



Prosocietal but powerless: the struggle to persuade and lead for ethical goals

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Abstract

This study explores whether prosocietal individuals can use influence tactics to gain power and reduce socially harmful practices in organizations, despite resistance from peers prioritizing short-term gains. By theoretically driven integration of championing, CSR/ESG, and organizational politics literature, we introduce *Benevolent Machiavellianism*, i.e., prosocietal organizational politics. In a behavioral task with four-person groups ($N = 466$), participants repeatedly withdrew funds from a charity pool before competing for votes on decision-making authority. Widespread antisocial behavior persisted, as prosocietal players failed to curb it. Those who deviated from group norms received fewer votes, showing the importance of group alignment over traditional influence tactics. While political skill boosted confidence in persuasion, it had little impact on actual outcomes. Meanwhile, malevolent Machiavellianism and power motives predicted greater charity withdrawals in the final stage. By treating the rarity of *Benevolent Machiavellians* (estimated to consist around 1.5% of the sample) as the focal issue, we theorize structural powerlessness as a norm- and incentive-based barrier to prosocietal insider change.

Keywords Political skills · Championing · Social responsibility · Prosocietal organizational politics

JEL Classification D01 · D64 · M14 · M54

This article explores a critical issue in corporate governance: how can an employee ethically gain the power to stop socially harmful practices when the organization's dominant coalition benefits from the status quo and traditional options of exit, voice,

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and loyalty offer little chance of change? Consider a manager in a pharmaceutical company who discovers that a profitable drug has undisclosed side effects well known to the executives (Ausness 2021; Keefe 2021); or an engineer in an automotive company might find that specific vehicle models do not meet environmental standards and the company is covering it up with biased software (Ewing 2017; Li et al. 2018) or cases such as the Wells Fargo cross-selling scandal, where aggressive internal sales targets and incentive systems led employees to open millions of unauthorized customer accounts and impose hidden fees on clients (Noel and Osman 2024).

In these “bad barrels” situations, i.e., organizational environments with unethical climates, cultures, or codes of conduct (Kish-Gephart, Harrison and Treviño 2010; Bahník et al. 2025), honest individuals face three fundamental responses, which can be conceptually linked to Albert Hirschman’s classic framework of *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (1970). Yet in many contemporary corporate scandals, none of these options suffices to halt harmful practices (Ashforth and Anand 2003; Miceli, Near and Dworkin 2008; Morrison 2011). Honest employees choose to leave the organization, removing themselves from complicity (Feldman and Ng 2007; Houdek and Bahník 2025), and the bravest will blow the whistle afterwards (Miceli, Near and Dworkin 2008; Rothschild and Miethe 1999; Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran 2005 – a path that may trigger ethical improvements but leads to a dramatic decline in the organization’s public image. Moreover, whistleblowers face harsh consequences, including depression, anxiety, financial hardship, isolation, and strained personal relationships (Bjorkelo 2013). Retaliation is common and often severe, particularly when the exposed misconduct is systemic and central to the organization’s business model: “retaliation was most certain and severe when the reported misconduct was systematic and significant—when the practices exposed were part of the regular, profit accumulation process of the organization” (Rothschild and Miethe 1999, p. 107).

Many choose submission by loyalty, they remain silent and compliant, even when one is aware of unethical practices, often rationalized by moral disengagement, career concerns, or fear of retaliation (Kish-Gephart et al. 2009). Few are attempting to initiate change from within by speaking up, championing a solution, or challenging leadership (Burris 2012; Detert and Treviño 2010; Heucher et al. 2024; Morrison 2011), which does not work when this represents a direct threat to the prevailing business model with the support of the leading coalition.

However, some employees may opt for a fourth, more strategic path – *fight*. Rather than only voicing concerns within an existing authority structure, they try to acquire decision rights so they can stop the harmful practice themselves. This insider reformer’s response is therefore distinct from Hirschman’s voice or loyalty, because its action logic is not persuasion to decision-makers but becoming the decision-maker. Conceptually, it adds an authority-acquisition pathway to Exit–Voice–Loyalty and highlights a constraint that Hirschman’s framework largely leaves implicit, i.e., whether a reform attempt is politically feasible depends on how it interacts with dominant group norms and coalition incentives (see Fig. 1). When the reform goal threatens profit or peer payoffs, and the environment is hostile, the insider reformer faces a structural dilemma as prosocietal intent increases the need to mobilize support under opposition. Under these conditions, influence has to become more strategic, i.e., more about coalition-building, selective framing, and sometimes morally ambig-

Fig. 1 Extending Hirschman’s Exit–Voice–Loyalty framework by introducing Fight as a fourth response pathway. Benevolent Machiavellianism refers to the strategic influence logic through which some insiders may pursue this pathway when prosocietal repair threatens dominant coalition interests

	Staying within the dominant coalition’s rules	Breaking with the dominant coalition’s rules
Acceptance of the organizational status quo	LOYALTY - Uphold or comply with existing policies and norms - Continue operating within the organization’s framework without challenging it	EXIT - Depart from or abandon the organization - Accept that real change is not feasible and rebel by exit
Push for organizational change	VOICE - Issue selling or championing of prosocial goals - Persuade decision-makers within existing authority	FIGHT - Authority acquisition - Become the decision-maker to implement prosocietal repair

uous trade-offs needed to overcome resistance. We refer to this structurally induced mode of prosocietal power-building as *Benevolent Machiavellianism*, i.e., the instrumental accumulation and deployment of influence to secure authority for prosocietal repair in contexts where straightforward ethical voice is predictably neutralized.

Suppose prosocietal individuals want to effect change from within and avoid the negative consequences of internal opposition or even external whistleblowing. In that case, organizational scholars can offer them three grand streams of research that, taken together, describe but do not resolve their dilemma. Championing and issue-selling theories explain how insiders without formal authority can raise issues and mobilize attention (DiBenigno 2020; Dutton et al. 2001; Lauche and Erez 2023); ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) and CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) frameworks articulate how organizations can be steered toward broader societal responsibilities (Aguinis and Glavas 2012; Fatima and Elbanna 2023). Organizational politics research details how individuals build coalitions and secure power within contested environments (Ferris et al. 2019; Kacmar and Baron 1999). We argue that none of these streams alone explains how an employee in a “bad barrel” can ethically gain power to stop harm (Liu et al. 2018; Morrison 2014; Pan and Sparks 2012), but that their integration points toward a new form of prosocietal organizational politics: Benevolent Machiavellianism.

This study develops and tests an integrative mechanism that links championing, CSR/ESG, and organizational politics to explain when and why ethically motivated insiders attempt to secure decision authority for prosocietal repair in harmful organizations. Benevolent Machiavellianism extends championing by shifting attention from issue-selling to obtaining formal decision authority, builds on CSR/ESG by highlighting the micro-political work required to enact prosocietal commitments, and revises organizational politics by foregrounding prosocietal rather than self-interested objectives.

Using a novel behavioral design that simulates organizational ethical dilemmas, we provide evidence on the limits and boundary conditions of political tactics for ethical change, specifically when peer norms and collective incentives systematically override individual influence capacity. Our findings reveal that prosocietal individuals often remain powerless. The study contributes to theory by specifying the conditions under which strategic, power-oriented, and ethically ambiguous influence tactics succeed or fail, and by clarifying how Benevolent Machiavellianism differs from related constructs such as prosocial leadership and moral courage.

1 Theoretical integration: championing, CSR/ESG, and organizational politics

To understand how employees might become Benevolent Machiavellians, we synthesize three complementary frameworks that each capture part of the problem but leave a crucial gap. Championing and issue-selling research explains how actors without formal power direct attention to issues and mobilize support from superiors. CSR/ESG frameworks describe how organizations articulate and institutionalize prosocietal commitments. Organizational politics research explains how individuals navigate power structures and build coalitions. These perspectives suggest that ethically motivated insiders must both frame issues persuasively and acquire power within political structures, but they have not yet been integrated into a coherent account of prosocietal power-building in “bad barrel” contexts. We propose the following specific mechanisms.

Issue selling specifies how insiders can mobilize attention without authority, but it typically presumes that persuasion is directed at superiors who can act. CSR/ESG specifies prosocietal objectives that often impose a distributive cost on the organization or its members (e.g., lower short-term returns), thereby generating predictable resistance. Organizational politics specifies that in contested environments, resistance is not resolved by better arguments but by coalition formation, control of information, and strategic management of dependence. When prosocietal intent targets a profit-threatening change in a hostile setting, the actor cannot rely solely on normative appeal; they must address a political implementation problem under opposition. This is the space where Machiavellianism (i.e., strategic, instrumental influence aimed at securing control over consequential decisions) becomes theoretically necessary. Benevolent Machiavellianism is thus a structural prediction about the influence mode that is induced by the joint presence of prosocietal intent, profit-threatening goals, and hostile politics (see Supplementary materials for Fig. S1: Theoretical Integration Model).

We first consider how championing illuminates the voice and framing side of Benevolent Machiavellianism. Championing or issue selling is defined as supporting or defending a cause from lower levels of an organization to the upper echelons; as Balven et al. (2018, p. 34) put it: “... champions are internal entrepreneurs who take creative ideas and bring them to life,” or in the words of Lauche and Erez (2023 p. 553), “[a]ctors without formal power can initiate and shape organizational change through issue selling to direct the attention of more powerful actors to the relevance of a given issue.” Much of the literature examines various influence behaviors, their effectiveness, and executives' receptivity to champions' voices (Detert and Burris 2007; Dutton et al. 2001; Rouleau 2005).

However, in corporations, championing is usually applied to promote a new technology or business development using insider knowledge rather than to advance ethical arguments or combat the organization's negative externalities (but see Wickert and de Bakker 2018). Most studies describe actions by champions to direct executives' attention to issues such as new technology, product development, or a technical change in business practice (Lauche 2019). Moreover, the literature usually focuses on concrete champions and specific step-by-step strategies of corporate programs

and innovations they sell rather than how to become decision-makers able to eliminate the harm their organization operations is causing (Howard-Grenville 2007); this problem ties in with how Wickert and de Bakker describe the extant literature: “less attention has been given to the relationship between influence behaviors and organizational contexts” (2018, p. 52). While championing theory focuses on how individuals can effectively advocate for themselves, ideas, or projects and sell them for direct individual or organizational benefit, our study shifts the lens to influence tactics a prosocial individual has to use to be able to push prosocial improvement with a direct negative cost for an organization’s bottom line. We investigate the persuasion challenges faced by employees who recognize ethical or legal transgressions within their organizations.

In sum, championing clarifies how insiders can frame and sell issues upward, but it typically assumes organizational openness to change and focuses on projects aligned with organizational interests. It says little about how employees can challenge core harmful practices, nor about how they might accumulate the formal authority to unilaterally stop such practices.

The second line, Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) frameworks, provide broader perspectives. ESG criteria offer a set of standards for a company's operations, focusing on how it safeguards the environment, manages relationships with employees, suppliers, customers, and the communities where it operates, and practices good governance (Chatterji et al. 2009). Pragmatically, it is a tool for socially conscious investors to screen potential investments that create external pressure on top managers to shape a corporation’s engagement with social issues. CSR refers to corporate practices and policies that positively influence the world (Aguinis and Glavas 2012; Sonenshein 2016). The concept emphasizes the responsibility of corporations to act in the best interests of the environments and societies in which they operate.

While ESG and CSR are critical in the “big picture” guiding organizations toward ethical practices, they lack the immediacy and directness required when decisive action is needed to address harmful practices (Maon et al. 2009; Sonenshein 2016), as none of the procedures indicate how to combat the significant negative externality that the firm causes at the moment with the dominant coalition's knowledge and/or approval. Indeed, individual concerns can give rise to an issue champion who can initiate changes in their company’s values or practices (Bansal 2003; Wickert and de Bakker 2018). Still, they fail to empower individual employees with skills or tactics to enact immediate change in the face of actual ethical crises (Afsar and Umrani 2020). Although the literature on micro-foundations of CSR, i.e., how individual employees perceive and respond to CSR policies, is rapidly gaining momentum (Chen et al. 2020; Heucher et al. 2024; Kim et al. 2025; Kruse 2024; Tekleab et al. 2021), the research at the individual level is still underexamined in the CSR literature (Jones Christensen et al. 2014) and basically showing that “CSR ‘matters’ to individuals, but it also shows that current knowledge of micro-CSR is fragmented and incomplete” (Gond et al. 2017, p. 240). Moreover, excessive control in CSR/ESG programs may undermine employees’ moral decision-making by discouraging independent ethical reasoning and motivation, leaving them ill-prepared to navigate novel or ambiguous situations where rules don’t readily apply (Stansbury and Barry 2007).

For our purposes, the theoretical necessity of CSR/ESG is not that it makes individuals moral, but that it can operate as an institutional shield for prosocietal power-seeking. When reform threatens coalition payoffs, prosocietal actors are vulnerable to being cast as disloyal norm violators (with labels as moralists, naïve idealists, or threats to the organizational interests; Monin et al. 2008). A macro-level CSR/ESG commitment changes the interpretive frame by allowing insiders to present prosocietal action as the enforcement of the organization's declared obligations, backed by formal policies, governance routines, and external audiences such as investors or regulators. Generic integrity slogans or individual moral identity lack this institutional anchoring because they may signal virtue but typically do not supply role authority or protection against retaliation. CSR/ESG is relevant because it provides legitimacy resources that can neutralize deviance attributions and make prosocietal bids for authority more defensible within the organization.

Thus, CSR and ESG frameworks provide the macro-level language and formal accountability structures through which organizations can be held answerable to society, and they can legitimize insider enforcement of prosocietal commitments. However, CSR/ESG does not, in itself, resolve the micro-political problem of who has the authority to interpret and implement those commitments. Whether CSR/ESG functions as a protective institutional shield or as symbolic rhetoric depends on organizational politics and coalition dynamics that determine whether the prosocietal insider is empowered as an enforcer or marginalized as a deviant. This is why the micro-political mechanisms highlighted in organizational politics are required to complete the CSR/ESG lens.

Therefore, we argue that the third framework, organizational politics, is essential. Although organizational politics is typically viewed negatively as self-serving and manipulative, it may play a positive role in achieving common goals. Recent research increasingly acknowledges the positive aspects of organizational politics (Ellen 2014; Hochwarter 2012; Landells and Albrecht 2017). This perspective of *pro-social* or positive organizational politics views politics as a strategic means for leaders to secure conditions for better performance of their teams (Ahearn et al. 2004), or to shape subordinates' perceptions of leaders' abilities, which are then positively related to higher job satisfaction and performance (Blickle et al. 2013; Frieder et al. 2019). However, this approach to organizational politics focuses on benefits at the individual (usually a leader), team, or organizational level, neglecting the broader societal impact. There is a notable lack of insight into how (or if) organizational political strategies could be adapted to yield benefits that extend beyond personal or internal organizational advantages, positively affecting the wider community. For instance, politically skilled leaders who build trust within their teams may also cultivate organizational reputations for integrity that strengthen community and investor confidence (Mishina et al. 2012). Similarly, coalition-building around sustainability or ethical compliance can produce public goods (e.g., improved environmental performance, stronger governance, or enhanced stakeholder trust), that benefit constituencies beyond the organization itself. However, the existing literature on prosocial organizational politics overwhelmingly documents these positive political outcomes at the individual, team, or organizational level, with little attention to whether and how political strategies can be directed toward broader societal benefit.

We thus propose an examination of a new concept: prosocietal organizational politics, captured by the role of Benevolent Machiavellians (consistent with Machiavelli's original emphasis on strategic action to secure the greater good; Cosans and Reina 2018). This approach involves leveraging political actions within an organization to gain power and then fostering prosocietal change that addresses ethical or sustainability issues the organization causes. These Benevolent Machiavellians may prioritize societal stakeholders over the dominant coalition's short-term preferences, which can make their actions appear disloyal or norm-violating to peers inside the organization. In integrative terms, they combine the framing and issue-selling skills emphasized by championing, the prosocietal aspirations and accountability language of CSR/ESG, and the coalition-building and power-accumulating behaviors described in organizational politics. It is a shift from issue selling to decision-makers to becoming the decision-maker; from championing programs that fit existing business models to seeking authority to change those models; and from whistleblowing to a more proactive, power-building strategy for ethical transformation.

Organizations face a growing range of normative pressures that demand alignment with ethical standards and the broader social good, including Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, human rights due diligence, data ethics, and public health obligations. In each case, the core tension is the same as reform that serves long-term ethical legitimacy may impose short-term costs on the dominant coalition, triggering resistance that standard voice mechanisms cannot overcome. Benevolent Machiavellianism, as a structural response to this tension, should therefore generalize to any organizational context in which immediate adaptive efficiency is weighed against disruptive ethical adaptation.

2 Benevolent Machiavellianism: related constructs and their validation

The construct of Benevolent Machiavellianism is related to but distinct from several existing concepts. First, prosocial leadership typically presupposes that individuals already occupy formal leadership roles and focuses on how they use their existing authority to benefit followers and the organization (Grant 2012; Zhu and Akhtar 2014; Tintoré 2019). Benevolent Machiavellianism, by contrast, centers on how individuals without such authority seek to obtain it in order to stop harmful practices, often in opposition to their organization's short-term interests.

Second, moral courage emphasizes principled, often public, resistance to wrongdoing (such as speaking up, refusing to comply, or whistleblowing) without necessarily engaging in sustained political maneuvering (Comer and Sekerka 2018; Dungan et al. 2019; Sekerka and Bagozzi 2007). Benevolent Machiavellianism incorporates similar moral identity or motivation but adds an explicit focus on longer-term power-building and coalition-crafting.

Third, positive political behavior or positive organizational politics describes the use of political tactics for the benefit of others or the organization (Ellen 2014; Hochwarter 2012; Landells and Albrecht 2017). Our notion of Benevolent Machiavellianism refers to prosocietal political behavior specifically oriented toward reduc-

ing societal harm, enacted in ethically compromised organizational contexts, and explicitly oriented toward gaining control over consequential decisions.

Our study examines how employees use political skills to mitigate the negative social impacts of their organizations. The vast majority of the extant literature is based on qualitative methods of in-depth interviews, focus groups, and archival data, or cross-sectional questionnaire surveys (Onkila and Sarna 2022), which is understandable because changing the operation of an organization to reduce its detrimental impact by political or championing action is an extraordinarily complex and context-dependent topic that needs to be analyzed with nuance at the individual, organizational, and macro-level. These actions are notoriously challenging to study because they are covert, intertwined with unspoken norms and subtle distinctions of organizational culture (Buchanan 2016; Ferris et al. 2019). As a result, the literature lacks causal findings about actual behavior (Banks et al. 2021) because randomized controlled trials on the effectiveness of political actions or persuasion techniques are infeasible in the field. Indeed, a comprehensive review of the field of organizational politics did not include any experimental studies among the 94 it examined (Franke and Foerstl 2018). Similarly, a recent systematic review of employee-CSR relations based on 331 journal articles included no experimental studies (Onkila and Sarna 2022).

We decided to go a different route. We designed a behavioral task simulating organizational politics in scenarios in which group actions harm society and investigated how prosocietal individuals can persuade others to gain the power to counteract these effects. Studying covert and potentially harmful organizational behavior in real settings poses ethical and epistemological challenges (Banks et al. 2021). However, structurally similar scenarios can be simulated in an online or laboratory setting without causing substantial harm while maintaining naturalistic and analytical generalization and isomorphic learning (Buchanan 2016). Also, unlike field studies, where numerous uncontrollable factors can influence outcomes, laboratory settings may help build a more robust body of knowledge by standardizing the procedure and focusing only on well-defined variables of interest. In effect, there is robust evidence that results from laboratory studies in I/O psychology reliably predict field results (Anderson et al. 1999; Mitchell 2012). This research contributes to the theoretical understanding of organizational politics' role in promoting prosocietal change and offers insights for employees striving to effect ethical change in their workplaces.

3 Research questions development

We build on extensive research demonstrating that politically skilled individuals are better at understanding a group's dynamics and thus have flexible and more appropriate situational responses (e.g., consideration of others' motives in a given context), which leads to their greater ability to persuade others, gain power and secure their goals (Frieder et al. 2019). These qualities blend with the definition of a successful champion, although their goal is not to gain decision-making power. Political or influence skills are also usually defined with reference to self-interest or organizational interest (cf. "The ability to effectively understand others at work, and to use

such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal and/or organizational objectives," Ahearn et al. 2004, p. 311). It is implied, and a vast number of studies show, that there is a strong association between a level of political will or political skills and individuals' organizational accomplishments like career success, salary, and their group outcomes like productivity and general performance (Ferris et al. 2019; Gentry et al. 2012; Munyon et al. 2015; Todd et al. 2009).

However, politicking, persuasion, or manipulation can also take on an explicitly malevolent character. Individuals with strong self-interested or even Machiavellian traits are then characterized by their willingness to manipulate and exploit others to achieve their singular goals. They are adept at reading social situations, using this knowledge to their advantage, and employing manipulative tactics, often at others' expense (Cesinger et al. 2023; Dahling et al. 2009; Jones and Mueller 2022).

In this article, we have two main objectives – first, to examine whether the same political will and persuasion skills are effective when persuading colleagues to give one power, which can be used to attain a prosocial goal even if it conflicts with their immediate personal and organizational interests. Second, if prosocial people are able or willing to use these skills or, on the contrary, if a self-interested strategy will prevail.

Research on the political tactics used to get one's way identifies several specific tactics, such as assertiveness, ingratiation, rationality, exchange, upward appeals, consultation, inspirational appeal, and others (Kipnis et al. 1980; Yukl et al. 2008; Yukl and Falbe 1990). The success of these tactics – i.e., reaching an outcome such as performance evaluation, promotion, target commitment, or level of trust – depends on the roles of the agents and targets and the context, with rational persuasion as the only tactic for reaching outcomes regardless of moderating factors (Lee et al. 2017). Although the latest meta-analysis noted that “situational factors in which the influence tactics are used are likely to have a significant impact on their effectiveness” (Lee et al. 2017, p. 226), there are no attempts to study whether the outcome has a negative social impact; as no such study, to our knowledge, exists yet. This knowledge gap leads to research questions (RQ):

RQ 1: How do individuals differ in the successful adoption of the influence tactics?

To address RQ1, Hypotheses 1–2 (see Table 1 for operationalized hypotheses) propose that participants with higher political skill and higher political will will be more successful in persuading others.

RQ2: How are self-interested versus prosocial tendencies (captured by power and affiliation motives) related to prosocial behavior and persuasiveness?

To address RQ2, Hypotheses 3a–3b (Table 1) link power motive to antisocial decisions, Hypotheses 4a–4b and 5 link affiliation motive to prosocial decisions, and Hypotheses 6–7 link deviations from the group's norm to lower persuasiveness.

Prosocial individuals, who are inherently motivated by prosocial concerns, may exhibit a more negative perception of organizational politics and of their organization's injunctive social norms. Their focus on ethical standards and moral values, often deontological in nature, means they prioritize doing what is 'right' over what would persuade others or what the social norms of their group are (Cohen and Morse 2014). This ethical stance can impede their ability to engage in persuasive tactics to gain power, which may require a more Machiavellian approach. While Machiavel-

Table 1 Summary of the hypotheses

Political Skills and Will and Persuasion (RQ1)	H1: Participants' political skills are positively associated with their ability to persuade others, as measured by the number of votes they receive H2: Participants' political will is positively associated with their persuasive power, as reflected in the number of votes they receive
Power Motive and Money Withdrawal (RQ2)	H3a: Participants' power motive is positively associated with the total amount of money units they decide to withdraw from the charities in the first three rounds H3b: Participants' power motive is positively associated with the total amount of money units they decide to withdraw from the charities in the final round
Affiliation Motive and Charitable Contribution (RQ2)	H4a: Participants' affiliation motive is negatively associated with the total amount of money units they withdraw from the charities in the first three rounds H4b: Participants' affiliation motive is negatively associated with the total amount of money units they withdraw from the charities in the final round H5: Participants' affiliation motive is positively associated with the amount of money units they return to the charities at the beginning of the fourth round
Withdrawal Differences and Influence (RQ2)	H6: Participants with a larger difference between their total withdrawal from the charities in the first three rounds and the average total withdrawal of the remaining members of the group are less persuasive, as evidenced by receiving fewer votes H7: Participants with a larger absolute difference between their total withdrawal from the charities in the first three rounds and the average total withdrawal of the remaining members of the group are less persuasive, as evidenced by receiving fewer votes
Machiavellian Views (RQ3)	H8a: Participants with higher scores on the Views dimension of Machiavellianism withdraw higher amounts from charities in the first three rounds H8b: Participants with higher scores on the Views dimension of Machiavellianism withdraw higher amounts from charities in the final round
Machiavellian Tactics, Persuasion, and Final Round Decisions (RQ3)	H9: Participants scoring higher on the Tactics dimension of Machiavellianism will be more effective in persuading others, as indicated by receiving more votes H10: Participants with high overall Machiavellianism scores propose higher withdrawals in the final round, reflecting a belief that the ends justify the means

lians are not necessarily better than others at persuasion tactics (Austin et al. 2007), they are more willing to instrumentally employ such tactics (Grams and Rogers 1990; Harms et al. 2024). On the other hand, prosocial individuals are less likely to excel in organizational politics because their actions are guided more by moral principles than by strategic evaluation or persuasion tactics (Bolino et al. 2016; Bolino and Grant 2016).

Furthermore, prosocial individuals' preference for moral stance and fairness may conflict with the utilitarian, nuanced, and sometimes underhanded strategies needed in decisions that go against one's organization's objectives (Bertsimas et al. 2012; Gkeredakis et al. 2023; Monin et al. 2008). The need to balance individual, organizational, and societal goals can create blurred ethical lines, making it challenging for those with strong moral convictions to engage effectively. This ethical rigidity, while admirable, can be a disadvantage in environments where flexibility and effective persuasion are necessary to gain power and achieve one's prosocial goals. Prosocial individuals may become powerless observers of their organizational misconduct by refusing to be pragmatic or utilitarian. This ambiguity in an appropriate strategy by prosocial individuals leads to the final research question:

RQ 3: Which tactic is more effective in persuading group members to give one power to achieve prosocietal goals that may go against the group's objectives?

To address RQ3, Hypotheses 8a-8b (Table 1) link Machiavellian views to antisocial decisions, while Hypotheses 9–10 link Machiavellian tactics and overall Machiavellianism to persuasion success.

In sum, while prosocietal individuals bring valuable ethical perspectives and a focus on the greater good, these same qualities may hinder their willingness or ability to engage in or succeed in obtaining power for the prosocietal change in their organization. For example, Machiavellianistically promising others to help their interests and then breaking the promise may work better to achieve prosocietal goals than announcing prosocietal intentions. On the other end of the spectrum, malevolent Machiavellians are characterized by their manipulative, self-serving nature and are adept at navigating organizational politics through influence tactics focused solely on personal gain, even at the expense of society at large.

4 Methods

Data, materials, and analysis code can be found at <https://osf.io/utn62/>. Pre-registration for the study can be found at <https://osf.io/c4x5q/>.

4.1 Overview of the study and hypotheses

We have developed an innovative task where participants form a four-member group representing an organization and engage in four stages of an activity. This involves withdrawing funds allocated for charities. The group's withdrawal of funds represents a negative societal impact. Members privately suggest the amount to extract from charities in the initial three stages. This sum is then halved and distributed evenly among all members, i.e., each participant invariably receives a portion of the funds removed from the charities, *irrespective of their individual choices*. Halving the withdrawn amount introduces an element of value destruction, making the task more than a mere reallocation of funds from charities to the organization (i.e., participants). In this way, the task mirrors organizational ethical dilemmas in which employees can increase internal resources or performance indicators by engaging in practices that impose dispersed, partly hidden costs on external stakeholders, thereby creating a trade-off between group benefit and broader societal harm.

In the decisive fourth stage, each member has the choice to return up to half of their accumulated funds to the charities. Concurrently, they have the opportunity to convince the other members of the group to vote for them to become a decision-maker. Only the decision-maker has the authority to determine the final round's withdrawal amount from the charities. Notably, the charity fund in this last stage is *tenfold* larger than in the preceding rounds. The whole task is explained to the participants in advance with comprehension checks.

We expect some behavioral trends among participants to appear. Primarily, the study focuses on power-grabbing organizational politics, which, in our task's context, involves employing effective influence tactics to obtain power to decide on resource

allocation. This necessitates a combination of political will and skill (Ferris et al. 2005; Kapoutsis et al. 2017; Kimura 2015). We hypothesize that applying influence tactics to obtain power will be more likely when there is a clear need; hence, in our study, we expect participants to exert more effort to influence others when there is a discrepancy in charity withdrawal levels among group members. Additionally, we anticipate that situations posing societal harm (alongside personal or group benefits) will drive prosocial individuals to strive for change. This will be examined through two motives: the power motive, which involves influencing others' attitudes or behaviors and seeking status, and the affiliation motive, which focuses on fostering positive interpersonal relationships (Heckhausen and Heckhausen 2008).

Specifically, our framework is based on two individual-level axes (see also Fig. 2): 1) ethical orientation (ranging from self-serving to prosocial motives and behavior) and 2) influence capacity (ranging from low to high political will and skills). We expect two primary strategies for power grabbing within the task. These strategies also correspond to personality traits measured by a Two-Dimensional Machiavellianism Scale (TDMS; Monaghan et al. 2020). The first, termed “Malevolent Machiavellianism”, involves participants demonstrating high self-serving political will, high political skills, low affiliation, and high power motive. This approach will be characterized by intensive charity withdrawal, minimal returns, and successful influence tactics, primarily for self and group benefit, and will be associated with high TDMS scores (both Views and Tactics).

Conversely, “Benevolent Machiavellianism” combines high benevolent political will and high political skills, affiliation, and power motive. Participants adopting this strategy will be likely to suggest minimal charity withdrawals, return substan-

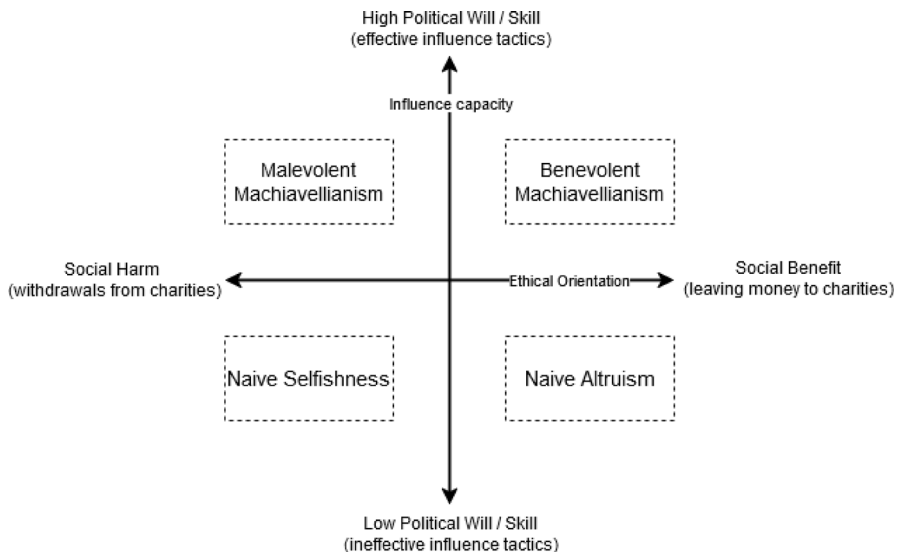


Fig. 2 A schema of possible strategies in the task where individuals could use various influence tactics (i.e., apply political will/skill) to gain power over monetary benefits for themselves and their group at the expense of society (represented in the study by charities)

tial amounts, and actively engage in influence tactics. This approach correlates with lower Views and higher Tactics scores on the TDMS scale.

Two additional strategies, not centered on obtaining power, may also be identified. “Naive Altruism” is marked by a lack of political will and skills, a strong affiliation motive, but a weak power motive. Participants with this approach tend to withdraw minimally from charities, return significant amounts, and either avoid or ineffectively use influence tactics. In contrast, “Naive Selfishness” is characterized by limited political will and skills, a low affiliation, and a power motive. Here, participants are likely to withdraw heavily from charities, return little to nothing, and similarly avoid or ineffectively use influence tactics.

Based on this theoretical framework, we formulate the following hypotheses, which we test in the described task.

4.2 Exploratory analyses

Apart from the described hypotheses, we examined how features of messages are associated with the number of votes a participant who wrote the message received. In particular, we used the ratings of messages by other participants and the content of the messages coded by research assistants as the examined features (for more details, see the Measures and Expected Results sections). In using influence tactics, given the task's anonymous nature, we expect participants to focus more on task-related outcomes than on building relationships (Sherwood and DePaolo 2005). Participants will be aware of their group's past actions regarding charity withdrawals (in the first three rounds, they will see how many money units have been taken from charities by their group and how much they have consequently received), allowing them to tailor their strategies to align with others' revealed values or preferences, i.e., whether they lean towards higher or lower charity withdrawals.

4.3 Sample

Six hundred participants (i.e., 150 groups of four) were recruited on Prolific.¹ We invited a gender-balanced sample of people located in the UK, at least 18 years old, with an approval rate of at least 99 and between 10 and 300 submissions. Each participant received a participation fee of £4 for completing the study, up to £0.5 for correctly answering questions checking the understanding of the procedure, and an additional bonus depending on decisions made during the experiment. Out of the participants who started the study, 96 participants discontinued the study or did not respond for a long time, and a researcher therefore took their role (moved the task another step to allow the other players to continue it; see Procedure). Data of these participants were excluded from the study according to the pre-registered exclusion criterion, even if they later returned to it. We further excluded 38 participants who were in the group where two or more other participants did not complete the whole task. The analysis was performed with data of the remaining 466 participants. Out of these remaining participants for whom information was available, 55.2% were

¹ Additional two participants started the study, but the session was canceled for the lack of participants.

female, 44.8% male, their median age was 32 ($IQR = 14$), 56.6% worked full-time, 19.7% part-time and the remaining 23.7% were unemployed, not in paid work, about to start a new job or in another employment status.

4.4 Procedure

The study was run using oTree. The entire study was administered in English. In cases where a participant returned the task on Prolific or stopped performing the task for an unreasonable amount of time (i.e., > 4 min on the intro page, > 8 min on the task overview page, > 2 min on pages during the first three rounds, > 6 min on the fourth round page), one of the researchers advanced the task so that other members of the group could continue. In such cases, the researcher always took the maximum amount from the charity, returned nothing, and left the message in the fourth round empty (in the results, we present an analysis of the groups with and without these inactive participants). Participants who did not complete the experimental task were excluded from the study.

Participants first selected a preferred charity from five well-known UK charities (see Fig. 3 for a schema of the full experimental procedure). They were then explained the procedure of the entire study. Afterwards, participants answered eight multiple-choice questions about the procedure, earning £0.05 for each correct answer and an additional £0.10 if they answered all eight questions correctly.

Participants were randomly assigned to a group of four for four rounds. During the first three rounds of the task, each participant privately decided how many money units (MU; 100 MU = £1) out of 50 MU allotted to charities they wanted to take away (i.e., 200 MU per round/four participants). The money units taken from the charities were divided by two and then distributed equally among all members of the group. Thus, each participant could receive up to 25 MU in each of the first three rounds if all group members took all money units away from the charities. After each round, participants saw how many money units had been taken from charities and how much they had consequently received.

After three rounds played in this manner, at the beginning of the fourth round, participants were able to return some money units to the charity (up to a maximum of half of what they had received from the first three rounds). Participants also wrote a message for other group members (within a 3-min time limit), giving them a chance to convince other group members to vote for them to become decision-makers. All participants also decided how many money units out of 2000 MU they wanted to take from the charity in the last round. Afterward, all participants read messages from others and voted on who would become the decision-maker (they couldn't vote for themselves). Only the decision of the participant with the most votes (i.e., "decision-maker") was revealed and implemented. In the event that multiple participants received the same number of votes, the decision of one of them was chosen at random.

After this synchronous experimental task, participants went through several questionnaires and answered questions related to the experimental task at their own pace. After the entire study was completed, the money was paid to the chosen charities.

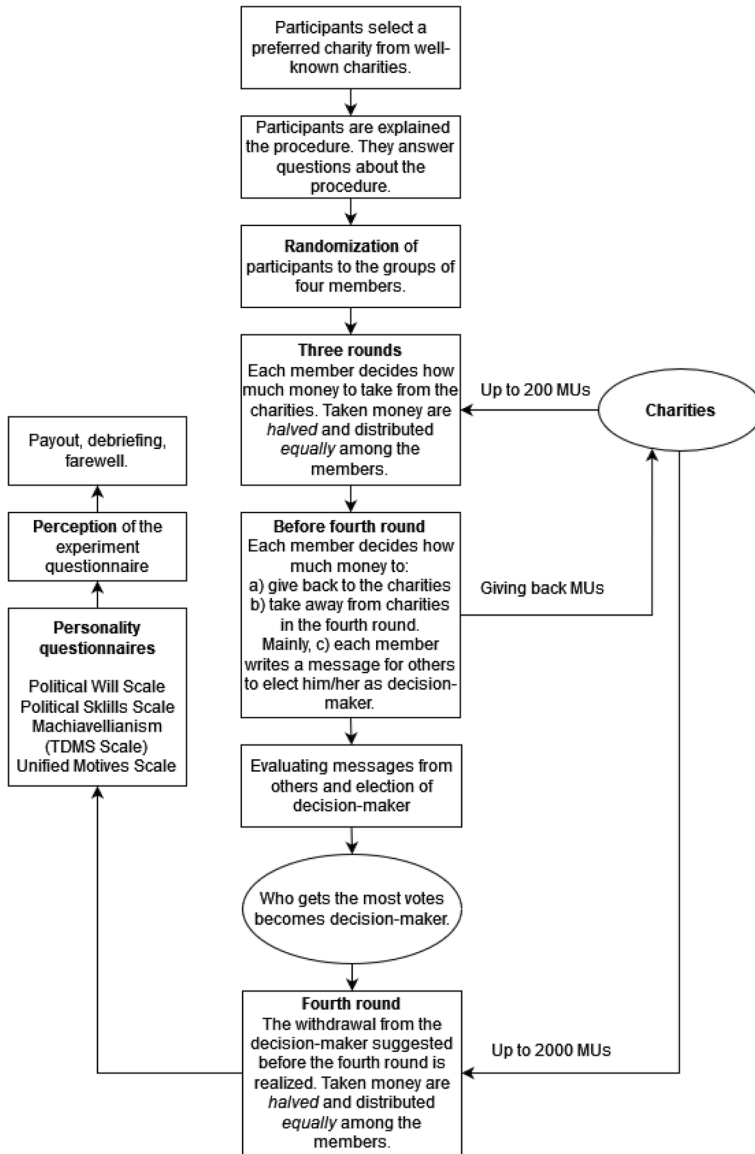


Fig. 3 A schema of the study

4.5 Measures

Withdrawal from charities: We use the total withdrawal from the charities in the first three rounds to assess prosocial tendencies. We interpret the amount taken from the charity as prosocial (low withdrawals) to self-interested (high withdrawals) behavior.

Difference in withdrawal from charities: We use the difference between a participant's total withdrawal from the charities in the first three rounds and the average remaining participants' total withdrawal from the charities in the first three rounds to assess whether participants vote for less prosocial members of the group (i.e., those who take more than other members of the group). We also use the *absolute* difference in withdrawal from charities to assess whether participants prefer to vote for other members of the group who behaved similarly as they did in the first three rounds of the task.

4.6 Contribution to charities

We use the proportion of money contributed to the charity out of the maximum possible for assessment of prosocial tendencies. Higher contributions are interpreted as prosocial behavior.

Argument: We categorized the participant's argument in terms of its content in several dimensions. Research Assistants (RAs) first performed a preliminary review of all collected messages to familiarize themselves with the content and to identify any immediate themes or outliers. This step ensured that RAs developed a sense of the dataset before beginning the formal coding process. RAs received training on the coding scheme to ensure reliability and consistency in their coding. This training included practice sessions with sample messages where RAs applied the coding scheme, followed by discussions to reconcile different interpretations and refine understanding. Each message was independently coded by at least two RAs, and discrepancies between coders were discussed and resolved during coding meetings to ensure intercoder reliability. The coded dimensions were:

Vote-targeting dimension: Who does the message state or imply should get the votes (to be the decision-maker)? With codes: vote for me; don't vote for me; (don't vote for me but) vote for someone/anyone.

Benevolence dimension: What proportion of the money is proposed to be left to charities? Codes range from 10 (Leave all to charities; 100%, 2000 MU) to 0 (Leave nothing to charities; 0%, 0 MU).

Argument direction and valence dimension: An evaluation of what argument appears in the message or who is highlighted in the persuasion (the sender; the group; or charities). At the same time, an evaluation whether it is a positive or negative reference. The resulting codes corresponded to the combinations of these two dimensions: Message sender (messages with "I"): Positive, Negative. Group, other players, or another player (messages with "we"): Positive, Negative. Charity or charities (messages with "it"/"charity"): Positive, Negative.

Ratings of the argument: The average rating of the arguments in terms of how much the other participants in the group found the argument convincing, understandable, rational, emotional, selfish, altruistic, political, and naive is used to assess the characteristics of the participants' arguments.

Number of votes: We use the proportion of votes a participant received from others to assess the success of the persuasion.

Decision: We use the proposed withdrawal in the last round of the game for the assessment of prosocial tendencies. We interpret the amount taken from the charity as prosocial (low withdrawals) to self-interested (high withdrawals) behavior.

4.7 Scales

Political Will Political will was measured by the eight items of the Political Will Scale (Kapoutsis et al. 2017). The items were answered on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. The items were combined in an average score with higher numbers indicating higher political will, $\alpha = 0.88$, 95% CI [0.86, 0.90]. The scale measures two dimensions of political will: self-serving, $\alpha = 0.86$, 95% CI [0.83, 0.88], and benevolent political will, $\alpha = 0.80$, 95% CI [0.77, 0.84]. The scale includes items such as “I would engage in politics to serve the common good.” (benevolent political will) and “Prevailing in the political arena at work would prove my competence.” (self-serving political will).

Political Skill Political skill was measured by the 18 items of the Political Skill Inventory (Ferris et al. 2005). The items were answered on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. The items were combined in an average score with higher numbers indicating higher political skill, $\alpha = 0.93$, 95% CI [0.92, 0.94]. The scale includes items such as “I spend a lot of time at work developing connections with others.” (networking ability), “I am able to communicate easily and effectively with others.” (interpersonal influence), “I pay close attention to people’s facial expressions.” (social astuteness), and “I try to show a genuine interest in other people.” (apparent sincerity).

Machiavellianism Machiavellianism was measured by the Two-Dimensional Machiavellianism Scale (TDMS), which is a 12-item scale designed to assess two distinct dimensions of Machiavellianism: Views and Tactics (Monaghan et al. 2020). The Views dimension encompasses cynical and untrusting beliefs about others and the world (e.g., “In my opinion, human nature is to be dishonest”). The Tactics dimension represents the endorsement of manipulative behaviors and the belief that the ends justify the means (e.g., “I value being honest over getting ahead”). Both subscales had reasonable internal consistency, $\alpha = 0.78$, 95% CI [0.74, 0.81], for the views subscale and $\alpha = 0.83$, 95% CI [0.80, 0.86] for the tactics subscale. The two subscales correlated moderately $r(453) = 0.34$, 95% CI [0.25, 0.42], $p < 0.001$. The overall scale had an internal consistency of $\alpha = 0.83$, 95% CI [0.80, 0.85]. The TDMS items were answered on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” and were designed to capture both positively-keyed and negatively-keyed aspects of Machiavellianism.

Motives An ultra-short version of the Unified Motives Scale (UMS-3; Schönbrodt and Gerstenberg 2012) was used to measure power, achievement, affiliation, intimacy, and fear of failure, rejection, and losing control motives. The former four (hope) motives are each measured with 3 items, and the latter three (fear) motives are each measured by a single item. The hope motives items had a reasonable internal consistency: power, $\alpha = 0.66$, 95% CI [0.60, 0.71], achievement, $\alpha = 0.68$, 95%

CI [0.59, 0.74], affiliation, $\alpha = 0.78$, 95% CI [0.73, 0.82], intimacy, $\alpha = 0.67$, 95% CI [0.57, 0.74]. An example of the former type is “I like to fully immerse myself in a relationship,” measuring the intimacy motive, and of the latter type “Personally producing work of high quality,” measuring the achievement motive. The items were answered on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” for 7 items and “not important to me” to “extremely important to me” for the remaining 8 items. Although the reliabilities fall slightly below the conventional 0.70 threshold, they are acceptable for previously validated scales in basic research, particularly given that reliability is constrained by the small number of items per subscale and the breadth of the underlying constructs (Schmitt 1996).

4.8 Perception of the experiment

We asked participants about several issues regarding their perception of the task. First, we asked them how much they cared about the outcomes for the charities and whether they believed that another decision-maker would withdraw a similar amount of money as they would. Second, we asked them whether they wanted to become the decision-maker and whether they believed that they would become the decision-maker with the message they had written. Third, we asked them questions about various aspects of persuading others, such as whether they considered it complicated or understandable. Finally, we asked the participants to what degree they considered taking money from charities, giving money back to charities, and trying to prevent other participants from taking money from charities to be wrong vs. right, immoral vs. moral, stupid vs. smart, and selfish vs. altruistic.

Participants were also told that we would like to know whether participants were not motivated or tired to exclude the answers of such participants. Afterward, we asked them whether we should exclude their answers.

4.9 General analytic strategy

Given that the measures of behavior and the number of votes in the task depend on the behavior of other participants in the task, we computed a rank order for each of the measures for a given group and used these transformed measures in the analysis. The rank order was computed only from the participants who finished the task and was rescaled to -0.5 to 0.5. The tests of the hypotheses were first conducted using a linear regression with a personality trait tested in the given hypothesis (or the difference in withdrawal from charities) as an independent variable and the measure of interest as the dependent variable. We then tested whether the inclusion of a random slope for the examined predictor for groups (which takes into account differences in the possible effect of the predictor between groups) in a linear mixed-effect regression significantly improved the fit of the model. If not, we used the linear regression model. All the personality measures were centered before the analysis. We also conducted a similar analysis without the transformation of the dependent variables. This analysis can be biased under certain circumstances, but it may also have a higher statistical power.

As a robustness check, we checked the robustness of the results by performing the analyses without data from participants in whose groups any other participant discontinued the study.² The data for analyses which could not have been impacted by this discontinuation were kept in the main analysis (e.g., if a participant discontinued the study after the third round, the data for the first three rounds were kept for all participants in the group).

5 Results

5.1 Relationships between measures

Table 2 shows correlations between the share of received votes, the three measures of behavior in the task, and the measured personality traits. It is possible to see that the withdrawal from charities in the first three rounds and the decision of the amount to withdraw in the last round correlated with each other positively, and both correlated negatively with the contribution to charities before the fourth round. The four hope motives correlated positively with each other, but only the power motive was significantly associated with behavior in the task, namely with the withdrawal from charities in the first three rounds. Machiavellianism correlated positively with withdrawal from charities and negatively with contribution to charities before the fourth round. No measure of individual differences correlated with the share of received votes.

5.2 Withdrawal from charities

Participants withdrew on average 56% of the maximum amount of money units from the charities in the first three rounds, with 12% of participants withdrawing nothing and 23% of participants withdrawing the full amount. Consistent with H3a, participants with a higher power motive withdrew more from the charities, $t(453) = 3.05$, $p = 0.002$, $b = 0.058$, 95% CI [0.020, 0.095].³ In line with H8a, participants with higher scores on the Views dimension of Machiavellianism withdrew higher amounts from charities, but the effect was not significant, $t(453) = 1.68$, $p = 0.094$, $b = 0.030$, 95% CI [-0.005, 0.065].⁴ Contrary to H4a, participants' affiliation motive was not significantly negatively associated with withdrawal from charities, $t(453) = -0.78$, $p = 0.437$, $b = -0.015$, 95% CI [-0.054, 0.023].

² We also planned to repeat the analysis without the data from participants who indicated that we should definitely discard their answers, but there was only one such participant, so we did not run the robustness check.

³ The effect was similar, but not significant when only participants from groups without any participant who discontinued the study were included in the analysis, $t(282) = 1.89$, $p = .059$, $b = 0.045$, 95% CI [-0.002, 0.092].

⁴ However, the effect was significant when the analysis is performed with withdrawal from charities not ranked within the group, $t(453) = 2.58$, $p = .010$, $b = 6.160$, 95% CI [1.470, 10.851], and when only participants from groups without any participant who discontinued the study were included in the analysis, $t(282) = 2.26$, $p = .024$, $b = 0.049$, 95% CI [0.006, 0.092].

Table 2 Descriptive statistics for main variables. The measures of behavior in the task are displayed as percentages of the maximum possible values, and they are not rank ordered unlike the measures used in confirmatory analyses. Values in square brackets indicate the 95% confidence interval for each correlation. * indicates $p < 0.05$. ** indicates $p < 0.01$

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Votes (%)	0.27	0.23										
2. Withdrawal (%)	0.56	0.34	0.04									
3. Contribution (%)	0.52	0.42	0.00	-0.49**								
4. Decision (%)	0.38	0.39	0.07	0.66**	-0.55**							
5. Political skill	5.12	0.89	0.01	[0.61, 0.71]	[-0.61, -0.48]	-0.03						
6. Political will	4.12	1.18	0.02	-0.02	[-0.02, 0.16]	0.09	0.17**					
7. Machiavellianism	3.40	0.87	0.04	0.04	[-0.05, 0.13]	[-0.01, 0.18]	[0.08, 0.26]					
8. Power motive	3.14	0.93	0.08	0.24**	-0.21**	0.25**	-0.20**	0.26**				
9. Achievement motive	4.38	0.66	0.06	0.18**	[-0.29, -0.12]	[0.16, 0.33]	[0.29, 0.44]	[0.32, 0.47]	0.20**			
10. Affiliation motive	3.88	0.90	0.06	[-0.02, 0.17]	[-0.12, 0.06]	[0.07, 0.25]	[0.29, 0.44]	[0.32, 0.47]	[0.11, 0.29]	0.37**		
11. Intimacy motive	4.49	0.66	0.00	[-0.03, 0.15]	[-0.15, 0.04]	[-0.00, 0.18]	[0.34, 0.49]	[0.01, 0.20]	[-0.25, -0.07]	[0.29, 0.45]	0.41**	
				-0.03	0.09	0.01	0.56**	0.12*	-0.26**	0.34**	[0.33, 0.48]	
				[-0.12, 0.06]	[-0.00, 0.18]	[-0.08, 0.10]	[0.49, 0.62]	[0.03, 0.21]	[-0.34, -0.17]	[0.25, 0.42]		
				-0.05	0.09	-0.04	0.33**	0.01	-0.21**	0.13**	0.27**	0.49**
				[-0.14, 0.04]	[-0.01, 0.18]	[-0.13, 0.05]	[0.25, 0.41]	[-0.08, 0.10]	[-0.30, -0.12]	[0.03, 0.21]	[0.18, 0.35]	[0.41, 0.55]

5.3 Decision

In the final round, participants suggested withdrawing, on average, 769 money units out of the possible 2000, i.e., 38%. Consistent with H3b, participants with a stronger power motive wanted to withdraw higher amounts from charities in the final round, $t(453) = 3.27$, $p = 0.001$, $b = 0.059$, 95% CI [0.023, 0.094]. Contrary to H4b, participants' affiliation motive was not negatively associated with the withdrawal in the final round, $t(453) = 0.59$, $p = 0.557$, $b = 0.011$, 95% CI [-0.026, 0.048]. Consistent with H8b and H10, the size of the suggested withdrawal in the last round was positively associated with the Views dimension of Machiavellianism, $t(453) = 2.06$, $p = 0.040$, $b = 0.035$, 95% CI [0.002, 0.068],⁵ as well as overall Machiavellianism scores, $t(453) = 4.73$, $p < 0.001$, $b = 0.089$, 95% CI [0.052, 0.127]. As shown in Table 3, 45% of participants decided to withdraw 250 money units or fewer in the last round, and 22% of participants decided to withdraw 1750 money units or more.

5.4 Contribution to charities

Participants, on average, returned 52% of the maximum amount to charities before the last round, with 30% of participants not returning anything and 31% of participants returning more than 99%. In line with H5, the amount of money units returned to the charities was positively associated with participants' affiliation motive, $t(453) = 1.08$, $p = 0.280$, $b = 0.020$, 95% CI [-0.016, 0.057]; however the effect was not significant.⁶

5.5 Votes

Contrary to H1 and H2, and H9, the ability to persuade others, as measured by the number of votes they received was associated with neither political skill, $t(453) = 0.19$, $p = 0.847$, $b = 0.004$, 95% CI [-0.032, 0.039], nor political will, $t(453) = 0.11$, $p = 0.909$, $b = 0.002$, 95% CI [-0.026, 0.029], nor Machiavellianism, $t(453) = 0.68$, $p = 0.494$, $b = 0.013$, 95% CI [-0.024, 0.049]. Participants with a larger difference between their total withdrawal from the charities in the first three rounds and the

Table 3 The association between the number of received votes and the withdrawal decision. While the bins used for the decision are arbitrary, the decision has a multimodal distribution with peaks at 0, 1000, and 2000 and lower peaks at 500 and 1500, and the bins contain values within the same distance from these peaks

Votes	Decision				
	0–250	251–750	751–1249	1250–1749	1750–2000
0	33.9%	4.9%	14.6%	4.9%	14.6%
1	10.1%	2.1%	4.3%	0.9%	6.7%
2+	1.5%	0.0%	0.9%	0.0%	0.6%

⁵ The effect is not significant when the analysis is performed with the decision not ranked within the group, $t(453) = 1.73$, $p = .084$, $b = 63.683$, 95% CI [-8.510, 135.876].

⁶ The effect was significant when only participants from groups without any participant who discontinued the study were included in the analysis, $t(282) = 2.04$, $p = .042$, $b = 0.047$, 95% CI [0.002, 0.092].

average total withdrawal of the remaining members of the group did not receive fewer votes, $t(97.2) = 0.69$, $p = 0.490$, $b = 0.000$, 95% CI [-0.000, 0.001], contrary to H6. However, consistent with H7, a higher *absolute* difference between total withdrawal from the charities in the first three rounds and the average total withdrawal of the remaining members of the group was associated with a significantly lower number of received votes, $t(464) = -3.04$, $p = 0.002$, $b = -0.001$, 95% CI [-0.002, -0.001]. As can be seen from Table 3, 1.5% of participants were benevolent, deciding to withdraw less than 250 money units, while also being highly successful in attracting votes, receiving 2 or more votes from the other group members.

5.6 Arguments

Table 4 shows correlations between the share of votes, the withdrawal decision in the last round and characteristics of arguments, coded by researchers and evaluated by other participants in the group. The proportion of votes a participant received correlated positively with positive arguments for the sender, groups, and charity, but not with the implied size of the withdrawal (benevolence; see also Fig. 4). The arguments of participants who received more votes were rated by other participants as more convincing, understandable, rational, emotional, altruistic, and less naive.

5.7 Perception of the experiment

Participants rated that they thought that an average participant cared less about how much the charities would get in the experiment than they did, $t(456) = -8.50$, $p < 0.001$, $d = -0.40$, 95% CI [-0.49, -0.30], $M_{\text{others}} = 2.96$, $M_{\text{oneself}} = 3.47$. A majority of participants (65.9%) reported that it had occurred to them that it was possible to try to become the decision-maker in the last round to prevent others from taking money from the charities. Participants generally considered taking money from charities as wrong, immoral, stupid, and selfish, and giving money back to charities in the opposite terms (see Fig. 5). While preventing others from taking money from charities was rated on average positively, it was viewed less positively than giving money back to charities.

As seen from Table 5, participants who felt that trying to persuade others was complicated or too much of a hassle received fewer votes, while those who wanted to become the decision-maker received more votes, both suggesting the importance of motivation in persuading others.

6 Discussion

Our study investigated whether employees with prosocietal intentions, rather than purely self-serving ones, could leverage political tactics to gain power to advance an organizational change that benefits society at the expense of immediate collective or individual gain. By using a simulated decision-making scenario in which participants chose how much money to withdraw from a charity – and subsequently attempted to persuade peers to grant them decision-making authority in a high-stakes

final round – we sought to fill theoretical and practical gaps in the literature on championing, CSR/ESG, and organizational politics. We organize the discussion around our three research questions: RQ1 (H1–H2) examined whether political skill and political will would translate into greater persuasive success (votes); RQ2 (H3–H7) focused on how power and affiliation motives, as well as deviations from group withdrawal norms, shape anti/social withdrawals and influence; and RQ3 (H8–H10) tested whether Machiavellian views and tactics promote both anti/social behavior and persuasive success.

Our most consequential result is the near-nonexistence of the benevolent-and-empowered outcome. Only 1.5% of participants combined prosocietal choices (low withdrawals) with high persuasive success (receiving at least two votes), despite most participants rating charity-taking as morally wrong. The pattern shows structural powerlessness, a condition in which individual-level capacities (political skill, prosocietal intent) are systematically neutralized by group-level forces such as climates of silence, implicit beliefs that speaking up is risky, and sanctions against challengers (Morrison and Milliken 2000; Detert and Edmondson 2011; Morrison 2023). These forces operate through dominant norms and reputational penalties for deviating from the coalition’s past behavior (e.g., derogation of prosocietal rebels and do-gooders), and through shared material incentives when harm is collectively beneficial (Monin et al. 2008; Ashforth and Anand 2003). In such contexts, endorsement mechanisms like voting may favor norm-prototypical candidates over reformers, limiting the political viability of prosocietal influence (Houdek and Bahník 2025; Bahník et al. 2025).

In our task, peers did not directly reward ethical correctness. Instead, they penalized deviation from the group’s withdrawal norm and relied on simple, norm-consistent cues when allocating authority. That is exactly what would be expected in organizations where harmful practices are embedded in routines and payoffs because the reformer is evaluated less as a moral agent and more as a potential threat to the coalition’s distributional interests (Anand et al. 2004). In effect, the prosocietal reform is often not constrained by a lack of moral motivation or interpersonal competence, but by the politics of norm enforcement, e.g., coalitions select leaders who will reproduce the payoff structure that benefits them.

Specifically, and contrary to our expectations (RQ1), neither political skill nor political will (benevolent or self-serving) predicted the number of votes participants received. This finding runs counter to extensive literature showing that political skill correlates with career success, leadership emergence, and interpersonal influence (Ferris et al. 2005; Munyon et al. 2015). One plausible reason is that our specific scenario – taking money from a charity – may have rendered conventional political skill tactics (e.g., ingratiation, rational appeals) less compelling when the moral stakes were clear (Banks et al. 2021). Moreover, our design asked participants to allocate votes after reading each other’s text messages, without any face-to-face interaction or relationship-building, possibly attenuating the effect of personal influence skills. One possible explanation for why the political will/skill did not have a behavioral impact may also stem from self-serving bias, as we found a clear discrepancy between objective behavioral outcomes (Table 2) and subjective perceptions (Table 5). Political skill correlates strongly with how people *felt* about the task (e.g., whether persuading

Table 4 Correlations between the share of received votes, suggested withdrawal in the last round, and features of arguments. The variables 3–7 are categorizations of the arguments by researchers. *Target* is coded as 1 for “vote-for-me” arguments, -1 for “don’t-vote-for-me” and “vote-for-someone-else” arguments, and 0 otherwise. Sender, Group, and Charity are coded as 1 for their positive description, -1 for their negative description, and 0 otherwise. The variables 8–15 are ratings of arguments by other participants in the group. Values in square brackets indicate the 95% confidence interval for each correlation. * indicates $p < 0.05$. ** indicates $p < 0.01$

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Votes (%)	0.27	0.23														
2. Decision (%)	0.38	0.39	0.07													
			[-0.02, 0.16]													
3. Target	0.42	0.87	0.23**	0.08												
			[0.14, 0.32]	[-0.01, 0.17]												
4. Benevolence	5.90	3.98	-0.08	-0.79**	-0.06											
			[-0.20, 0.05]	[-0.84, -0.74]	[-0.18, 0.07]											
5. Sender	0.27	0.50	0.20**	0.02	0.40**	0.09										
			[0.11, 0.28]	[-0.07, 0.12]	[0.32, 0.48]	[-0.04, 0.21]										
6. Group	0.21	0.45	0.27**	0.18**	0.01	-0.30**	0.11*									
			[0.18, 0.35]	[0.09, 0.27]	[-0.08, 0.10]	[-0.41, -0.18]	[0.02, 0.20]									
7. Charity	0.29	0.55	0.09*	-0.29**	0.17**	0.52**	0.18**	-0.02								
			[0.00, 0.18]	[-0.37, -0.21]	[0.08, 0.26]	[0.42, 0.60]	[0.09, 0.27]	[-0.11, 0.07]								
8. Convincing	3.08	1.07	0.46**	0.02	0.26**	-0.01	0.12**	0.18**	0.14**							
			[0.39, 0.53]	[-0.07, 0.11]	[0.17, 0.34]	[-0.14, 0.11]	[0.03, 0.21]	[0.10, 0.27]	[0.05, 0.23]							
9. Understandable	3.67	0.95	0.34**	-0.06	0.18**	0.15*	0.10*	0.09	0.17**	0.71**						
			[0.26, 0.42]	[-0.15, 0.03]	[0.09, 0.26]	[0.02, 0.27]	[0.01, 0.19]	[-0.00, 0.18]	[0.08, 0.26]	[0.66, 0.75]						

Table 4 (continued)

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
10. Rational	3.35	0.99	0.37**	-0.05	0.30**	0.08	0.16**	0.15**	0.17**	0.71**	0.76**					
			[0.29, 0.45]	[-0.14, 0.04]	[0.21, 0.38]	[-0.04, 0.21]	[0.07, 0.25]	[0.06, 0.24]	[0.08, 0.26]	[0.66, 0.75]	[0.72, 0.80]					
11. Emotional	2.56	1.03	0.17**	-0.20**	0.23**	0.43**	0.22**	0.01	0.33**	0.38**	0.40**	0.37**				
			[0.08, 0.26]	[-0.28, -0.11]	[0.14, 0.31]	[0.32, 0.53]	[0.13, 0.30]	[-0.08, 0.10]	[0.24, 0.41]	[0.30, 0.46]	[0.32, 0.48]	[0.29, 0.44]				
12. Selfish	1.97	1.01	-0.07	0.39**	0.09	-0.63**	-0.01	0.03	-0.36**	-0.19**	-0.20**	-	-			
													0.23**	0.28**		
													[-0.31, -0.14]	[-0.36, -0.20]		
13. Altruistic	2.54	0.95	0.15**	-0.25**	0.19**	0.46**	0.19**	0.01	0.31**	0.33**	0.40**	0.41**	0.44**	-		
														0.32**		
														[0.36, 0.48]	[-0.40, -0.24]	
14. Political	1.81	0.75	0.05	0.09*	0.11*	-0.13*	0.16**	0.12**	-0.05	0.03	-0.01	0.09	0.16**	0.18**	0.16**	
			[-0.04, 0.14]	[0.00, 0.18]	[0.02, 0.20]	[-0.26, -0.01]	[0.07, 0.25]	[0.03, 0.21]	[-0.14, 0.04]	[-0.06, 0.12]	[-0.10, 0.08]	[-0.00, 0.18]	[0.07, 0.25]	[0.10, 0.27]	[0.07, 0.25]	
15. Naïve	1.96	0.80	-	-0.05	-0.10*	0.15*	-0.01	-0.10*	-0.07	-0.29**	-0.23**	-	0.10*	0.14**	0.07	0.22**
			0.25**									0.29**				
			[-0.33, -0.16]	[-0.14, 0.04]	[-0.19, -0.01]	[0.02, 0.27]	[-0.10, 0.08]	[-0.19, -0.01]	[-0.16, 0.02]	[-0.37, -0.20]	[-0.31, -0.14]	[-0.37, -0.21]	[0.01, 0.19]	[0.05, 0.23]	[-0.02, 0.16]	[0.14, 0.31]

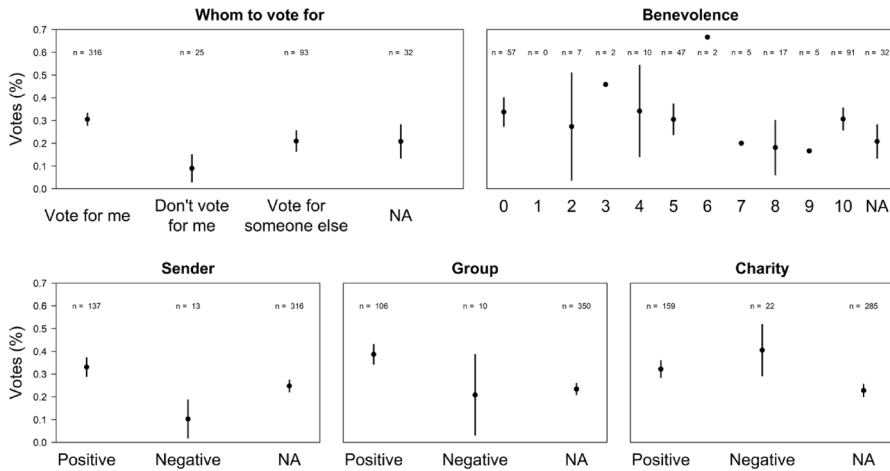
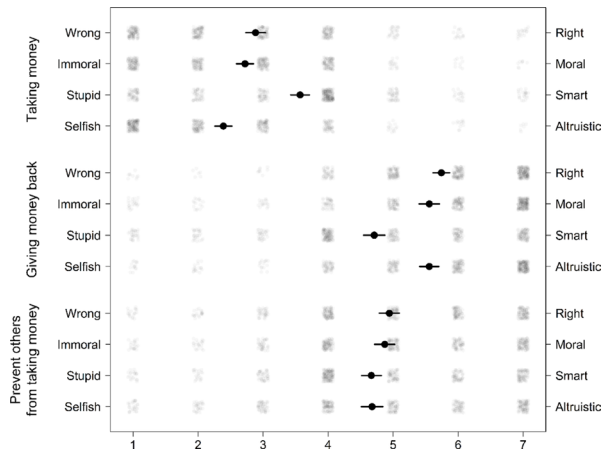


Fig. 4 The association between features of arguments and the proportion of received votes. The error bars represent 95% confidence intervals around the means (and they are shown only for codes with at least six observations). *NA* indicates that the argument did not contain relevant information to the code

Fig. 5 Ratings of behaviors in the task. The error bars represent 95% confidence intervals for the means displayed by the black points. The transparent points represent individual responses with an applied jitter to reduce their overlap



others was easy or a hassle, wanting to be a decision-maker, confidence in becoming a decision-maker, etc.), although they had no observed actual impacts. Individuals with higher political skills just felt more capable, more in control, and more motivated to assume leadership. Indeed, a classic finding in organizational behavior is that self-assessed competencies do not always map onto real-world outcomes – especially in ethically polarized or highly constrained scenarios where the usual levers of influence are diminished.

Participants whose messages contained positive self-references – whether highlighting their own merits or the group’s collective benefit – attracted more votes (examples such as: “*I would love yall beautiful people to vote me...*” or “*Dear Team members... I promise to make the best decision that will benefit us all*”). These patterns align with prior research showing that positive self-presentation, empathy, and

Table 5 Task perception. The Correlations columns show correlation coefficients with behavior in the task. * indicates $p < 0.05$. ** indicates $p < 0.01$. *** indicates $p < 0.001$

Question	M(SD)	Correlations				
		Votes	Decision	Machiavellianism	Political skill	Political will
I did not care about how much money will be taken from the charities	2.48(1.37)	0.01	0.39***	0.35***	-0.18***	0.06
I believed that another decision-maker would withdraw a similar amount from the charity as I would have	3.73(1.28)	-0.01	0.02	-0.02	-0.01	-0.03
I believed that I would be the decision-maker with the message that I had written	2.81(1.35)	0.22***	0.11*	0.11*	0.24***	0.24***
Trying to persuade others felt complicated	3.24(1.34)	-0.19***	-0.13**	0.09*	-0.21***	-0.05
I did not understand the purpose of trying to persuade others	2.38(1.16)	-0.12*	-0.03	0.11*	-0.23***	-0.03
Trying to persuade others felt like too much of a hassle	3.09(1.32)	-0.22***	-0.04	0.16***	-0.24***	-0.08
I did not want to be influenced by the decision of another group member in the final round	3.49(1.27)	-0.01	0.04	0.13**	0.06	0.05
I wanted to become the decision-maker	3.38(1.44)	0.17***	0.20***	0.05	0.18***	0.18***
I did not want to be responsible for the decision	3.06(1.48)	-0.14**	-0.16***	-0.07	-0.18***	-0.16***

articulation of shared objectives can enhance influence in short communications (Lee et al. 2017; Sherwood and DePaolo 2005).

Relatively more votes also went to those who spoke both positively and negatively about charity. For example, a mix of insider cynicism and rational argument (*“I work in tech, and everyone wants a job in the charity sector because its easy as hell and theres no targets/real responsibility. I also see charities doing absolutely nothing in my local community tbh, and actively advocating against us nationally. It just seems like easy jobs for the boys and family members in all honesty—although I do like soi dog foundation in Thailand—I think we should take the money and will enact that if elected.”*), offering a personal critique that some participants may have found relatable or credible, even if controversial. This suggests that authenticity may be persuasive when paired with confident self-presentation and a decisive tone. Correspondingly, proposing to leave a large portion to charities did not by itself garner more votes; rather, the communicative style and emotional tone (e.g., being rated as “rational,” “altruistic,” and “understandable”) were more crucial. This aligns with the championing theory premise that content and style of issue-selling matter substantially (Dutton et al. 2001), but it also extends current knowledge by showing that positive emotional appeals can be effective in morally charged scenarios.

Addressing RQ2, antisocial behavior was clearly presented in our task as participants withdrew on average 56% of the maximum amount of money from the charities while a quarter of participants withdrew the full amount (despite, on average, the participants considered taking money from charities as wrong, immoral, stupid, and selfish). Individuals with a higher power motive withdrew more from the charities in both the initial rounds and the decisive final round. There is longstanding evidence that individuals high in power motives seek to influence group outcomes to demonstrate competence or dominance (Suessenbach et al. 2019). Strong power orientation also manifests as a desire to assume leadership roles (Ahearn et al. 2004), and, in our study, those who wanted to become the decision-maker actually also received more votes. Our results affirm that such individuals are more inclined to maximize personal or group gains, even when it harms external stakeholders. Notably, while championing and CSR theories usually focus on how individuals mobilize leadership (Dutton et al. 2001; Wickert and de Bakker 2018), our findings suggest that a drive to control outcomes might override prosocial inclinations, stressing the need to consider power dynamics when encouraging ethical intra-organizational behavior (Houdek et al., 2026).

We found that the absolute difference between a focal participant’s withdrawals and the group’s average correlated with fewer votes, suggesting that aberrant members (takers or givers) faced challenges in rallying support in their group. Individuals who deviate substantially from a dominant group norm may be viewed as either too exploitative or too moralistic, undercutting peer trust. This finding substantiates theories that norms strongly influence voice acceptance (Morrison 2014). Also, it aligns with the championing literature, in which issue sellers often tailor their pitches to align with or only gently challenge prevailing group positions (Dutton et al. 2001). In short, even if someone seeks power for benevolent reasons, a stark deviation from collective behavior can reduce their persuasive appeal.

Turning to RQ3, Machiavellian views did not significantly predict early-round withdrawal but did predict a greater inclination to withdraw charity funds in the final round, where the stakes were much larger. This pattern may suggest that high cynicism may lie dormant until high-reward opportunities arise, echoing prior findings that Machiavellians exploit strategic moments for personal gain (Dahling et al. 2009; Grams and Rogers 1990). Moreover, overall, Machiavellianism correlated with a higher final withdrawal and the perception that charities should lose their money, which was consistent with the ethos that ends justifying the means. Despite these manipulative tendencies, Machiavellian participants did not secure more votes, indicating that purely self-interested or cynical perspectives were not more persuasive in this morally salient setting. These results align with the idea that Machiavellian behaviors may flourish in ambiguous or high-benefit environments but do not necessarily translate into broad support (Austin et al. 2007; Majeed et al. 2023).

7 Implications for theory and practice

Our findings challenge a linear view of championing and CSR frameworks that assume intrinsically motivated employees can sway corporate leadership through conventional influence alone (Aguinis and Glavas 2012; Fatima and Elbanna 2023). Our null findings suggest that political skill, as typically conceptualized, may be less effective in contexts of overt ethical conflict than in more ambiguous, career-oriented settings. Standard political skill scales emphasize reading others, adapting behavior, and building coalitions to advance personal or organizational objectives (Ferris et al. 2019; Frieder et al. 2019), and although they try to measure benevolent or malevolent orientation, they are largely agnostic about the moral valence of specific objectives. In our design, the central dilemma (taking money from a charity) was both salient and normatively loaded for most participants, leaving comparatively less room for subtle impression-management. When the moral stakes are clear, peers may privilege simple, norm-consistent cues (e.g., not deviating too far from the group's prior behavior, or using arguments that sound rational, altruistic, and understandable) over generalized social savvy. From the perspective of Benevolent Machiavellianism, this implies that possessing high political skill is not sufficient, as ethical insiders may need context-specific repertoires for framing moral trade-offs and proposing feasible reforms, rather than relying on generic influence competencies developed in value-neutral conditions.

These findings contribute to theory by reframing prosocietal insider change as a problem of authority acquisition during norm enforcement, rather than simply voice effectiveness (Hirschman 1970; Morrison 2011; Morrison and Milliken 2000; Detert and Edmondson 2011). Integrating championing, CSR/ESG, and organizational politics is theoretically necessary because it shifts the focal mechanism from persuasive articulation (voice) to political implementation (Ferris et al. 2005). The empirics of this mechanism is the observed 1.5% of participants who exhibit Benevolent Machiavellist behavior; benevolent power acquisition is possible but structurally rare, suggesting that group norms and shared incentives routinely select against prosocietal reformers even when moral disapproval of harm is widespread (Morrison and Mil-

liken 2000). In this sense, our theoretical contribution is not that political skill doesn't matter, but that in morally salient, distributive conflicts it can be overridden by group dynamics. Our findings reveal a form of structural powerlessness that standard individual-difference accounts of influence fail to capture. Our proposed conceptual integration is thus necessary because, as a recent authoritative article on social change agents in organizations shows, political art is universally ignored: "a significant gap remains in educating students about how to effectively pursue insider social change initiatives within organizations, while navigating the complex landscape of workplace politics and culture" (Heucher et al. 2024, p. 336).

Additionally, while organizational politics literature has explored how political skill can yield individual or team benefits (Ferris et al. 2019; Kacmar and Baron 1999), we found it is not straightforwardly transferable to situations of overt ethical conflict. Our results therefore reveal boundary conditions for the effectiveness of influence tactics, highlighting the potential tension between moral imperatives and the typical skill-based approaches taught in political influence models (Ferris et al. 2019).

7.1 Practical implications

For practitioners, our results carry three key messages. First, prosocietal aims and political skill are not, on their own, sufficient to secure power in morally charged situations; neither political skill nor political will predicted voting, and only a tiny minority of clearly prosocietal actors managed to gain decision-making authority. Organizations that want insiders to prevent harmful practices cannot simply hire more prosocietal people or train them in influence skills; they must also create decision or governance structures that make ethical stances electorally viable (e.g., by giving explicit legitimacy to candidates who commit to protecting external stakeholders). Second, our finding that large deviations from the group's withdrawal norm reduced votes suggests that ethical reformers should avoid appearing as isolated moral extremists. Instead, they may be more effective when they frame their proposals as extensions of existing group values and highlight shared benefits rather than emphasizing only external beneficiaries. Third, organizations can actively support Benevolent Machiavellians by institutionalizing prosocietal political channels; for example, creating ethics committees with real decision authority, tying promotion criteria to responsible external impact, and offering training in moral framing and coalition-building that explicitly acknowledges political realities rather than naively depoliticizing ethics. These steps reduce the need for ethical insiders to resort to covert or manipulative tactics and increase the likelihood that prosocietal power-building can succeed without eroding trust within the organization.

7.2 Limitations and future research

Several limitations qualify our findings. First, the short-term, anonymous nature of the lab study may not fully capture the relational complexities of real workplaces, where interpersonal history, hierarchical roles, and repeated interactions strongly shape political behavior (Buchanan 2016). Especially, the decisive fourth round had a

known endpoint. Consistent with research on finitely repeated games, finite horizons can generate end-game effects and create behavioral adjustment as future accountability fades (Selten and Stoecker 1986; Andreoni 1988; Normann and Wallace 2012). This limits generalization to situations with repeated high-stakes interaction; yet it allowed us to observe, e.g., whether participants seek authority by temporarily accommodating selfish coalition preferences and then use that authority to pursue a more prosocial final decision or vice versa.

Second, our measure of success – votes received in a single round – cannot fully approximate the long-term processes of building coalitions for ethical change (Roulean 2005). Future research could investigate extended simulations, integrate repeated feedback loops, or manipulate the moral ambiguity of organizational wrongdoing to clarify how prosocial employees calibrate their tactics over time.

Third, we acknowledge that our operationalization of prosocial or prosocial behavior raises interpretive challenges. Specifically, the design permitted actions that improved the group's welfare (i.e., taking from a charitable cause and redistributing resources internally), which may plausibly be seen as prosocial in relation to the group, even if they conflicted with broader prosocial interests. While half the amount taken from the charity was destroyed (attenuating the collective benefit), the remaining redistribution still left participants of the study better off relative to the initial allocation. This design was intentionally created to simulate how organizations generate (large) negative social externalities while acquiring (smaller) resources for themselves, and to examine whether members within the organization are motivated to minimize overall resource destruction. However, future research could explicitly vary the level at which prosociality is defined (e.g., internal group vs. external societal beneficiary) to better understand how actors justify and legitimize ethically ambiguous tactics. We operationalized prosocial behavior through charitable giving; whether the same political dynamics hold for other normative domains (e.g., DEI, data ethics, workplace safety) remains an open question for future research. Additionally, further exploration of whether Machiavellian tactics might be more effective in less explicitly moral contexts would enrich the understanding of how “positive organizational politics” (Ellen 2014) can be harnessed.

Finally, our handling of participant dropouts in the online group task may have influenced group dynamics. To preserve the continuity of the interactive decision process, when a participant timed out, a researcher advanced the task on their behalf using a standardized rule (maximum withdrawal from the charity, no return, and no message). The replacement protocol could have made some groups appear more self-interested than they would otherwise have been, potentially affecting perceived norms and strategic calculations. However, as indicated by small differences between the analyses with and without participants that could have been affected by the procedure, it does not seem to have significantly impacted the results.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest We have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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