KMAN PUBLISHING INSTITUTE

Journal Website

Designing Internal Relationships Between Causes and Strategies of Political Behavior in the Public Sector Using Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM)

Ghorabanali. Khazaei Poul[1] , Davood. Kiakojouri[2]* , Mohammad Javad. Taghipourian[3]

[1] PhD Student in public administration, Chalous Branch, Islamic Azad University, Chalous, Iran
[2] Associate Professor, Department of Public Administration, Chalous Branch, Islamic Azad University, Chalous, Iran
[3] Department of Management, Chalous Branch, Islamic Azad University, Chalous, Iran

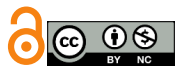* Corresponding author email address: Davoodkia@iauc.ac.ir

Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article type: *Original Research* **How to cite this article:** 	**Objective:** The main goal of this research is to design the internal relationships between the causes and strategies of political behavior in the public sector using Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM). **Method:** In this study, through the review of previous research literature and using the opinions of experts in the field of public management and organizational behavior, six causal and strategic variables affecting political behavior in the public sector were identified. These variables were classified using Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM), which includes six steps, and through the use of a questionnaire. **Findings:** The research findings indicated that the environmental factors variable serves as the basis of the model, influencing all other variables. At the next level, individual and structural factors are positioned, which affect freedom of speech and adherence to the law, and in turn, these factors influence meritocracy. **Conclusion:** Managers should create a suitable environment for guiding public sector units with inhibitory organizational structures towards empowered organizational structures, fostering freedom of speech, adherence to the law, and meritocracy. *Keywords:* Political behavior, public organizations, strategic factors, causal factors, meritocracy.

1   Introduction

One of the concepts that has a close relationship with power is politics or political behavior. Political behavior is an act carried out by individuals or groups with the intentional and conscious aim of influencing others in order to increase and protect their own interests, at the expense of the organization or its members, especially when faced with conflicting solutions. Such behavior damages efficiency and effectiveness, both at the individual and organizational levels (Ramezani Rad et al., 2021; Sanaie et al., 2023). Political behaviors are considered integral components of public organizations. These behaviors cause discord and administrative harm, leading to reduced

organizational productivity (Taheri & Ataiee, 2022). Political behavior in organizations, while potentially serving the interests of individuals, groups, or the organization, is ultimately detrimental, according to experts and researchers. In most organizational roles, it negatively impacts performance, and employees evaluate these behaviors negatively due to their potential effects in hindering professional or personal goals within the organization (Coelho Junior et al., 2020; Lerman et al., 2017). Political behavior is a common phenomenon in any organization and cannot be studied separately from the political behavior within them. Generally, it is impossible to eliminate political behaviors in organizations, but awareness of their manifestation can assist managers in reducing their destructive effects (Gholami et al., 2021; Tatari et al., 2019).

The existence of vague goals for organizations, resource scarcity, the increasing strategic role of human resources in organizations, the importance of employee job satisfaction, the development of management knowledge with an emphasis on effective human resource participation, environmental changes and turbulent conditions, the increasing complexity of decision-making processes, and the lack of rational methods for today's complex conditions, improvement and reconstruction programs of organizations, and the importance of the satisfaction of groups and stakeholders in performance and productivity of the organization. It is now said that organizational success depends on critical factors such as the competitive competence of the organization and the ability of senior managers to employ constructive and beneficial political behavior. According to researchers, the serious realities of political behavior have invalidated some human aspirations for ideal organizations with logical behavior (Zhou & Hoever, 2014). Despite varying perspectives and dimensions regarding political behavior, studies and research indicate that desirable and effective political behavior in organizations is essential to enhance human and organizational productivity, and is now discussed as managing political behavior in organizational behavior trends. However, political behavior, like other aspects of organizational dynamics, is not a simple process and varies from one organization to another (Abun et al., 2022; Meydan & Köksal, 2019). The more an organizational culture emphasizes a win-lose approach, the greater the motivation of employees for political behavior. If it is perceived that one party can achieve its goals at the expense of another, or if the nature of these goals is such that both parties cannot achieve them, then that situation is called a zero-sum game, and in these conditions, political behavior intensifies (Bello et al., 2021; Poon, 2003; Tatari et al., 2019).

When individuals' power sources are threatened, they will exhibit political behaviors. In other words, conflicts over power, conflict, consensus, and personal profit-seeking lead individuals to strategically and informally pursue their goals, which determines the formation of political behavior in organizations. Political behavior is a strategic, goal-oriented, rational, and conscious process for achieving personal interests or promoting organizational status and positions, including deliberate influential actions to support or increase personal or group interests (Lerman et al., 2017). Humans engage in work in organizations to meet their needs and interact with others, creating conditions conducive to the emergence of political behavior (Coelho Junior et al., 2020; Malik et al., 2019). Political behavior, on one hand, realizes the goals of the organization and, on the other, prevents achieving these goals. In political behavior, individuals strive to either comply with or oppose the broader goals of the organization through positive and negative behaviors (Tatari et al., 2019). This research will discuss the design of internal relations between the causes and strategies of political behavior in the public sector using Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM).

2   Methods and Materials

2.1   Study Design and Participants

Considering Sanders' Onion Model (2003), this research is applied in nature and aims to design the internal relationships between the causal and strategic dimensions of political behavior in Iranian public organizations using Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM). The research is descriptive-survey in terms of nature and method. In this study, data were collected through the review of existing literature and interviews with experts, and a questionnaire aligned with the research hypotheses was employed. The population of this research consists of managers of government offices and members of the scientific board, who were selected using a purposive sampling method. This type of sampling is known as "purposive." In this research, 16 experts were chosen for sampling.

2.2   Data Analysis

Interpretive Structural Modeling is an appropriate technique for analyzing the impact of one element on other elements and is one of the tools that show the interaction

IJIMOB
International Journal of Innovation Management and Organizational Behavior

Khazaei Poul et al.   International Journal of Innovation Management and Organizational Behavior 3:4 (2023) 44-52

between different variables. This methodology examines the order and direction of complex relationships among elements of a system. Using this tool, the researcher can overcome the complexity between variables. This method is used to identify and demonstrate relationships between different components that may have complex relationships. The steps of Interpretive Structural Modeling are as follows:

1. Identification of variables impacting the system;
2. Creation of a self-interaction matrix;
3. Determination of the initial reachability matrix;
4. Calculation of the final reachability matrix and the set of output and input variables;
5. Determination of the levels of variables; Development of the interpretive structural model.

3   Findings and Results

In this research, initially, the causal and strategic components of political behavior in Iranian public organizations were identified using the opinions of experts in the field of public management and organizational behavior.

Table 1

Causal and Strategic Components of Political Behavior in Public Organizations

Dimension	Component	Related Items for Each Component
Causal Factors	Individual	Manager's indifference towards employees' desires and career fate following decisions, adapting to the godfather role, high ambition of the manager, arrogance of the leader in the organization, cautiousness of the godfather, strictness of the godfather, decisiveness of shadow management.
	Environmental	Organizational void of leadership, ability to eliminate traces of illegal activities in the organization, ambiguity of the political and financial evaluation system in the organization, ability to violate organizational laws, normalization of crime in the organization, legitimization of family interests, existence of a belief system above the law in the organization, existence of a despotic environment in the organization, culture of law evasion in the organization, presence of submissive and needy employees towards the master.
	Structural	Creating unlimited organizational power structures based on rewarding subordinates; changing organizational rules and norms in self-interest, altering the identity of existing employees to benefit the family, possessing unlimited power based on individual expertise, changing the existing pattern of interests in favor of the family, culture of non-meritocracy in appointments, creating an atmosphere and extensive propaganda to increase the godfather and his group in the organization.
Strategic Factors	Freedom of Speech	Ability of knowledgeable individuals to express opinions in the organization, enhancing organizational growth and maturity, transparency in economic, political, administrative, social, and cultural activities in the organization, overt communication for clarification, continuous monitoring and oversight, confrontation with the existing power structure in the organization, encouraging organizational whistleblowing.
	Meritocracy	Creating a healthy competitive environment, presence of independent and integrated inspection, active majority participation in organizational decision-making, transforming majority stance into power, organizational employees' sensitivity to ethical standards, obliging managers to be accountable to subordinates for their actions and behavior, utilizing external experts like consultants.
	Adherence to the Law	Monitoring compliance with organizational laws and regulations under all conditions, commitment and respect to organizational laws and regulations, obliging unity among organizational employees and existing ethical standards in organizations as a law.

After identifying the foundational indices of the phenomenon under study, an n×n square matrix of the existing indices is designed. This matrix is essentially the ISM questionnaire. In this step, experts compare criteria in pairs and respond to pairwise comparisons based on the following definitions using letters V, A, X, O:

V: Factor i in the row causes the realization of factor j in the column.

A: Factor j in the column causes the realization of factor i in the row.

X: Both the row and column factors cause the realization of each other (factors i and j have a bilateral relationship).

O: There is no relationship between the row and column factors.

Table 2

Self-Interaction Matrix of Variables Affecting Political Behavior

Variables / Factors	Structural Factors	Individual Factors	Environmental Factors	Freedom of Speech	Adherence to the Law	Meritocracy
Structural Factors	-	X	A	V	V	V
Individual Factors		-	A	V	V	V
Environmental Factors			-	V	V	V
Freedom of Speech				-	X	V
Adherence to the Law					-	V
Meritocracy						-

To achieve the initial reachability matrix, the aforementioned symbols from the previous step are converted into zeros and ones according to the following rules:

If the i.j entry in the structural self-interaction matrix is V, in the i.j entry of the initial reachability matrix, one is placed and zero in the j.i entry.

If the i.j entry in the structural self-interaction matrix is A, in the i.j entry of the initial reachability matrix, zero is placed and one in the j.i entry.

If the i.j entry in the structural self-interaction matrix is X, one is placed in both the i.j and j.i entries of the initial reachability matrix.

If the i.j entry in the structural self-interaction matrix is O, zero is placed in both the i.j and j.i entries of the initial reachability matrix.

In Interpretive Structural Modeling, the influence power is derived from the sum of numbers in each column or the total of inputs, and the degree of dependence is derived from the sum of numbers in each row or the total of outputs. The transformation of symbols into zeros and ones according to the mentioned rules is shown as follows:

Table 3

Formation of the Initial Reachability Matrix

Variables / Factors	Structural Factors	Individual Factors	Environmental Factors	Freedom of Speech	Adherence to the Law	Meritocracy
Structural Factors	-	1	0	1	1	1
Individual Factors	1	-	0	1	1	1
Environmental Factors	1	1	-	1	1	1
Freedom of Speech	0	0	0	-	1	1
Adherence to the Law	0	0	0	1	-	1
Meritocracy	0	0	0	0	0	-

Table 4

Formation of the Influence Power and Dependency Matrix

Variables / Factors	Structural Factors	Individual Factors	Environmental Factors	Freedom of Speech	Adherence to the Law	Meritocracy	Influence Power
Structural Factors	1	1	0	1	1	1	5
Individual Factors	1	1	0	1	1	1	5
Environmental Factors	1	1	1	1	1	1	6
Freedom of Speech	0	0	0	1	1	1	3
Adherence to the Law	0	0	0	1	1	1	3
Meritocracy	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Dependency	3	3	1	5	5	6	-

In this step, after calculating the input and output matrix of each variable in the third step and considering transitivity in relationships, the final reachability matrix is obtained. Accessibility is such that if variable A influences B, and B influences C, then it can be concluded that A affects C. This matrix shows the degree of dependency and influence power of each variable. In Interpretive Structural Modeling, the influence power is derived from the sum of numbers in each column or the total of inputs, and the degree of dependence is derived from the sum of numbers in each row or the total of outputs. The intersection between the two sets is determined using the output and input sets for each variable in the final reachability matrix. The final reachability matrix of the current study is shown in Table 5.

Table 5

Formation of the Final Reachability Matrix

Variable	Input	Output	Intersection
Structural Factors	1, 2, 4, 5, 6	1, 2, 3	1, 2
Individual Factors	1, 2, 4, 5, 6	1, 2, 3	1, 2
Environmental Factors	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6	3	3
Freedom of Speech	4, 5, 6	1, 2, 3, 5	5
Adherence to the Law	4, 5, 6	1, 2, 3, 4, 5	4, 5
Meritocracy	6	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6	6

In the level determination stage, variables with fewer inputs are less affected by other variables and are therefore placed on the same level. In this stage, when the highest-level factors are identified in the first iteration, they must be removed from the table. This process continues until the level of all factors is determined.

Table 6

Final Accessibility Matrix - Level One

Row	Variable	Input	Output	Intersection	Level
1	Structural Factors	1, 2, 4, 5, 6	1, 2, 3	1, 2	
2	Individual Factors	1, 2, 4, 5, 6	1, 2, 3	1, 2	
3	Environmental Factors	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6	3	3	
4	Freedom of Speech	4, 5, 6	1, 2, 3, 5	5	
5	Adherence to the Law	4, 5, 6	1, 2, 3, 4, 5	4, 5	
6	Meritocracy	6	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6	6	1

In the current study, according to the data in the above table, the variable of meritocracy, which has fewer inputs, is placed at level one and is not shown in the subsequent table in the next stage.

Table 7

Final Accessibility Matrix - Level Two

Row	Variable	Input	Output	Intersection	Level
1	Structural Factors	1, 2, 4, 5	1, 2, 3	1, 2	
2	Individual Factors	1, 2, 4, 5	1, 2, 3	1, 2	
3	Environmental Factors	1, 2, 3, 4, 5	3	3	
4	Freedom of Speech	4, 5	1, 2, 3, 5	5	2
5	Adherence to the Law	4, 5	1, 2, 3, 4, 5	4, 5	2

In the current study, according to the data in the above table, the variables of freedom of speech and adherence to the law, which have fewer inputs, are placed at level two and are not shown in the subsequent table in the next stage.

Table 8

Final Accessibility Matrix - Level Three

Row	Variable	Input	Output	Intersection	Level
1	Structural Factors	1, 2	1, 2, 3	1, 2	3
2	Individual Factors	1, 2	1, 2, 3	1, 2	3
3	Environmental Factors	1, 2, 3	3	3	

In the current study, according to the data in the above table, the variables of structural factors and individual factors, which have fewer inputs, are placed at level three and are not shown in the subsequent table in the next stage.

Table 9

Final Accessibility Matrix - Level Four

| Row	Variable	Input	Output	Intersection	Level
3	Environmental Factors	3	3	3	4

In the current study, according to the data in the above table, the variable of environmental factors is placed at level four.

In this stage, considering the levels of factors and the final reachability matrix, the interpretive structural model is drawn. The final model, depicted in Figure 1, is designed in five levels. This model indicates that variables at lower levels have a more hierarchical influence on other variables. As shown in Figure 1, the variable of environmental factors serves as the basis of the model and influences all variables of the research.

Figure 1

Final Model
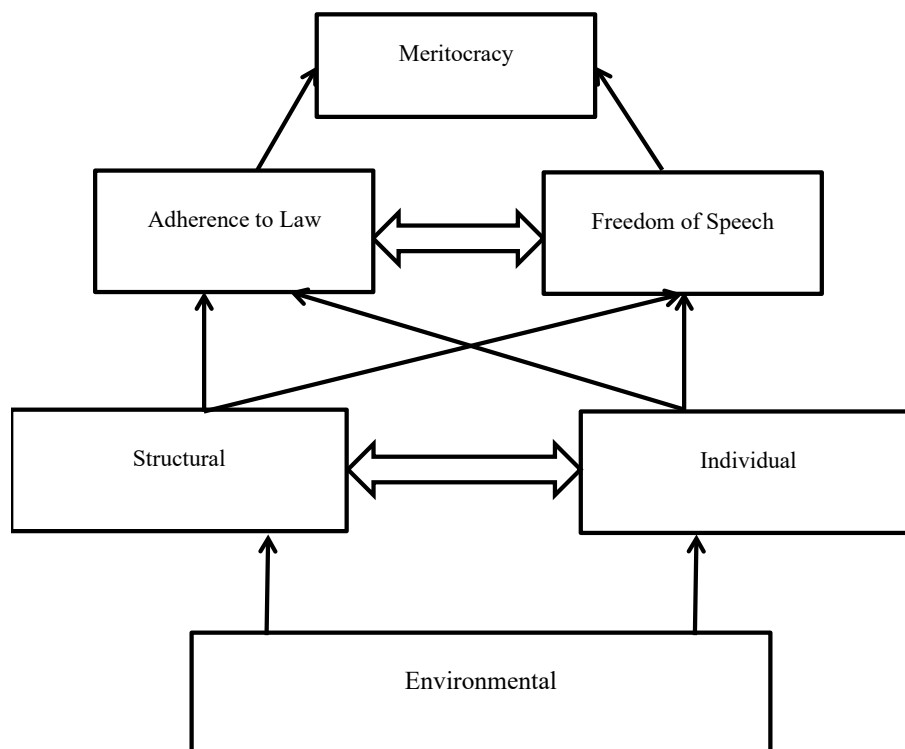
4   Discussion and Conclusion

The main objective of this research is to design the internal relationships between causes and strategies of political behavior in the public sector, utilizing Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM). ISM provides an orderly and directed framework for complex issues and offers decision-makers a realistic view of their situation and the variables involved. The ISM process involves identifying variables, defining their internal relationships, establishing order, and explaining complex issues from an institutional perspective. In this paper, based on expert opinions and literature review, six influential variables on political behavior in the public sector were identified. Then, based on their impact, these variables were classified into five levels. The results, based on the interpretive structural model of the study depicted in Figure 1, indicate that the variable of environmental factors, as the basis of the model, influences all other variables. At the next level, individual factors and structural factors are positioned, influencing freedom of speech and adherence to the law, which in turn affect meritocracy. Political behaviors in organizations cannot be eliminated, and a manager expecting no one to engage in such behaviors displays naivety. However, political maneuvers can and should be controlled to be confined within logical and constructive limits. Political behaviors, as one of the components of organizations, create a divisive and harmful work environment with increasing negative consequences, such as poor performance at individual and organizational levels, limiting information sharing, creating communication barriers, increasing stress and workload, forming negative attitudes towards work, perception of injustice, etc. Based on these consequences, attention to the prevalence of political behavior in the organization and the factors affecting it is essential for prevention and limitation. Interviewees referred to a set of conditions that facilitate the phenomenon under study and influence behaviors and actions, noting that contextual conditions affect the central category and its outcomes. In this research, the categories of implementation and participation are widely recognized as influential contextual factors of identified behavior, and the results of the previous research (Sanaie et al., 2023) regarding the impact of political behaviors on managerial decisions, internal trust, and participation in decision-making confirm the views of the interviewed professors. This issue is emphasized in units with inhibitory organizational structures, necessitating strict and inflexible rules, enforcement of laws, resistance to change, emphasis on unilateral decision-making, disrespect for expert opinions, alienation of organizational members, lack of systemic thinking, and absence of an environment conducive to creativity and innovation. Interviewees proposed strategies for controlling, managing, and addressing the central phenomenon, meaning that whenever a specific action or inaction is chosen in response to an issue or for maintaining a position by an individual or group, consequences arise. Some of these consequences are desired, and some are unintended. A consequence can be singular or multiple, short-term or long-term, visible to the person but hidden from others, immediate or gradual, reversible or irreversible, predictable or unpredictable, and its impact can be limited or extensive. In this research, freedom of speech, meritocracy, and adherence to the law are identified as effective strategic factors of political behavior, and the results of research by Malik and colleagues (2019) on political behaviors and meritocracy confirm the views of the interviewed professors (Malik et al., 2019). In this researchh, tensions induced by the leader, success in achieving godfather goals, and corruption are among the effective consequences of political behavior, as confirmed by the research of Sanaei and colleagues (2022) regarding power sources in relation to inhibitory organizational structures and political behaviors (Sanaie et al., 2023). Considering the research findings on the causal conditions affecting political behavior based on the godfather theory, factors such as individual, environmental, and structural characteristics of the godfather are recognized as influential. Political behavior in organizations is inevitable and includes activities aimed at achieving specific goals such as gaining, developing, and using power and other resources to create personal superiority. To properly manage political behaviors in organizations, it is best to behave in a way that others do not perceive your motives as political, even if they are not; grant independence to subordinates, take responsibility and avoid coercion, provide conditions for public and open opposition, and refrain from secretive activities. Considering the research findings on effective strategies for political behavior based on the godfather theory, freedom of speech, meritocracy, and adherence to the law are recognized as effective strategic factors. Meritocracy should not be considered a limited issue. If we aspire to revive a meritocratic system or claim to have a meritocracy school, we should not limit our thinking and attitudes to a single aspect or issue. Rather, we should broadly outline the process of meritocracy and view it from various angles. The lack of meritocracy in Iran's social system, rooted in

historical, cultural, and economic reasons, is due to disbelief and the absence of meritocratic thinking. One of the best mechanisms that can be suggested is the assessment center mechanism. By using the assessment center process, many of the proposed solutions can be implemented, as this process aims to select competent and capable managers, leading to increased self-control, continuous feedback, managerial participation in developing evaluation indices and meritocracy, and attention to proactive supervision.

Acknowledgments

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Authors Contributions

Ghorabanali Khazaei Poul significantly contributed to this research by actively participating in the identification and categorization of key causal and strategic variables related to political behavior in the public sector. His expertise in public management and organizational behavior was instrumental in shaping the conceptual framework of the study. Additionally, he played a vital role in conducting the comprehensive literature review, helping to establish the foundational knowledge base for the research. Davood Kiakojouri made a substantial contribution by leading the application of Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) in structuring and analyzing the identified variables. His methodological expertise and proficiency in ISM facilitated the development of a robust model that elucidates the internal relationships within the context of political behavior. Furthermore, he contributed to the data collection process through the utilization of questionnaires, ensuring the empirical foundation of the study. Mohammad Javad Taghipourian provided valuable insights into the research by drawing upon his knowledge and experience in public management and organizational behavior. His expertise informed the selection of relevant variables and their integration into the ISM framework. Additionally, he played a critical role in interpreting the research findings and deriving practical implications, particularly in the context of managerial strategies for improving governance within public sector units.

Ethics principles

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

References

Abun, D., R. Macaspac, L. G., Magallanes, T., C. Catbagan, N., & Mansueto, J. M. (2022). The effect of organizational politics on the individual work performance. *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science (2147- 4478)*, *11*(2), 157-171. https://doi.org/10.20525/ijrbs.v11i2.1643

Bello, A., Omofowa, S., Nwachukwu, C., & Nguyen, A. V. H. (2021). Relationship between organizational politics and organizational commitment. *Management*. https://doi.org/10.14704/WEB/V18SI04/WEB18128

Coelho Junior, F. A., Hedler, H., Faiad, C., & Marques-Quinteiro, P. (2020). Determinants of political behavior and the role of technology in the classroom: An empirical investigation in Brazil. *Technology in Society*, *62*, 101279. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techsoc.2020.101279

Gholami, A., Khodadadnezhad, A., & Danesh Fard, K. (2021). Identifying, Explaining and Measuring the Causes of Forming Political Behaviors with an Organizational Approach in Iranian Governmental Organizations. *Journal of Development & Evolution Mnagement*, *13*(46), 91-99. https://jdem.qazvin.iau.ir/article_686854_e705bd428cdde04ffa8cc995ead05a11.pdf

Lerman, A. E., Sadin, M. L., & Trachtman, S. (2017). Policy Uptake as Political Behavior: Evidence from the Affordable Care Act. *American Political Science Review*, *111*(4), 755-770. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055417000272

Malik, O. F., Shahzad, A., Raziq, M. M., Khan, M. M., Yusaf, S., & Khan, A. (2019). Perceptions of organizational politics, knowledge hiding, and employee creativity: The moderating role of professional commitment. *Personality and individual differences*, *142*, 232-237. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2018.05.005

Meydan, C., & Köksal, K. (2019). The effect of organizational structure on leader power in educational and security organizations: A comparative study. *Egitim ve bilim-education and science*, *44*(197). http://dx.doi.org/10.15390/EB.2019.7512

Poon, J. M. (2003). Situational antecedents and outcomes of organizational politics perceptions. *Journal of managerial psychology*, *18*(2), 138-155. https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/02683940310465036/full/html

Ramezani Rad, F., Kiakojouri, D., & Mokhtari Bayekolaei, M. (2021). Designing a Model of Managing organizational Polotical Behavior With Ethical Approach in Public Sector Banking industry. *Quarterly Ethical Research (Association for Islamic Thought)*, *2*(11), 49-88. http://rimag.ricest.ac.ir/fa/Article/18239

Sanaie, M., Jafariani, H., & Samanian, M. (2023). Political behavior of government managers and its causes in the organization. *Political Sociology of Iran*, *5*(11), 2894-2911. https://doi.org/10.30510/psi.2022.312064.2535

Taheri, M., & Ataiee, M. (2022). Designing a model of political behavior in government organizations. *Journal of New Research Approaches in Management and Accounting*, *5*(83), 1142-1162. https://www.majournal.ir/index.php/ma/article/view/1180

Tatari, M., Moradi, S., Khademi, S. M., & Sabzi, A. (2019). Presenting Pattern for Effect of Organizational Pessimism and Political Behavior on Organizational Health of the Staff of The Ministry Of Sports And Youth. *Applied Research in Sport Management*, *8*(2), 89-100. https://doi.org/10.30473/arsm.2019.35141.2493

Zhou, J., & Hoever, I. J. (2014). Research on Workplace Creativity: A Review and Redirection. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, *1*(1), 333-359. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-031413-091226