

COMMENTARY

## Bringing I-O psychology to the (re)public

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When we talk about influencing the public, as in the focal article by Rogelberg et al. (2022), political institutions could represent one of the most significant areas of untapped potential for industrial-organizational (I-O) psychologists. We have some paths already forged. We have influenced federal employment practices and law through agencies such as the Office of Personnel Management, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and the Office of Federal Contract Compliance among others. The work has influenced both federal employment practices and organizations generally throughout society.

However, as a field, we are only beginning to facilitate and shape the practices of *elected* representatives and their staffs at the federal, state, and local levels. Yet, elected officials are the very people who are most likely to affect employment policies, practices, and laws. Furthermore, elected officials largely determine efficacy of government institutions. Anyone following the news can see our political system isn't working well. I-O psychology has an "O" in our name, so ensuring that political organizations work more effectively is one way we can (and should) bring I-O to the public.

Risky? Yes! Difficult? Definitely. Worth it? Do we have a choice? But, knowing where to start might be the hardest part. We suggest that two paths have immediate potential: helping political leaders (a) manage their staff and (b) manage political organizations.

### Political staffing

Most elected officials receive little formal management training. Furthermore, human resource departments at the federal, state, and local levels are focused on the full population of government agencies and civil service employees. Elected officials and their staffs are small and have much lower visibility. Thus, they are less likely to be exposed to accepted evidence-based, people-management principles. We can help. I-O psychologists know this work well. We know how to help leaders build strong, strategic, high-performing, motivated teams. We could add immediate value by helping elected officials in recruiting, selecting, onboarding, leading, training, and motivating their teams. The knowledge and skills they build in these areas can, in turn, transform their understanding and advocacy for legislation and policies in these arenas. Some guidance on human resources (HR) processes already exists within the public administration literature (Boselie et al., 2021; Farazmand, 2007), but I-O psychologists could add significant expertise, making it easily consumable and accessible for this group through leadership development; mentoring and coaching systems; team development; and promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion—think *Harvard Business Review* for politicians. This is a first step but not enough.

## Political organizations

The second step is helping political institutions become more effective organizations. We need to bring our organizational development skills to help individuals and groups work effectively in an adversarial environment. I-O psychology has not historically played in this arena very often, with the exception of noteworthy recent efforts (Stark, 2021). Getting political players to work together, between and within parties, in the United States and beyond, is becoming increasingly difficult. The public says they want politicians to work together, and yet politicians are rewarded for not compromising (Mann & Ornstein, 2012). We have dealt with these dilemmas before—the age-old issue of rewarding A while hoping for B (Kerr, 1995). The need to campaign and fundraise to one's core constituencies is continuous and often rewards *not* working together. Context matters (Knies et al., 2017).

The challenges are considerable, but we suggest four possible inroads for I-O psychologists to make a difference. All of the suggestions are designed to appeal simultaneously to both self-interests and shared group outcomes and, thus, we would argue are potentially more likely to be accepted and gain traction.

- **Understanding the current reward systems** that prevent movement including reinforcements, cognitive biases, and strategies to overcome them.
- Providing tools for groups to **work through conflict toward consensus**. This may include working with opposing political parties but could begin within parties, which also have multiple subgroups, competing interests, and diversity as well. I-O psychologists are experts in helping diverse teams identify shared goals, build psychological safety, create shared mental models, and engage in continuous learning. This is a skill set that any politician would value.
- **Promoting diversity, inclusion, professionalism, and empathy**. Empowering diverse groups to work more effectively together professionally (Squire, 1992), drawing on sources such as the social psychology of intractable conflicts (Ashmore, et al., 2004; Vallacher, et al., 2010), and peace psychology (Christie & Montiel, 2013) are important to meeting the evolving expectations of organizational change in response to changing social and cultural demographics.
- Offering leadership development that enables political leaders to **promote understanding and engagement in diverse constituencies** (see Grant, 2021, for a model of how to do this and in a way that frames psychological research in an easy-to-understand framing for nonexperts). This could include self-awareness of one's own biases while creating space for adversaries to engage productively with one another.

As I-O psychologists, let's not forget the influence that we really could have in larger society; let's consider ways we can bring I-O psychology to the (re)public.

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