since the ambiguity caused by political actions can create power vacuums (Duan et al., 2021). Thus, it is possible that some individuals who are adept at mastering the survival rules in political environments can concurrently perceive high levels of politics and still thrive in a workplace setting perceived by many as debilitating, toxic, and unfair (Kane-Frieder et al., 2014). Second, previous research has found that self-monitoring can interact with contextual factors to positively influence employee voice (see, e.g., Fuller et al., 2007). Third, regarding voice behavior, scholars have increasingly emphasized that although employee voice is primarily directed toward organizational benefits, it can also yield advantages for voicers themselves (Morrison, 2014). Duan et al. (2021) introduced the concept of self-interested voice behavior, proposing that this form of voice can serve as a vital tool for employees to protect or pursue their personal interests at work without necessarily being at the expense of organizational benefits. This implies that self-interested voice can assist employees in acquiring essential resources for their own ongoing development within the organizational political landscape. In light of the above-mentioned research, self-monitoring employees who are sensitive to and good at coping with environmental influences may use self-interested voice as a tool for survival or to thrive in the presence of organizational politics.

The Interactive Effect of Self-Monitoring and Perceived Organizational Politics on Self-Serving Cognition

Self-monitoring refers to an individual's ability and tendency to monitor and regulate their behavior, self-presentation, and expressions in social situations (Snyder, 1974). People high in self-monitoring are sensitive to social cues (i.e., the expression and self-presentation of others in social situations) and are often adept at assessing a social context and adjusting their behavior to fit the expectations and norms of that context (Lennox & Wolfe, 1984). Due to its enduring and latent nature, self-monitoring can have an impact on individuals' psychological states or behaviors after being activated by situational factors (Tett & Burnett, 2003). According to trait activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003), behavior is a result of the interplay between an individual's traits and the characteristics of the situation they are in (Greenbaum et al., 2017). Thus, drawing on trait activation theory, this study argued that employees' self-monitoring trait would be both activated by and interplay with POP, prompting employees to develop a state of self-concern known as self-serving cognition (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2018), which subsequently becomes a psychological driving force motivating employees to speak up for themselves.

Organizational politics inevitably exist due to the conflict between the scarcity of resources and the diversity of demands within an organization (Ferris et al., 2019). To acquire as many resources as possible, individuals or groups within the organization may engage in strategic behavior to maximize self-interest (Ferris & Treadway, 2012). When these behaviors take the form of nonsanctioned political activities, the result can be uneven power dynamics, blurred rules, and strong environmental uncertainty (Chang et al., 2009), making it challenging for employees to anticipate the consequences of their own behaviors. Employees have to constantly read the room and pay close attention to environmental clues in such an ambiguous and unpredictable organizational context (Li et al., 2020). Consequently, their self-monitoring personality trait can be activated. When they perceive the presence of self-serving political activities, they can quickly understand and assimilate the role of these self-serving actions and promptly make adjustments to adapt to the environment (Lennox & Wolfe, 1984), generating an awareness that it is necessary for them to strive for their own interests in a high-POP environment and therefore fostering a greater sense of self-serving cognition. In contrast, when POP is low, employees' self-monitoring may not be easily activated, because they do not often have to pay attention to cues in a context that is less ambiguous and more predictable (Li et al., 2020). Moreover, even when employees exhibit high self-monitoring in a low-POP environment, they may find fewer self-serving activities in such a context (Ferris et al., 2019) and therefore regulate themselves based on the observed cues, resulting



in diminished self-serving cognition. Therefore, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Self-monitoring and perceived organizational politics will interact to influence employees' self-serving cognition, such that the relationship between self-monitoring and self-serving cognition will be positive when perceived organizational politics is high and will be nonsignificant when perceived organizational politics is low.

Self-Serving Cognition and Self-Interested Voice

Self-interested voice is a type of voice behavior targeting issues, procedures, or practices that are relevant to an individual's personal interests (Duan et al., 2021). As with other typical types of voice behavior (e.g., promotive voice; Liang et al., 2012), self-interested voice is also change-oriented, discretionary, and purposeful by nature. However, unlike voice behaviors that benefit others, self-interested voice is mainly related to the personal interests of the voicer (Duan et al., 2021). In contexts that pose greater threats to resource loss, self-interested voice can be seen as instrumental in protecting or acquiring resources (Duan et al., 2021; Ferris et al., 2019). However, while self-interested voice primarily benefits the individual speaking, the opinions, ideas, concerns, or suggestions raised are not necessarily detrimental to organizational interests (Duan et al., 2021). In contrast, employees who raise self-related but change-oriented suggestions may also potentially contribute to organizational improvement.

When employees with high self-monitoring develop self-serving cognition in a high-POP environment, using social cues as guidelines for monitoring their own self-presentation (Snyder, 1974), they become more self-focused to minimize resource-loss threats and maximize personal benefits. Thus, self-serving cognition is likely to motivate them to protect and advance self-interests (Mitchell et al., 2018) in highly political environments, where resource losses are common due to the prevalence of self-serving activities at the expense of others (Hochwarter et al., 2003). Thus, given that self-interested voice can help employees protect and obtain resources, and regain clarity and control (Ferris et al., 2019; Hochwarter et al., 2014), to cope with the environment they are likely to adopt self-interested voice behavior as a valuable tool for safeguarding resources and shaping their work context (Duan et al., 2021). This enables them not only to survive but also to thrive in such a self-serving situation. Therefore, we proposed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2: Self-serving cognition will be positively related to self-interested voice.

Hypothesis 3: Self-serving cognition will play a mediating role in the interactive effect of self-monitoring and perceived organizational politics on self-interested voice, such that the indirect effect will be positive when perceived organizational politics is high and will be nonsignificant when perceived organizational politics is low.

Method

Participants and Procedure

We used convenience sampling and the snowball technique to distribute 373 online questionnaires within our personal and professional networks to employees of various industries and organizations throughout China as well as their direct supervisors. To reduce the possibility of common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003), we administrated the surveys in three waves, each separated by a 2-week interval. All participants were assigned unique identification codes to ensure effective matching between questionnaires. In addition, they were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and received RMB 100 (USD 14) as compensation upon completion of all three waves. This study conformed to the ethical principles of our institution, and the participants gave informed consent.

In the first wave, employees reported self-monitoring and POP. In the second wave, they rated their self-serving cognition. In the third wave, supervisors rated the employees' self-interested voice behavior. After matching multiwave data using identification codes and excluding questionnaires with excessive missing values due to nonparticipation in any of the three waves, we ultimately obtained 311 matched surveys (overall response rate = 83.4%). Among the respondents, 30.5% were men and 69.5% were women. Participants' age ranged from 21 to 67 years ($M = 40.69$, $SD = 9.47$). The mean organizational tenure was 9.50 years ($SD = 8.98$). Regarding level of education, 47.9% had a junior college degree or lower, 42.4% had a bachelor's degree, and 9.7% had a master's degree or higher. As for their role in the organization, 91.3% were front-line employees, while 8.7% were front-line managers or above.

Measures

We translated all scales that were originally compiled in English into Chinese and then back into English, following established back-translation procedures (Brislin, 1980). Items for all measures other than self-interested voice were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Self-Monitoring

We used the 13-item scale developed by Lennox and Wolfe (1984) to measure employees' self-monitoring. A sample item is "In social situations, I have the ability to alter my behavior if I feel that something else is called for." Cronbach's alpha in this study was .85.

Perceived Organizational Politics

To measure employees' perceived organizational politics, we used the six-item scale developed by Hochwarter et al. (2003). A sample item is "People do what's best for them, not what's best for the organization." Cronbach's alpha in this study was .93.

Self-Serving Cognition

We adopted the three items from the scale of Mitchell et al. (2018) that were designed to assess employees' self-serving cognition in the work context. A sample item is "I am concerned with protecting myself at work." Cronbach's alpha in this study was .71.

Self-Interested Voice

To measure self-interested voice, we adopted the eight-item scale developed and validated by Duan et al. (2021) in the Chinese context. A sample item is "Develop and make recommendations concerning issues that affect their interests." These items were rated using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). Cronbach's alpha in this study was .93.

Control Variables

Following previous studies that have investigated the antecedents of employee voice (e.g., Li et al., 2020), we controlled for age, gender, level of education, tenure, and organizational position.

Data Analysis

We used SPSS 24.0 to calculate descriptive statistics for each variable and test the reliability of the scales. The correlation table was produced by RStudio. We used Mplus 7.4 to conduct a confirmatory factor analysis to assess construct validity and Model 7 of the SPSS PROCESS macro to perform regression analyses (bootstrapped resamples = 5,000).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations of all variables, offering initial evidence in support of our hypotheses.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis Results

| Variable | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
|--------------------------------------|----------|-----------|--------|--------|--------|--------|------|------|-------|-------|---|
| 1. Gender | 1.69 | 0.46 | — | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Level of education | 3.24 | 1.19 | -.03 | — | | | | | | | |
| 3. Age | 40.69 | 9.47 | .06 | -.26** | — | | | | | | |
| 4. Tenure | 9.50 | 8.98 | -.06 | .42** | .42** | — | | | | | |
| 5. Position | 1.12 | 0.43 | .02 | -.11* | .08 | -.02 | — | | | | |
| 6. Self-monitoring | 3.19 | 0.52 | -.09 | -.18** | .19** | -.15** | .12* | — | | | |
| 7. Perceived organizational politics | 1.94 | 0.90 | -.22** | .22** | -.02 | .24** | -.01 | -.07 | — | | |
| 8. Self-serving cognition | 2.78 | 0.71 | -.10 | .03 | -.11* | -.04 | .01 | .05 | .14* | — | |
| 9. Self-interested voice | 1.91 | 0.71 | -.26** | .33** | -.17** | .25** | .04 | -.07 | .26** | .16** | — |

Note. Gender: 1 = male, 2 = female. Level of education: 1 = junior high school or below, 2 = high school, 3 = associate’s degree, 4 = bachelor’s degree, 5 = master’s degree, 6 = doctoral degree. Position: 1 = employee, 2 = front-line manager, 3 = middle manager, 4 = senior manager. Scale scores were produced by averaging scores across the items in the scale.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis to assess construct validity. The results indicate that the hypothesized four-factor model, comprising self-monitoring, POP, self-serving cognition, and self-interested voice, fit the data well, $\chi^2(59) = 100.93$, root-mean-square error of approximation = .05, comparative fit index = .98, Tucker–Lewis index = .98, standardized root-mean-square residual = .04, demonstrating the good discriminant validity of the focal variables measured in this study.

Hypothesis Testing

The regression analysis results (see Table 2) show that interaction between self-monitoring and POP was significant in predicting self-serving cognition. In addition, self-serving cognition positively predicted self-interested voice.

Table 2. Results of Regression Analysis Testing Moderated Mediation

| Variables | Self-serving cognition | | Self-interested voice | |
|---|------------------------|--------|-----------------------|--------|
| Gender | -.07 | (0.09) | -.33*** | (0.08) |
| Level of education | -.01 | (0.04) | .09* | (0.04) |
| Age | -.01 | (0.01) | -.02** | (0.01) |
| Tenure | -.00 | (0.01) | .02*** | (0.01) |
| Position | .05 | (0.09) | .13 | (0.09) |
| Self-monitoring | .06 | (0.08) | .02 | (0.07) |
| Perceived organizational politics | .08 | (0.05) | | |
| Self-monitoring × Perceived organizational politics | .27*** | (0.07) | | |
| Self-serving cognition | | | .11* | (0.05) |
| R^2 | .08 | | .23 | |

Note. Standard errors are presented in parentheses.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

As shown in Figure 1, the simple slopes test indicated that when the level of POP was low, self-monitoring exhibited a nonsignificant negative relationship with self-serving cognition ($M - 1 SD$), $b = -0.18$, $SE = 0.11$, *ns*. However, self-monitoring was positively related to self-serving cognition when POP was high ($M + 1 SD$), $b = 0.31$, $SE = 0.10$, $p < .01$. Thus, Hypotheses 1 and 2 were supported.

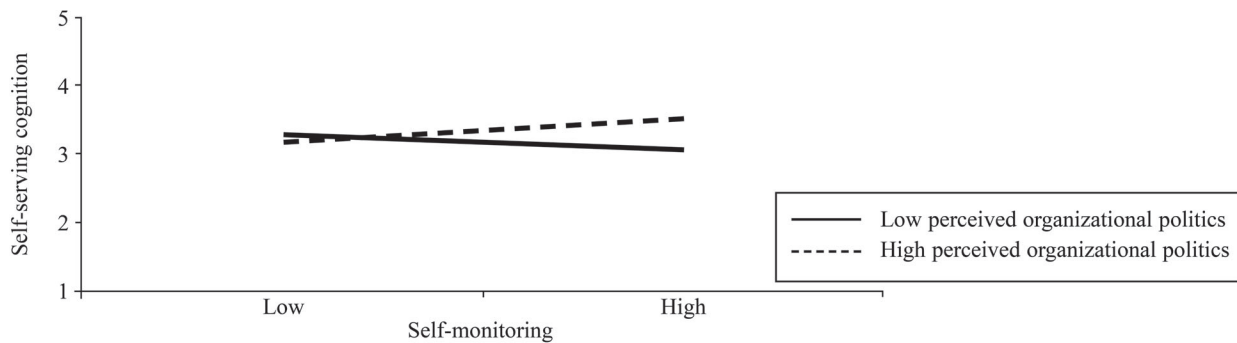


Figure 1. Moderating Effect of Perceived Organizational Politics on the Relationship Between Self-Monitoring and Self-Serving Cognition

Furthermore, testing Hypothesis 3 with 5,000 bootstrapped resamples showed a moderated indirect effect of self-monitoring on self-interested voice through self-serving cognition, estimate = .03, *SE* = 0.02, 95% CI [0.01, 0.07]. When POP was low, self-monitoring had a nonsignificant negative indirect effect on self-interested voice via self-serving cognition, estimate = -.02, *SE* = 0.02, 95% CI [-0.08, 0.01]. However, the indirect effect of self-monitoring on self-interested voice via self-serving cognition was positive when POP was high, estimate = .03, *SE* = 0.02, 95% CI [0.01, 0.09]. Thus, Hypothesis 3 was supported.

Discussion

Theoretical Implications

First, this study enriches existing research on employees' voice behavior that is targeted at benefiting themselves. Although scholars have increasingly emphasized that employee voice can benefit not only organizations but also the voicers themselves, research on self-interested voice is still significantly limited (Duan et al., 2021). Through examining both a personality trait (i.e., self-monitoring) and an organizational contextual factor (i.e., POP) as antecedents of self-interested voice, this study has introduced novel factors that motivate employees to speak up for their own interests, depicting what kind of employees may engage in more self-interested voice behavior in what situations and why.

Second, this study not only is the first to examine the relationship between self-monitoring and self-interested voice but also complements previous studies on the relationship between self-monitoring personality and voice behavior by emphasizing the boundary effect of contextual factors. Although previous research has discussed the influence of self-monitoring on employee voice, only the type of voice targeted at benefiting the organization has been considered (e.g., Crant et al., 2011; Duan & Cao, 2015; Fuller et al., 2007). Moreover, inconsistencies in findings have arisen (e.g., some scholars did not find a significant effect of self-monitoring on employee voice, whereas others identified a positive relationship between these variables; see Crant et al., 2011; Duan & Cao, 2015), which may be due to a lack of consideration of the fact that the impact of self-monitoring can be largely directed by external situational factors. Through investigating the moderating role of POP, this study revealed the joint effect of the self-monitoring personality trait and a situational factor on self-interested voice behavior, thereby expanding the current research perspective to consider more boundary effects.

Third, this study took a neutral standpoint rather than the predominantly negative perspective adopted in many studies when interpreting the influence of POP. By showing that employees may not necessarily experience negative effects from POP, our findings offer new insights and supplement existing research.



Practical Implications

These findings have several practical implications. The results showed that self-monitoring can be activated and lead to increased self-serving cognition and self-interested voice when POP is high. Thus, when POP is inevitable it is important for managers to stimulate employees' self-monitoring to help them adapt through intervention strategies, such as training. Moreover, because self-monitoring is considered a stable personal attribute (Lennox & Wolfe, 1984), we recommend that managers proactively recruit employees with high self-monitoring during the hiring process. Second, although self-interested voice can be seen as instrumental in protecting or acquiring resources (Duan et al., 2021) for employees and may not necessarily be detrimental to organizational development, it is unrealistic to expect that employees' self-interests will always be consistent with organizational interests. Thus, we recommend that managers who want to reduce employees' self-interested voice take steps to diminish political activities in the workplace, which would reduce the need for self-serving cognition and self-interested voice among employees. If managers are unable to reduce POP, they could adopt strategies (e.g., establishing a collaborative climate) that align employee self-interested voice with organizational interests as much as possible.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has some limitations. First, we adopted a time-lagged design to collect data. Future studies could use longitudinal or experimental designs to enable inferring causal relationships. Second, this study applied trait activation theory and explored only how and why self-monitoring individuals can use self-interested voice to survive or even thrive in the political environment. Future studies could draw on different theoretical perspectives to identify other types of personality characteristics (e.g., hardiness; see Funk, 1992) that help employees find survival rules and engage in different voice behaviors in a high-POP context. Third, related to our research focus, this study incorporated only self-interested voice as a type of voice outcome and examined its antecedents, investigating who would speak up for themselves in what situation and why. Future researchers could include different voice behaviors as outcomes to compare whether there are different mechanisms explaining employees' different voice decisions in high-POP environments. Last, we included only Chinese participants in the study sample. In the future, participants from different cultural settings could be considered to increase the generalizability of the results.

Acknowledgments

Yanzhe Zhou designed the model, conducted the investigation and data analysis, and wrote the draft of this manuscript. Boqiang Zong was involved in the draft manuscript review and editing.

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

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