

Explaining the Mediating Role of Organizational Trust in Influences of Managers' Conflict Management Strategies on University Employees' Political Behavior

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article type: Research Article Article history: Received: 7 April 2026 Accepted: 9 June 2026 Published online: 29 June 2026 Keywords: Organizational Trust; Political Behavior; Organizational Conflict; University; Employees	This study aimed to explain the mediating role of organizational trust in the relationship between managers' conflict management strategies and employees' political behavior at Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz. The statistical population consisted of all 234 administrative employees of the university during the 2022–2023 academic year. Using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table, a sample of 144 participants was determined and selected through simple random sampling, ensuring equal selection probability for all population members. Of the distributed questionnaires, 140 usable responses were retained for the final statistical analyses. This applied study employed a descriptive, correlational-analytical design based on structural equation modeling. Data were collected using the Organizational Trust Questionnaire of Kanawattanachai and Yu (2002), the Conflict Management Questionnaire of Putnam and Wilson (1994), and a researcher-developed Political Behavior Questionnaire. The reliability of the instruments was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Results revealed a significant negative relationship between managers' conflict management strategies and organizational trust, as well as between organizational trust and employees' political behavior. No significant direct relationship was found between conflict management strategies and political behavior. However, conflict management strategies exerted a significant indirect and positive effect on political behavior through the mediating role of organizational trust, indicating that organizational trust fully mediated this relationship. The findings suggest that managers' conflict management strategies do not directly predict employees' political behavior; rather, this influence is transmitted entirely through organizational trust. Strengthening trust-building processes is therefore essential for reducing destructive political behavior in academic institutions.

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Introduction

Organizational political behavior among employees in higher education institutions, encompassing informal and often covert efforts to acquire power, influence decisions, and pursue personal interests through tactics such as coalition formation, information withholding, and the exercise of unofficial influence, represents one of the most serious challenges in university settings. These behaviors can disrupt scientific and interdisciplinary collaborations, diminish the quality of academic decision-making, and exert significant negative effects on organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and employee performance ([Aybar & Marşap, 2018](#); [Ferris et al., 1996](#); [Mintzberg, 1983](#)). In universities, where resources are limited, competition for academic promotion and research funding is intense, perceptions of organizational politics and the resulting political behaviors foster an atmosphere of distrust, impeding the achievement of educational, research, and talent-development objectives ([Zibenberg et al., 2020](#); [Soressa et al., 2025](#); [Mwaniki & Muathe, 2021](#)).

The organizational behavior literature indicates that political behavior is less a product of individual personality traits than a reflection of structural conditions and prevailing organizational relationships. Resource scarcity, procedural ambiguity, perceived injustice, lack of transparency in decision-making, weak communication, and diminished organizational trust are among the primary factors that heighten the likelihood of political behaviors ([Aybar & Marşap, 2018](#); [Manzoor et al., 2023](#); [Ekhsan & Badrianto, 2024](#)). In universities, competition over promotion opportunities, research budgets, managerial responsibilities, and educational resources—when fair managerial mechanisms are absent—can drive employees toward informal strategies to secure personal gains. In such contexts, individuals divert energy from educational and research goals toward building coalitions, exerting influence, and managing political relationships, ultimately undermining the university's social capital and overall performance ([Aybar & Marşap, 2018](#); [Rahim, 2011](#)).

In recent years, researchers have emphasized that reducing political behaviors cannot be achieved solely through employee control; rather, it requires reforming managerial processes and cultivating an environment grounded in justice, transparency, and trust ([Joo et al., 2023](#); [Soressa et al., 2025](#)). From this perspective, managers assume a role beyond planning and resource control. Through their interactions with employees, decision-making styles, and management of interpersonal relationships, they profoundly shape employees' perceptions and behaviors. One of managers' most critical responsibilities in this domain is the effective management of organizational conflict. Conflict, particularly in knowledge-intensive organizations, is inevitable, and the quality of its management determines the trajectory of future employee interactions ([Rahim, 2011](#); [Biçer, 2020](#); [Soressa et al., 2025](#)).

Managers' conflict management strategies (e.g., integrating, compromising, avoiding, dominating, and obliging) constitute the key independent variable in this study. Collaborative and compromising styles transform conflict into opportunities for learning, creativity, and improved decision-making, whereas dominating or avoiding approaches typically escalate tension, erode trust, and promote opportunistic behaviors ([Rahim & Bonoma, 1979](#); [Biçer, 2020](#); [Kinontao et al., 2025](#); [Soressa et al., 2025](#)). In universities, where a substantial portion of activities relies on interpersonal interactions, participatory decision-making, and scientific collaboration, managers' selection of appropriate conflict management strategies plays a decisive role in shaping the organization's behavioral climate ([Manzoor et al., 2023](#)).

Organizational trust functions as the central mediating variable in the proposed model. Organizational trust reflects employees' belief in the integrity, competence, fairness, and reliability of managers and the organization, leading employees to feel confident that managerial decisions and actions serve collective interests and adhere to principles of justice and mutual respect ([Joo et al., 2023](#); [Shockley-Zalabak et al., 2000](#); [Ekhsan & Badrianto, 2024](#)). According to social exchange theory ([Blau, 1964](#)), managers employing participatory strategies build trust, prompting employees to reciprocate with cooperation and constructive behaviors while reducing defensive and political actions. Conversely, ineffective conflict management erodes trust and creates conditions conducive to opportunistic and political behaviors ([Manzoor et al., 2023](#); [Soressa et al., 2025](#); [Biçer, 2020](#)). Empirical support for this mediating mechanism is provided by [Joo et al.](#)

(2023) and [Soressa et al. \(2025\)](#), who demonstrate how trust translates managerial actions into positive behavioral outcomes.

Despite the substantial body of research examining the effects of conflict management strategies on organizational performance, job satisfaction, and trust ([Kinontao et al., 2025](#); [Biçer, 2020](#); [Manzoor et al., 2023](#)), and separate investigations of the relationship between perceptions of organizational politics and outcomes such as commitment and trust in university settings ([Aybar & Marşap, 2018](#)), a notable research gap remains regarding the direct influence of managers' conflict management strategies on university employees' political behavior—particularly the mediating role of organizational trust in this pathway. Most prior studies have been conducted in industrial, public, or corporate sectors, limiting their generalizability to universities, which possess unique characteristics such as emphasis on academic freedom, knowledge-based collaboration, and non-hierarchical interactions ([Soressa et al., 2025](#); [Joo et al., 2023](#)). Furthermore, while the literature acknowledges the conceptual distinction between enacted political behavior and perceptions of politics ([Ferris et al., 2000](#)), few empirical studies have elucidated the psychological mechanisms—such as organizational trust—operating in this process. This gap not only constrains theoretical understanding but also hinders the development of practical recommendations for university administrators seeking to foster healthy, trust-based environments free from destructive politicization. Accordingly, the present study aims to explain the mediating role of organizational trust in the relationship between managers' conflict management strategies and university employees' political behavior. The findings are expected to enrich the organizational behavior and conflict management literature while providing actionable insights for improving organizational climate in higher education institutions

Method

Sample and Sampling Method

The statistical population of the present study consisted of all administrative staff members of Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz during the 2022–2023 academic year, totaling 234 employees. Based on the Krejcie and Morgan sample size table, a sample of 144 participants was selected. Participants were recruited using a simple random sampling method, ensuring that all members of the target population had an equal probability of being selected. Following the distribution and collection of the questionnaires, 140 completed questionnaires were deemed usable and were included in the final statistical analyses.

Tools Used

Organizational Trust Questionnaire: Organizational trust was measured using the Organizational Trust Questionnaire developed by Kanawatanachai and Yoo (2002). The instrument consists of 12 items rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." The questionnaire assesses organizational trust across three dimensions: cognition-based trust, affect-based trust, and intention to trust. Cognition-based trust reflects employees' evaluations of the organization's and managers' competence, reliability, and integrity. Affect-based trust refers to the emotional bonds and feelings of security that characterize interpersonal relationships within the organization. Intention to trust represents employees' willingness and predisposition to place trust in others within the workplace. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, yielding a coefficient of 0.78, indicating acceptable reliability.

Conflict Management Questionnaire: Conflict management styles were assessed using the Conflict Management Questionnaire developed by Putnam and Wilson (1994). The questionnaire comprises 30 items measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." The instrument evaluates three conflict management styles: non-confrontation, solution orientation, and control. The non-confrontation style reflects an individual's tendency to avoid conflict and withdraw from conflict situations. The solution-oriented style emphasizes collaboration, open communication, and the pursuit of mutually satisfactory solutions. The control style reflects attempts to exert influence, dominate conflict

situations, and promote one's own viewpoints during interpersonal disagreements. The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, resulting in a coefficient of 0.82, which demonstrates satisfactory internal consistency.

Employee Political Behavior Questionnaire: Employee political behavior was measured using a researcher-developed questionnaire consisting of 9 items rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." The items were designed to assess the extent to which employees engage in political behaviors within the workplace, including attempts to gain influence, utilization of informal networks, seeking support from colleagues, influencing organizational decisions, and other behaviors aimed at advancing individual or organizational interests. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was examined using Cronbach's alpha, yielding a coefficient of 0.74, indicating acceptable reliability for measuring employee political behavior.

Procedure

The research procedure began with identifying the research problem and developing the theoretical framework, followed by defining the study variables, namely organizational trust, conflict management styles, and employee political behavior. Appropriate measurement instruments were subsequently selected based on the conceptual definitions of these constructs. After identifying the target population, the required sample size was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size table. Participants were then selected through simple random sampling to ensure that every member of the population had an equal chance of participation. The selected participants were invited to complete the research questionnaires.

Prior to data collection, the objectives of the study were clearly explained to the participants. They were assured that their responses would remain confidential, would be used solely for academic and research purposes, and that participation was entirely voluntary. Participants were also encouraged to answer all questionnaire items carefully and honestly based on their actual perceptions and workplace experiences. Upon completion of the data collection process, all returned questionnaires were screened for completeness and eligibility. Of the distributed questionnaires, 140 were found to be complete and suitable for statistical analysis. The collected data were subsequently coded and entered into statistical software for analysis. Before testing the research hypotheses, the internal consistency reliability of all measurement instruments was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients, confirming that each instrument demonstrated acceptable reliability. Finally, after data preparation and screening, the collected data were analyzed using appropriate statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics were first employed to summarize the demographic characteristics of the participants and the main study variables. Subsequently, inferential statistical analyses were conducted to test the research hypotheses and examine the relationships among organizational trust, conflict management styles, and employee political behavior. The entire research process was carried out systematically, from defining the target population and selecting the sample to analyzing the data, thereby ensuring the validity and credibility of the study findings.

Result

This section presents the findings derived from the analysis of the research data. First, the descriptive statistics of the study variables are reported, followed by the results of the correlation analysis and structural equation modeling.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics (Mean and Standard Deviation) of the Main Study Variables and Normality Assessment

Variables	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Kolmogorov–Smirnov Z	Sig.
Organizational trust	45.83	6.01	-0.239	-0.090	0.963	0.722
Cognition-based trust	14.54	3.151	-0.433	0.243	1.431	0.151
Affect-based trust	15.55	3.042	-0.940	1.215	1.699	0.006
Propensity to trust	15.73	2.480	-0.745	1.053	1.832	0.002
Political behavior	16.80	5.207	0.647	-0.041	0.429	0.234
Managers' conflict management strategies (total)	113.12	8.079	0.822	1.461	1.110	0.170
Non-confrontation strategy	33.47	5.774	1.092	1.204	1.011	0.170
Solution-oriented strategy	59.52	5.302	-0.690	0.568	1.264	0.082
Control strategy	20.11	4.564	0.276	0.091	0.784	0.570

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the study variables, including the mean, standard deviation, skewness, kurtosis, and the results of the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test. The mean organizational trust was 45.83 (SD = 6.01), the mean employee political behavior was 16.80 (SD = 5.20), and the mean managers' conflict management strategies was 113.12 (SD = 8.08). The skewness and kurtosis values for all variables fell within the acceptable range. The Kolmogorov–Smirnov test results indicated that, with the exception of the two components affect-based trust and propensity to trust, the distributions of the remaining variables did not differ significantly from a normal distribution. Nevertheless, given the sample size ($n = 140$) and the fact that the skewness and kurtosis values fell within an acceptable range, the normality of the data for structural equation modeling analyses was confirmed.

Table 2 Pearson Correlation Matrix Among the Main Study Constructs

Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
(1) Political behavior	1								
(2) Organizational trust	-0.383**	1							
(3) Cognition-based trust	-0.283**	0.68**	1						
(4) Affect-based trust	-0.207*	0.706**	0.142	1					
(5) Propensity to trust	-0.314**	0.683**	0.223**	0.303**	1				
(6) Managers' conflict management strategies	0.155	-0.23**	-0.23**	-0.156	-0.06	1			
(7) Non-confrontation strategy	0.259**	-0.24**	-0.139	-0.24**	-0.13	0.75**	1		
(8) Solution-oriented strategy	-0.168*	0.247**	0.160	0.175*	0.17*	0.092	-0.45**	1	
(9) Control strategy	0.143	-0.38**	-0.43**	-0.177*	-0.15	0.70**	0.59**	-0.43**	1

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$; $n = 140$.

The results of the Pearson correlation matrix (Table 2) showed that organizational trust had a significant negative relationship with employees' political behavior ($r = -0.383$, $p < .01$). Likewise, the two components cognition-based trust ($r = -0.283$, $p < .01$) and propensity to trust ($r = -0.314$, $p < .01$) showed significant negative relationships with political behavior, while the relationship between affect-based trust and political behavior was also negative and significant at the .05 level ($r = -0.207$, $p < .05$).

Organizational trust also showed a significant negative correlation with the non-confrontation strategy ($r = -0.240$, $p < .01$) and the control strategy ($r = -0.380$, $p < .01$), and a significant positive correlation with the solution-oriented strategy ($r = 0.247$, $p < .01$). In addition, the non-confrontation strategy showed a significant positive relationship with political behavior ($r = 0.259$, $p < .01$), and the solution-oriented strategy showed a significant negative relationship with political behavior ($r = -0.168$, $p < .05$), while no significant relationship was observed between the control strategy and political behavior.

To test the mediating role of organizational trust in the relationship between managers' conflict management strategies and employees' political behavior, structural equation modeling was used. As shown in Figure 1, the hypothesized model was first tested, and after applying the suggested modifications, the final model shown in Figure 2 was obtained.

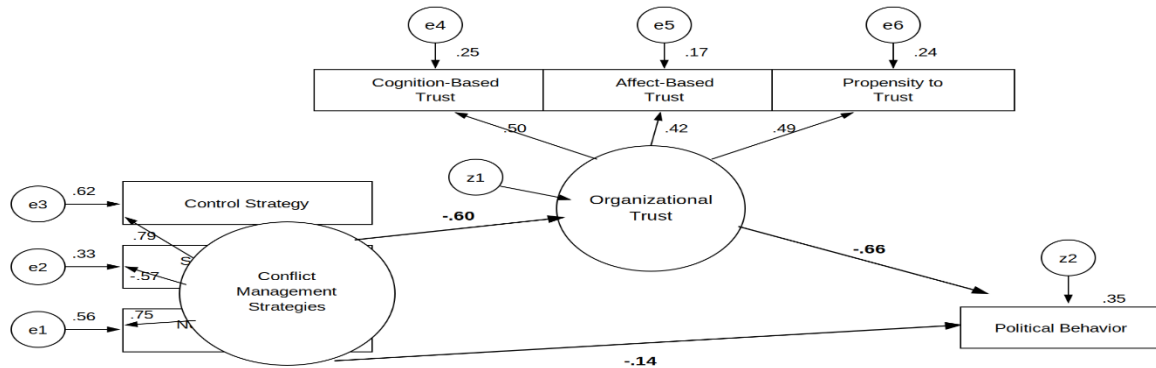


Figure 1. Standardized coefficients of the proposed model explaining the mediating role of organizational trust in the effect of managers' conflict management strategies on employees' political behavior (hypothesized model, prior to modification).

After the model was modified, the fit indices reached satisfactory levels. The fit indices for the final model are presented in Table 3. In the final model, the ratio of chi-square to degrees of freedom ($\chi^2/df = 0.798$), the Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI = 0.98), the Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI = 0.95), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI = 1.00), the Normed Fit Index (NFI = 0.95), and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA = 0.00) all indicated a very satisfactory fit of the structural model.

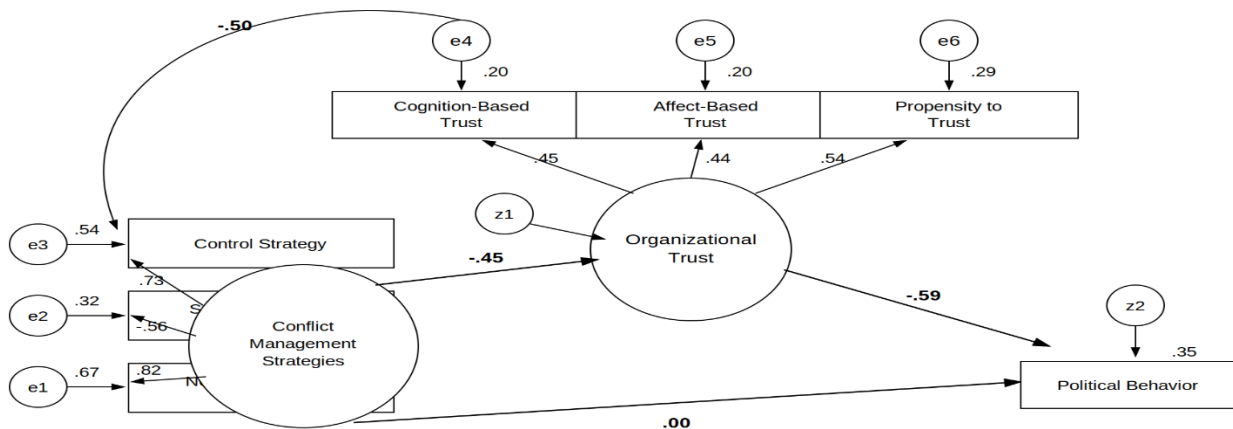


Figure 2. Standardized coefficients of the proposed model explaining the mediating role of organizational trust in the effect of managers' conflict management strategies on employees' political behavior (final model).

Table 3 Fit Indices of the Tested Research Model

Index	Hypothesized Model	Final Model	Acceptable Range	Fit Outcome
Chi-square (χ^2)	33.93	9.572	CMIN (χ^2)	–
Degrees of freedom	12	12	df	–
Model significance level	0.00	0.65	$p > .05$	Model confirmed
Chi-square/df	2.82	0.798	$\chi^2/df < 3$	Model confirmed
Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI)	0.93	0.98	$GFI > .90$	Model confirmed
Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI)	0.85	0.95	$AGFI > .90$	Model confirmed
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	0.87	1.00	$CFI > .90$	Model confirmed
Normed Fit Index (Bentler–Bonett, NFI)	0.82	0.95	$NFI > .90$	Model confirmed
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	0.11	0.00	$RMSEA \leq .05$	Model confirmed

Table 4 Path Analysis Results

Path	Unstandardized Estimate (B)	SE	C.R.	p	Standardized Estimate (β)	R ²
Conflict management strategies $\leftarrow$ Organizational trust	-0.137	0.050	-2.718	.007	-0.453	0.205
Conflict management strategies $\leftarrow$ Political behavior	0.000	–	–	–	0.000	0.353
Organizational trust $\leftarrow$ Political behavior	-2.175	0.634	-3.428	***	-0.594	–
Path	Direct Effect		Indirect Effect		Total Effect	
Conflict management strategies $\leftarrow$ Political behavior	–		0.269		0.269	

The path analysis results (Table 4) showed that managers' conflict management strategies had a significant, direct, negative effect on organizational trust ($\beta = -0.453$, $CR = -2.718$, $p = .007$). Organizational trust, in turn, had a significant, direct, negative effect on employees' political behavior ($\beta = -0.594$, $CR = -3.428$, $p < .001$). In contrast, the direct effect of managers' conflict management strategies on employees' political behavior was not significant ($\beta = 0.000$). However, the indirect effect of this variable on political behavior through organizational trust was significant (indirect effect = 0.269). The positive sign of the indirect effect results from the product of two negative path coefficients (conflict management strategies $\rightarrow$ organizational trust and organizational trust $\rightarrow$ political behavior), indicating that the effect of conflict management strategies on political behavior is transmitted entirely through the mediating variable of organizational trust. Organizational trust therefore plays a full mediation role in the relationship between managers' conflict management strategies and employees' political behavior.

In addition, the coefficients of determination showed that managers' conflict management strategies explain 20.5% of the variance in organizational trust, and that the combination of conflict management strategies and organizational trust together predict 35.3% of the variance in employees' political behavior.

Discussion & Conclusion

The present study aimed to explain the mediating role of organizational trust in the effect of managers' conflict management strategies on the political behavior of employees at Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz. The results showed that managers' conflict management strategies have a direct and negative effect on organizational trust ($\beta = -0.453$), and that organizational trust has a direct and negative effect on employees' political behavior ($\beta = -0.594$). The direct effect of conflict management strategies on political behavior was not significant, whereas its indirect effect through organizational trust was significant (0.269); in other words, organizational trust played a full mediating role in this relationship.

The finding of an overall negative relationship between conflict management strategies and organizational trust is consistent with prior literature at the component level. At the correlational level, the solution-oriented strategy showed a positive relationship with organizational trust ($r = 0.247$), whereas the non-confrontation ($r = -0.240$) and control ($r = -0.380$) strategies showed negative relationships. This pattern closely matches the findings of Biçer (2020), who found that integrating and compromising styles build trust while avoiding and dominating styles have no significant effect on trust, and is also consistent with Soressa et al. (2025), who reported that compromising ($\beta = 0.31$) and integrating ($\beta = 0.18$) strengthen trust while a dominating style shows no such effect. What rendered the overall effect negative in the present study was likely the dominance of the destructive contribution of the control strategy (the strongest negative correlation) over the constructive contribution of the solution-oriented strategy within the composite construct — an explanation consistent with Rahim and Bonoma's (1979) two-dimensional framework of "concern for self" versus "concern for others": strategies reflecting low concern for the other party's needs (control) are theoretically expected to produce perceptions of injustice and reduced trust, whereas strategies based on mutual cooperation (solution-oriented) tend to build trust. By contrast, the finding of Manzoor et al. (2023), who found conflict management styles to have an overall positive effect on trust ($\beta = 0.743$), is not consistent with the present results; this discrepancy may be attributable to differences in measurement instruments, since that study's scale (De Dreu & Van Vianen) assesses the overall quality of conflict management, whereas the Putnam and Wilson questionnaire combines three styles of differing effectiveness into a single composite score that does not necessarily indicate "good management."

The negative relationship between organizational trust and employees' political behavior is also clearly consistent with the theoretical and empirical literature. This finding aligns with Aybar and Marsap (2018), who, among faculty members at universities in Istanbul, found that perceived organizational politics has a negative relationship with organizational trust; together, these findings depict a cyclical, mutually reinforcing relationship between declining trust and increasing political behavior in academic environments. This pattern can be explained through Ferris et al.'s (1996) theoretical account of the emergence of organizational politics in response to ambiguity and lack of transparency, and through the logic of Blau's (1964) social exchange theory: in the absence of trust in managers' integrity and competence, employees pursue their interests through informal, political strategies rather than relying on formal processes. The findings of Joo et al. (2023) further support this pathway; they showed that organizational trust reduces group conflict ($\beta = -0.46$) by strengthening psychological safety ($\gamma = 0.40$) a mechanism similar to the one through which trust reduced political behavior in the present study.

Another noteworthy point is the full (rather than partial) mediation by organizational trust, a result that differs from most of the prior literature. Soressa et al. (2025) and Manzoor et al. (2023) reported partial mediation by trust in the relationship between conflict management styles and organizational performance, since the direct effect of these strategies on performance remained significant. In contrast, the pattern observed in the present study closely matches the findings of Joo et al. (2023), in which the direct effect of organizational trust on group conflict became non-significant in the presence of psychological safety, confirming full mediation. The difference in the type of outcome variable appears to explain this pattern: organizational performance is a multi-causal, multi-path outcome that is also influenced by other channels including individual learning and skill whereas political behavior is a relatively specific reaction to perceived uncertainty that is primarily shaped through the construct of trust. In other words, a manager's approach to conflict becomes meaningful to employees only insofar as it translates into the formation or erosion of their trust — an interpretation consistent with Mayer et al.'s (1995) integrative model of trust, since a manager's conflict management style essentially serves as evidence employees use to judge the

manager's competence, benevolence, and integrity, and it is this judgment rather than the behavior itself that predicts employees' subsequent reactions.

From a practical standpoint, these findings suggest that university administrators should, rather than focusing solely on resolving individual conflicts on a case-by-case basis, invest in trust-building processes transparency in decision-making, fairness in the allocation of research resources, and two-way communication with employees (consistent with [Vigoda-Gadot, 2000](#), on the role of perceived justice in reducing politicization in the public sector). More specifically, reducing reliance on the control strategy and increasing the use of the solution-oriented strategy could indirectly, but meaningfully, help prevent the emergence of destructive political behavior. At the same time, the cross-sectional design of the study, the sample being limited to a single university, and the use of a researcher-developed, self-report questionnaire to measure political behavior with the attendant possibility of social desirability bias (a point also noted by [Ferris et al., 2000](#), in distinguishing perceived from actual political behavior) represent limitations of the present study. Future research is encouraged to extend these findings using longitudinal designs, multi-university samples, and by entering the independent effect of each conflict management style (rather than a composite score) into the structural model.

Overall, the results indicate that managers' conflict management strategies alone do not directly predict university employees' political behavior, and that this influence is transmitted entirely through the pathway of organizational trust. While partially consistent with prior literature regarding the relationship between cooperative styles and trust, this finding reveals a more precise mediation pattern within the specific context of academic institutions, and indicates that building trust rather than technical conflict-resolution skill alone is the key factor in preventing destructive politicization in academic environments.

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