Exploring the Boundaries of Political Behaviour of Senior Leaders

by

Musa Motloung

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Supervisor: Professor Johan Olivier

Plagiarism Declaration

I, **Musa Motloung**, declare that this research proposal, which I hereby submit for the degree Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Pretoria, is my own work and has not previously been submitted by me for a degree at this or any other tertiary institution.

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Abstract

This study investigates the under-explored yet crucial terrain of the boundaries of political behaviour: specifically, among senior leaders in complex organisations where influence and collaboration are essential yet fraught with complication. Mismanaged, such dynamics can generate poor decision-making, thereby jeopardising an organisation's short-term success and long-term sustainability. To date, such research has emanated mostly from the Global North and Asia. However, this inquiry redresses the imbalance by focusing on South Africa and its unique context of cultural, racial, and gender dynamics. Informed by upper echelons theory, it adopts an inductive, qualitative approach with a hermeneutic phenomenological design, to explore the relational dynamics (strategic interface) between highly diverse senior leaders in complex, regulated South African banking organisations: a sector characterised by both institutional sophistication and persistent socio-economic inequalities. Data was collected via in-depth, semi-structured interviews with top executives, in which lived experiences were explored and rich insights garnered.

Theoretically, the study departs from prior research, which focused largely on middle management or generic organisational settings, and centres instead on upper echelons, where decisions bear particular strategic weight. The research generated several new conceptual insights which reframe political behaviour as a fluid, ethically contingent practice. Firstly, **contextual duality:** political behaviour is seen as neither inherently positive nor negative, but exists on a dynamic continuum shaped by intent, leadership values, and organisational context. Secondly, **boundaries are context-dependent**: acceptable political conduct is demonstrably fluid, shaped by internal structures (leadership culture, performance systems) and external socio-political forces (race, gender, national governance). Thirdly, the notion of **holistic integration** positions political behaviour as an evolving product of social, economic, and political interplay, rather than a fixed trait or isolated action. Fourthly, the study offers scholars and practitioners a set of practical guidelines, complemented by the leadership **continuum model**: a novel theoretical lens through which to analyse political conduct within complex, high-stakes leadership environments. Finally, the study concludes with recommendations for future research, including the development of measurement tools and further empirical testing across diverse sectors and geographies.

Keywords: political behaviour, senior leaders, upper echelons, ethical leadership, organisational culture

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List of Acronyms

AFD	Africa Development Bank
B-BBEE	Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment
BASA	Banking Association of South Africa
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
GIBS	Gordon Institute of Business Science
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
NERSA	National Energy Regulator of South Africa
NPD	New project development
PPT	Participant
RQ	Research Question
UNDP	United Nations Development Program

Chapter 1: Introduction

Strategic decisions have a great impact on the outcomes of an organisation (Samimi et al., 2019). Because such decisions are inherently uncertain, ambiguous, novel, and ill-structured, they generate highly emotive responses from upper echelon leaders (Elbanna, 2018; Elbanna et al., 2017; Samimi et al., 2019; Shepherd et al., 2020). This invariably provokes clashes about the best course of action – which, in turn, leads to political behaviour (Elbanna, 2018; Elbanna et al., 2017; Shepherd et al., 2020).

Elbanna's seminal literature review (2018) on the political behaviour of upper-echelon decision-makers underscores the harmful effects of such behaviour on various decisions and work-related outcomes. The review, which spans organisational, personal, and human resource management contexts, characterises political behaviour as predominantly self-serving, often to the extent that it violates norms and undermines the quality of strategic decisions (Ferris & Treadway, 2012; Hochwarter, 2012). These detrimental effects manifest in diminished strategic decision quality, thereby compromising organisational goals (Elbanna, 2018; Elbanna et al., 2017; Rudd, 2020; Shepherd et al., 2020). Shepherd et al. (2020) further emphasise the wide-ranging consequences of poorly managed political behaviour in strategic decision-making. Their research highlights critical areas impacted by such behaviour, including an organisation's competitive advantages, speed to market, growth trajectory, relative performance, and performance volatility (Elbanna, 2018; Samimi et al., 2019; Shepherd et al., 2020). These outcomes, both financial and non-financial, are integral to an organisation's short-term survival and long-term sustainability.

Moreover, Shepherd et al. (2020) identify specific harmful outcomes of political behaviour, including retaliatory interpersonal hostilities, missed opportunities, delayed responses, and the distortion or withholding of information. These behaviours hinder environmental responsiveness and contribute to insular, inward-looking decision-making processes. The politicking of upper-echelon leaders thus has profound implications for the present and future states of organisations, influencing both operational efficiency and strategic positioning (Samimi et al., 2019).

Against that backdrop, this study investigates the under-explored yet crucial terrain of the boundaries of political behaviour: specifically, among senior leaders in complex organisations, where influence and collaboration are essential yet fraught with complication. It is well accepted in the literature that political behaviour is dual in nature – and comprises both constructive and destructive aspects (Elbanna, 2018; Elbanna et

al., 2017; Kapoutsis & Thanos, 2016). However, more research is required for a better understanding of the duality of this universal phenomenon. Although scholars have begun to focus on the positive aspects of such behaviour (Elbanna, 2018; Elbanna et al., 2017; Shepherd et al., 2020), extant literature's dominant posture argues that political behaviour generates ubiquitous challenges. If poorly managed, such behaviour can generate poor decision-making, thereby jeopardising an organisation's short-term success and long-term sustainability (Elbanna, 2018; Rudd, 2020; Shepherd et al., 2020). Indeed, most research on this phenomenon invariably portrays such behaviour pejoratively (Ferris & Treadway, 2012; Hochwarter, 2012), raising concerns around compromised organisational outcomes: both financial and non-financial (Elbanna, 2018; Elbanna et al., 2017; Rudd, 2020; Shepherd et al., 2020). Hence, the overarching research question of this study: ***how do senior leaders in complex organisations define the boundaries of political behaviour?***

In this introductory chapter, I briefly explain political behaviour, examining why senior leaders engage in it and how it manifests. I then introduce the extant literature on political behaviour – highlighting its dual nature and strategic decision-making, with particular reference to scholarship on the upper echelon theory as a theoretical anchor for the study. I draw attention to the limitations of this work and the implications thereof for the theory and practice of the duality of political behaviour of senior leaders. I subsequently explain my methodological approach – an inductive, qualitative approach with a hermeneutic phenomenological design – and describe why it was suitable to answer my research question. The research problem and research questions follow, along with an overview of my research contribution. The chapter ends with an outline of the entire thesis.

1.1 What is political behaviour and its boundary conditions?

Political behaviour is seen as a universal phenomenon, especially in terms of how senior leaders execute their roles and responsibilities (Shepherd et al., 2020). According to current and earlier literature, political behaviour is multifaceted (Ivancevich & Matteson, 1987; Gibson et al., 1988). It can include behaviour *outside* the legal, recognised system of power in the organisation, and it may be intended to benefit an *individual* – often at the expense of the organisation (Ivancevich & Matteson, 1987).

Scholars have viewed political behaviour from several perspectives (Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1988; Elbanna & Child, 2007a). One standpoint focuses on internal factors:

how individuals use political strategies to serve their own interests in decision-making processes (Dean & Sharfman, 1996; Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1988; Elbanna & Child, 2007b); and how organisational units acquire power to influence such processes (Pfeffer & Moore, 1980; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1974). Another standpoint is broader. It embraces all kinds of influences on decision processes, whether these are exercised by *internal* actors (organisational members and organisational units); or *external* elements such as government agencies, unions, and customers (Hickson et al., 1986; Mintzberg et al., 1976; Pettigrew, 1973). This research inquiry focuses on *internal* political behaviour: that is, behaviour by individuals or groups involving the use of power or influence to obtain a specific outcome *within* an organisation (Elbanna, 2018; Kapoutsis & Thanos, 2016). Despite recent research on political behaviour and its relationship to related constructs like strategic management, scholars suggest that more attention should be given to how senior leaders – whose roles by definition require political behaviours – define the *boundaries* of such behaviour (Shepherd et al., 2020).

From a scholarly perspective, **boundary conditions** are precise stipulations or constraints applied to a system, problem, or equation to determine specific solutions or behaviours (Bacharach, 1989; Whetten, 1989). This term is widely used across disciplines, including physics, mathematics, engineering, social sciences, and organisational studies. According to Whetten (1989), boundary conditions are the "who, where, when" aspects of a theory. Other scholars such as Bacharach (1989) agree, and further assert that these conditions relate, most importantly, to boundaries in time, space, and the researcher's values, and describe the limits of the generalisability of a theory. In a general sense, boundary conditions therefore refer to the constraints or limits within which a system operates, or a problem is solved. In extant literature, this concept is often metaphorically applied to describe the factors, circumstances, or parameters that define the scope and limits of a narrative, character, or thematic exploration.

Boundary conditions, whether in literature, science, or theory, define the **limits of applicability** and the **framework for analysis or interpretation**. They are essential for structuring problems, focusing on specific aspects, and achieving meaningful results. In the milieu of social science and organisational studies, boundary conditions specify the contextual parameters within which theories, models, or practices hold true. For example, a leadership theory might be valid only within certain cultural or organisational settings, defined as its boundary conditions. To that end, for the purposes of this inquiry, boundaries refer to guardrails within which upper echelon leaders of complex organisations function as they navigate the universal phenomenon of the duality of political behaviour, in their use of power and influence to solicit a specific organisational

outcome – financial or non-financial outcomes (Figure 1.1). In this study, such boundary conditions refer more specifically to the perceived ethical lines, normative limits on influence tactics, and accepted standards of conduct that would delineate appropriate political behaviour from inappropriate or destructive acts for senior leaders within their organisational roles.

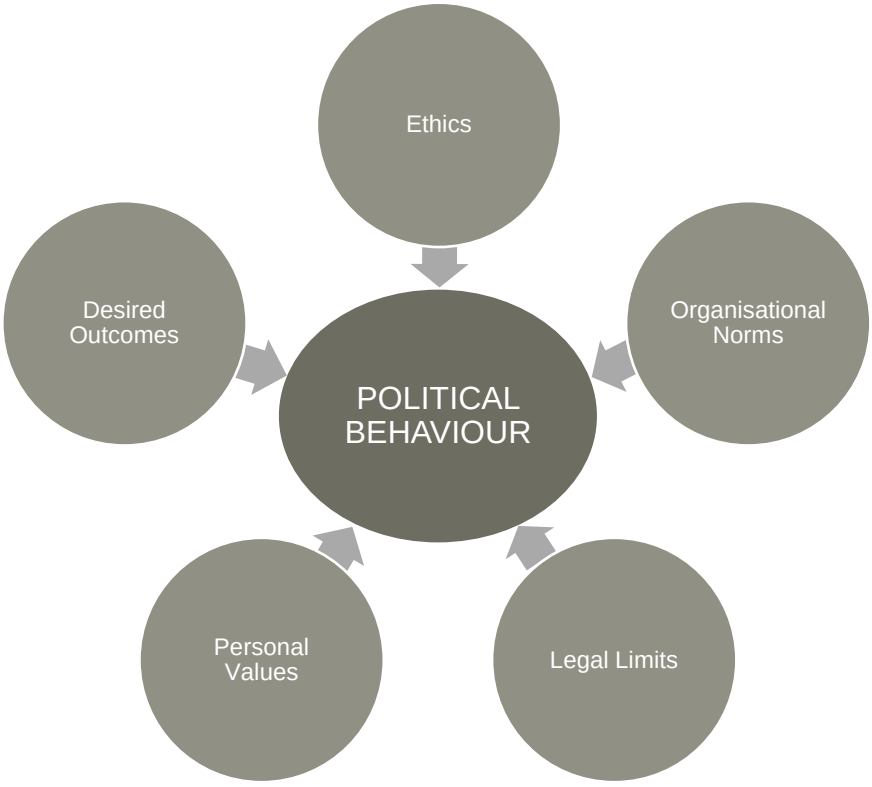

Figure 1.1: The guardrails of political behaviour

Source: Author's own.

1.2 Research phenomenon – problem, purpose and question

Senior leaders, notably boards, chief executive officers, and members of top management teams across all organisation types (profit and non-profit), make strategic decisions. Indeed, Samimi et al. (2019) conclude that decision-making is key to the roles and responsibilities of such upper echelon executives. At their core, strategic decisions are ad hoc, non-routine, complex, and highly consequential, influencing an organisation's success and sustainability (Elbanna, 2018; Elbanna et al., 2017; Kauppila et al., 2018; Samimi et al., 2019; Shepherd et al., 2020). Moreover, strategic decision-making is inherently political by definition and design (Elbanna, 2018; Shepherd et al., 2020). Thus, strategic decisions are highly likely to stimulate political actions because they are

complex, significant, and subject to uncertainty (Elbanna, 2018; Elbanna et al., 2017; Kauppila et al., 2018; Samimi et al., 2019).

Most dominant research across various fields (strategic decision-making, organisational management, and human resource management) asserts that political behaviour adversely permeates strategic decision-making (Elbanna, 2018; Ferris & Treadway, 2012; Rudd, 2020; Treadway et al., 2005) and thereby undermines organisational performance (Elbanna, 2018; Rudd, 2020; Shepherd et al., 2020). However, in the past decade, a new critical perspective has gained prominence, emphasising the positive dimensions of political behaviour (Elbanna, 2018; Elbanna et al., 2017; Shepherd et al., 2020). Although the duality of politics – both negative and positive – within an organisation is well-accepted, Elbanna (2018) and Shepherd et al. (2020) argue that there is limited knowledge about the *boundaries* of political behaviour of executive leaders at the apex of an organisation. Thus, while most literature is pejorative in describing political behaviour and concerned with compromised outcomes, it is also acknowledged that such behaviour is a necessary competence of leadership, and its effects depend on the context.

Political behaviour occurs when individuals, or a collective, use power and influence to solicit a specific outcome (Kapoutsis & Thanos, 2016; Vecchio & Sussman, 1991). In essence, this involves a social exchange between members of top management teams to influence the organisation's strategic agenda (Shepherd et al., 2020). Eisenhardt and Bourgeois (1988) further posit that political behaviour arises from a combination of differentiation and interdependence among individuals and groups, and is also used to influence the outcomes of an organisation. Thus, individual senior managers have specialised functions and are accountable for delivering results in individual business units, but they must work with other divisions to achieve the outcomes of their respective units and those of the organisation.

Several scholars further contend that political behaviour is generated by power struggles and conflicting viewpoints within top management teams, coalitions with competing interests, and the complex, judgmental and consequential nature of strategic decision-making (Elbanna et al., 2017; Kauppila et al., 2018). In the customary resource constrained business environment, the allocation of such limited resources is key to strategic decision-making, but the competition for such resources generates tension between teams (Mumford & Pettigrew, 1975). Given this interplay of interests, tensions, and power between individuals and groups, the strategic decision-making process can be characterised as inherently political (Hickson et al., 2003; Shepherd et al., 2020).

However, potentially harmful political behaviour by top leaders also stokes valid concerns about compromised organisational outcomes (Elbanna, 2018; Elbanna et al., 2017; Shepherd et al., 2020). Therefore, Johns (2017) and Shepherd et al. (2020) have called for further research to enhance our understanding of the boundary conditions of the political behaviour of such leaders.

Organisations indeed face many challenges: uncertain external environments, rapidly changing technological landscapes, unclear aspirations, performance evaluation, promotion and scarcity of resources (Knight, 2020; Wright & Nyberg, 2017). Where the stakes are so high, political behaviour is inevitable (Pettigrew, 1973). In turn, this behaviour influences large-scale innovative decisions, organisation restructuring, mergers and acquisitions, as well as entry into new markets (Friedman et al., 2016), often challenging existing forms of resource allocation. It is, therefore, reasonable to conclude that such challenges *provoke* political behaviour among individuals or groups (Knight, 2020) and consequently enable the preferences of the dominant coalition within top management teams to prevail (Stone et al., 2002).

Several scholars have explored how senior leaders participate in political behaviour to sway an organisation's strategic direction and agenda (Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1988). This can involve the strategic use of information, negotiating outside formal structures, and forming coalitions (Elbanna et al., 2017; Rudd, 2020; Shepherd et al., 2020). However, such behaviour can lead to unwise decision-making – especially when it becomes impossible to manage dominant voices within a top management team (Elbanna, 2018). According to Lindblom (1977), when certain groups dominate or start colluding rather than competing, less powerful people become vulnerable to exploitation, and the meaningful discussion of alternatives is suppressed. Additionally, political behaviour can give rise to revengeful interpersonal hostilities, which – in turn – leads to indecisiveness, missed business opportunities, tardy responses from executives, and the unfortunate limitation of free information flow within top management teams (Elbanna, 2018; Elbanna et al., 2017). Left unattended, such behaviour can threaten an organisation's financial and non-financial outcomes (Elbanna, 2018; Rudd, 2020; Shepherd et al., 2020).

The connection between circumstantial dynamics and organisational effectiveness is widely recognised (Johns, 2017), but "surprisingly … the boundary conditions of political behaviour remain little understood" (Shepherd et al., 2020, p. 2), and "… strategic decision theory has not yet adequately explained how top management teams cope with the inevitable politics in play" (Shepherd et al., 2020, p. 15). For this reason, Kapoutsis

and Thanos (2016, p.4) have urged scholars to "explore new boundary conditions that might regulate political efficiency". In response to such appeals, this study therefore interrogates how senior leaders – that is, those whose roles by definition require political behaviours – define their boundaries.

A literature review by Elbanna (2018) on the political behaviour of upper echelon decision- makers, highlights the lethal impact of such behaviour on the quality of strategic decision-making and work outcomes. The review, which covers strategic decision-making as well as organisational, personal, and human resource management, primarily regards political behaviour as egotistic behaviour which flouts organisational standards (Ferris & Treadway, 2012; Hochwarter, 2012). The study further contends that political behaviour within upper echelon leaders is inescapable and often damaging to the quality of strategic decision-making. The review concludes that it is vital to investigate the conditions under which individuals within top management teams – charged with a fundamental responsibility for strategic decision-making (Samimi et al., 2019) – define the boundaries of political behaviour, and thereby safeguard their respective organisations (Elbanna, 2018).

However, an alternative critical perspective has emerged in the past decade: one which focuses on the *positive* aspects of political behaviour (Elbanna, 2018; Elbanna et al., 2017; Shepherd et al., 2020). Such research shows that some top management teams are able to manage potentially divisive political behaviour and thus avoid organisational disfunction (Shepherd et al., 2020): notably by integrating individual preferences to promote information-sharing, safeguard quality decision-making, and increase the likelihood of timeous implementation (Elbanna, 2018; Elbanna et al., 2017; Shepherd et al., 2020). Fundamentally, Shepherd et al. (2020) and Elbanna et al. (2018) argue that political behaviour is a ubiquitous challenge that top leaders must navigate. However, literature has yet to focus on the *meaning* of political behaviour boundaries for senior leaders whose roles involve influencing and motivating others. Consequently, this study asks: *how do senior leaders in complex organisations define the boundaries of political behaviour?*

This study is anchored in upper echelons theory (Bromiley & Rau, 2016; Hambrick & Mason, 1984), which has contributed greatly to the literature of strategic management (Hambrick & Mason, 1984) by examining how executives' characteristics and experiences shape their perceptions, choices, and actions in ways that ultimately affect various organisational outcomes (Bromiley & Rau, 2016; Wang et al., 2016). Upper echelons theory acknowledges that top executives matter to company outcomes

because they make decisions and engage in behaviours that affect their organisations' health, wealth, and welfare – but they do so as flawed human beings (Bonelli, 2014; Quigley & Hambrick, 2015).

Literature asserts that the research questions "should assume two forms: a central question and associated sub-questions" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 133). As mentioned earlier, the central question of this research project is: ***how do senior leaders in complex organisations define the boundaries of political behaviour?*** Researchers concur that such behaviour is normal, and is sometimes an essential element of functioning (Zanzi & O'Neill, 2001). However, no agreed definition currently exists that captures the complexity of political action (Ferris et al., 2019). Hence, there is a need to better understand the theory and dimensions of this universal phenomenon. Taking this into account, the study therefore expanded the scope of the central question by exploring two associated sub-questions. First: *what factors influence the duality of political behaviour among senior leaders?* This sub-question responds to the call by Kapoutsis and Thanos (2016, p. 4) for "*new insights on the constructive and damaging effects of politics*". Second: *what contextual factors regulate political behaviour of senior executives in the organisation?* This addresses the need identified by Kapoutsis and Thanos (2016, p.4) for research that explores "new boundary conditions that might regulate political efficiency".

1.3 Scope of the research

This research project explores the boundaries of political behaviour, and is based on the lived experiences of senior leaders of regulated and complex organisations in South Africa. These leaders were asked to share insights about how their organisations engage in strategic decision-making, involving, for example: corporate restructuring; mergers and acquisitions; entering a new market; exiting a market; introducing a new product line; and so forth. Such periods of organisational change often induce *political* rather than *rational* behaviour and can encourage upper echelon strategic decision-makers to engage in political processes, as different factions and coalitions fight over territory (Elbanna, 2018; Shepherd et al., 2020).

Political behaviour is prevalent across **all levels of management**—senior, middle, and junior. However, this study focuses specifically on senior leaders, or upper-echelon executives, who bear primary responsibility for strategic decision-making (Samimi et al., 2019). By the nature of their roles, senior leaders are expected to engage in political

behaviours, which are integral to navigating the complexities of their positions. This study seeks to explore how these leaders define the boundaries of political behaviour. Given their influence, senior leaders play a pivotal role in determining organisational outcomes, shaping both short-term success and long-term sustainability through their decisions (Georgakakis et al., 2019; Samimi et al., 2019).

In relation to **organisational size**, political behaviour is particularly prominent in large organisations with hierarchical structures. Consequently, this study focuses on complex organisations characterised by high levels of multiplicity, interdependence, and diversity (Sargut & McGrath, 2011; Snowden & Boone, 2007; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017). Banks, as exemplars of such complexity, embody these features, reflecting the challenges and dynamics inherent in navigating interconnected systems and uncertainties within the financial landscape. Their complexity demands adaptive leadership, innovative management, and resilient systems.

Regarding **industrial delimitation**, the empirical component of this study is focused on organisations within the regulated banking industry, specifically the top locally controlled South African banks. These banks – often referred to as the "big four" – include Standard Bank, FirstRand, Absa, and Nedbank, and they operate across multiple segments, including retail, commercial, corporate, and investment banking. Collectively, these banks represent approximately 70% of the total assets in the South African banking sector (Fitch Solutions, 2020). South Africa's banking sector is one of the most sophisticated and robust in Africa, playing a critical role in the country's economy. It is characterised by a well-developed regulatory framework and a high degree of consolidation, with the top four banks dominating the market. These banks' services cater to diverse client bases, ranging from individuals and small businesses to large corporations and international markets. South African banks are recognised for their resilience and innovation, frequently adopting advanced technologies and practices to navigate local and global financial challenges. However, the sector also faces unique pressures, including regulatory compliance, economic volatility, and socio-economic inequalities, making it a dynamic and complex environment for strategic decision-making. This backdrop provides a rich context for examining the political behaviour of senior leaders within these institutions.

1.4 Definition of key research constructs

1.4.1 Senior leaders in an organisation

Scholars define "senior leaders" in different ways. Some focus on the criterion of strategic decision-making (Hambrick & Mason, 1984): specifically, decisions that significantly affect the organisation's long-term performance (Wilson et al.,1986). Such decisions are ad hoc, non-routine, complex, and highly consequential because they influence the organisation's short-term success and long-term sustainability (Kauppila et al., 2018). In other words, strategic decisions are critical for an organisation's survival and may have significant implications for the distribution of resources within the organisation. Thus, strategic decision-makers have more at stake because of what they stand to gain or lose, in terms of material or reputational consequences (Stone et al., 2002). Other scholars differentiate between leadership *of* organisations and leadership *in* organisations (Boal & Hooijberg, 2000). Finkelstein et al. (2009) describe senior leaders as "executives who have overall responsibility for an organisation, [including] their characteristics, what they do, how they do it, and particularly, how they affect organisational outcomes" (p. 4). The study by Samimi et al. (2019) provides a similar perspective, defining senior leadership in terms of "the functions performed by individuals at the top levels of an organisation (CEOs, top management team members, Directors, General Managers) that are intended to have strategic consequences for the firm" (p. 4). Thus, senior leaders influence others to make daily decisions that enhance the organisation's long-term sustainability while delivering on short-term financial targets (Boal & Hooijberg, 2000). Accordingly, senior leaders have overall responsibility for the organisation. They are not just chief executive officers, but can also be the dominant coalition: for example, heads of business units (Samimi et al., 2019). As such, they influence organisational outcomes through the decisions they make (Georgakakis et al., 2019; Samimi et al., 2019).

Over the past decade, scholars have broadly agreed that upper echelon leaders can be differentiated from lower-level leaders by the scope, influence, and long-term impact of their actions (Goldman & Casey, 2010). More recently, Barstardoz and Van Vugt (2019) highlighted earlier research which defined senior leaders as individuals with the power to initiate, direct, and coordinate followers who willingly accept such leaders' influence on the organisation's future. Similarly, Georgakakis et al. (2019) suggest that leadership at an executive level implies a shared process of exchanges among upper echelon leaders which affect the organisation's actions.

In conclusion, this research inquiry is guided by Boal and Hooijberg's definition, as it views senior leaders as leaders *of* organisations, as opposed to *in* organisations (Boal & Hooijberg, 2000). It also agrees that top leaders need not only be CEOs but could also be part of a dominant coalition (Samimi et al., 2019), and that they differ from lower-level leaders because of the impact of their decisions on the results of the organisation (Georgakakis et al., 2019; Samimi et al., 2019).

1.4.2 Political behaviour

Although political behaviour is recognised as having positive and negative aspects (Elbanna, 2018; Elbanna et al., 2017; Kapoutsis & Thanos, 2016), it has predominantly been viewed through a pejorative lens (Ferris & Treadway, 2012; Hochwarter, 2012). Again, scholars have provided various definitions of such behaviour, along with specific nuanced themes in each case. Some scholars view political behaviour as a series of intentional acts (for example, influence tactics, self-presentation, impression management) which are used to manage shared meanings of organisational situations to achieve desired outcomes (Kapoutsis & Thanos, 2016). This perspective defines political behaviour as primarily self-serving and egotistical – essentially negative. Conversely, Elbanna (2018), provides a neutral view of political behaviour – stating that political behaviour refers to intentional actions involving the use of power and influence, to serve either the self-interests of decision-makers or the interests of the organisation. This definition highlights the duality of political behaviour, viewing it as either constructive or destructive. Dayan et al. (2011) further assert that political behaviour originates from conflicting goals and interests within the organisation, with decisions reflecting the preferences of the most powerful actors – the dominant coalition – over those with less power. This definition focuses on the power dynamics inherent in political behaviour.

Moreover, according to Mintzberg (1983), political behaviour is informal, parochial, divisive, and illegitimate: not sanctioned by formal authority, ideology, or expertise. This view emphasises the divisive nature of political activities within organisations. Mintzberg (1985), later posited that organisations are political arenas where political behaviour reflects non-sanctioned and self-serving actions. This perspective affirms the illegitimacy of political behaviour and suggests that it can lead to adverse outcomes for the organisation. Other scholars share Mintzberg's view that political behaviour is a non-sanctioned activity within organisational settings, further highlighting the informal and unsanctioned nature of political actions (Farrell & Petersen, 1982; Gandz & Murray, 1980; Schein, 1977).

However, subsequent scholars have offered an alternative perspective. They suggest that not all non-sanctioned behaviour is harmful, and not all self-serving behaviour is dysfunctional. Thus, political behaviour can sometimes serve as a protective mechanism in threatening environments (Ferris & Judge, 1991; Zanzi & O'Neill, 2001). Ferris et al. (2002) go further, viewing political behaviour as a skillset that can actually be used constructively: by strengthening the ability to understand and influence others at work to act in ways that enhance personal and/or organisational objectives.

To summarise, extant literature defines political behaviour in terms of five key features. First, ***intentionality***: political behaviour is intentional and deliberate. Second, ***duality*****:** it can be both constructive (benefiting organisational goals), and destructive (self-serving or divisive). Third, ***power dynamics***: it often arises from conflicting interests and involves the use of power and influence. Fourth, ***legitimacy***: political behaviour is frequently characterised as non-sanctioned or illegitimate within formal organisational structures. Fifth, ***adaptiveness***: in some cases, political behaviour serves as a protective or adaptive mechanism in uncertain or threatening environments.

My research inquiry is guided by Elbanna's (2018) neutral definition, in that it views political behaviour as intentional actions involving the use of power and influence to serve either the self-interests of decision-makers or the interests of the organisation. This definition accentuates the dual nature of political behaviour, recognising that it can be either constructive or destructive.

1.4.3 Complex organisation

This study develops and expands the current understanding of *complex*, as distinct from *complicated*, organisation. Scholars assert that it is possible to predict the behaviour of complicated networks or systems, and to do so with a high degree of accuracy (Sargut & McGrath, 2011; Snowden & Boone, 2007; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017). However, complex systems behave very differently. Sturmberg and Martin (2013) point out that the word "complexity" comes from the Latin word *complexus* and is formed from the prefix "com" (meaning "together") and *plectere*: "to wave or braid". As such, the term "complexity" not only implies the connectedness of things but also recognises that the form/substance of a network or system permanently and unpredictably changes when its various elements interact (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017).

A complex environment is characterised by three such discrete elements: multiplicity, interdependence, and diversity (Sargut & McGrath, 2011). The term "multiplicity" denotes

the interaction of many elements; "interdependence" refers to the connectedness of these elements; and "diversity" relates to the degree of their heterogeneity (Sargut & McGrath, 2011). The greater the multiplicity, interdependence, and diversity, the greater the complexity. Organic growth, for example, is particularly complex, involving many distinct, diverse, collaborative and dynamic elements (Sargut & McGrath, 2011). In this research inquiry, the term "complex organisation" denotes an organisation with high levels of multiplicity, interdependence, and diversity (Sargut & McGrath, 2011; Snowden & Boone, 2007; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017).

Globally, banks are generally prime examples of **complex organisations**, as they display the key features of complexity as identified by Sargut and McGrath (2011), Snowden and Boone (2007), and Uhl-Bien and Arena (2017): multiplicity, interdependency, and diversity.

In terms of **multiplicity**, banks operate in multifaceted environments involving numerous stakeholders – such as customers, regulators, investors, and employees – across a variety of functions including retail banking, corporate banking, investment banking, and wealth management. *Importantly, this applies to the four South African banks from which participants with rich experience of the research phenomenon were drawn*. Banks also deal with multiple financial products, services, and technologies, while navigating distinct regulatory frameworks in different jurisdictions. This multiplicity generates vast and intricate networks of activities, relationships, and obligations.

Regarding **interdependency**, the activities within banks are highly interconnected. Internally, departments such as risk management, compliance, technology, and customer services rely on each other to deliver seamless and secure financial services. Externally, banks are deeply embedded in the broader financial ecosystem, including global markets, interbank lending systems, and economic policies. A disruption in one area, such as a technological failure or regulatory shift, often cascades across the organisation and its external connections, demonstrating the systemic interdependencies that characterise banking.

The final element in a complex organisation is **diversity**. Banks are diverse in their functions, workforce, and customer base. They serve a wide range of clients, from individual account holders to multinational corporations, requiring customised approaches to meet varying needs. Their operations span cultural, economic, and legal environments globally, necessitating flexible strategies and localised solutions. Additionally, their workforce comprises specialists from fields as varied as finance, data

analytics, legal compliance, and customer relations, all of which contribute to the organisation's functional and demographic diversity.

Through these features – multiplicity, interdependency, and diversity – banks epitomise the challenges and dynamics of complex organisations, requiring adaptive leadership, innovative management, and resilient systems to navigate the uncertainties and interconnected realities of the financial landscape.

1.5 Research methodology

This study presented an opportunity to explore the question: *How do senior leaders define political behaviour and its boundaries?* (Elbanna, 2018; Shepherd et al., 2020). The inquiry provides insights into the intricate dynamics within upper echelon executives in regulated banking organisations in the rarely researched context of South Africa. This process required me to develop strategies to access "difficult to access participants" (Leblanc & Schwartz, 2007; Lewellyn & Muller-Kahle, 2012) in different contexts. I discuss these strategies and related research choices in detail in Chapter 4.

There are three approaches to scholarly research: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Various scholars concur that qualitative methodology – based on open-ended questioning – is best suited to exploratory research, where the necessary variables have yet to be defined (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yin, 1996; Yin, 2016). Furthermore, exploratory research is valuable when there are gaps in the existing body of knowledge, and when participants' lived experiences are likely to generate new insights (Hart, 1998). Qualitative research endeavours to deliver such insights by interrogating people's perceptions, beliefs, and understanding of events (Schildt et al., 2020). Given that the overarching objective of this research inquiry is to expand existing knowledge and highlight new insights into the boundaries of the political behaviour of senior leaders in an organisation, the qualitative approach was deemed the most appropriate (Elbanna, 2018; Gioia et al., 2013; Johns, 2017; Kapoutsis & Thanos, 2016; Shepherd et al., 2020). Ultimately therefore, the research builds on existing upper echelons theory, contributes to the literature on senior leadership and furthers the understanding of the duality of political behaviour in organisations.

Guided by the philosophical framework defined by Hlady-Rispal and Jouison-Laffitte (2014), this inquiry is situated within an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm, consistent with phenomenological research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Loh, 2013). Phenomenology aims at "gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of

our everyday experiences ... [it] does not offer us the possibility of effective theory with which we can now explain and/or control the world, but rather it offers us the possibility of plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world" (van Manen 2001, p 9). Therefore, the purpose of phenomenological research is to access the lived experiences of a specific population (van Manen, 1990, 2014) through a formalised process of understanding a phenomenon (Groenewald, 2004; Hussey & Hussey, 1997).

Using inductive research, based on qualitative data (Edmondson & McManus, 2007), this inquiry draws on the understanding and experiences of individuals to gather insights into their real-world conditions. It also represents their views and perspectives; explores the context in which they work; and offers insights into the universal phenomenon of political behaviour (van Manen, 2014).

1.6 Significance of the research for business and theory

Scholars agree that political behaviour is a normal and sometimes essential element of functioning (Zanzi & O'Neill, 2001). However, the complexity of political action has yet to be fully defined (Ferris et al., 2019). Indeed, there is still widespread disagreement about the implications of political behaviour. Conceptualisations have varied over time and across studies (Kidron & Vinarski-Peretz, 2018; Lampaki & Papadakis, 2018), and the boundary between what *is* and what is *not* political behaviour remains blurred.

Consequently, this study seeks to enhance and expand current knowledge in three ways:

- Firstly, it explores how executive leaders of complex organisations define and elucidate the boundary conditions of their political behaviours. Until now, scholars have focused on political behaviour *between* middle and senior management levels (Liu et al., 2015), at the expense of examining such behaviour at the upper echelons (Elbanna, 2018; Johns, 2017; Kapoutsis & Thanos, 2016; Shepherd et al., 2020). This research therefore contributes to the literature on senior leaders by examining what happens beyond quantitative linear relationships.
- Secondly, this research focuses on South Africa. In so doing it redresses the current imbalance in extant literature on political behaviour which mostly emanates from the global North, Europe, and Asia (Elbanna, 2018). Upper echelon strategic decision-makers in South Africa represent a high level of diversity at many levels. Moreover, they operate within a typical African business setting which is also shaped by international business influences.

- Thirdly, this research contributes to the development of upper echelon theory. Neely et al. (2020) argue that limited attention has been given to upper echelon leaders' interactions and/or strategic interfaces: the relational "black box". This inquiry therefore seeks to fill the gap in existing knowledge by providing insights into how upper echelon leaders in complex organisations define and interpret the boundaries of political behaviour in their respective organisations.

As mentioned earlier, the decisions made by top executives affect an organisation's health, prosperity, and overall welfare. But executives are also human beings, and therefore fallible (Bonelli, 2014; Neely et al., 2020; Quigley & Hambrick, 2015). By sharing the insights and experiences of such executives, this inquiry enhances the understanding of other senior leaders, thereby liberating them from the parochial view that political behaviour is intrinsically negative (Elbanna, 2018). In so doing, the research further advances the existing understanding of the duality of political behaviour. Equally, such awareness can also help top management teams navigate potentially harmful political behaviour and troubleshoot adverse organisational outcomes (Gao & He, 2017). Related strategies, for example, might centre on tailored executive programs that engage upper echelon leaders on the antecedents, appearances, aftermaths, and boundaries of political behaviour.

To conclude, it is important to note that many scholars have struggled to gain access to senior leaders, especially when attempting to garner their insights on issues like indecision, trust, and strategic interface (Crow & Lockhart, 2014; Neely et al., 2020; Samimi et al., 2019). To address this challenge, I have drawn upon my own 25-year work experience in South Africa's business environment – particularly the last 20 years within the South African banking industry – and I have harnessed my networks with decision-makers who operate at the apex of their complex organisations.

1.7 Structure of the study

Chapter 1 has provided a rationale for this study of the boundaries of political behaviour among senior leaders in complex organisations, where influence and collaboration are essential yet fraught with complication. I have identified theoretical gaps and have articulated the research questions that embody these gaps. I have also indicated that this study aims to develop a theory that deepens our understanding of a universally important phenomenon in organisations: political behaviour, with all its inherent duality. The focus of subsequent chapters is outlined below.

Chapter 2 discusses South Africa and its banking landscape as the context for this inquiry. The chapter describes South Africa's political economy, and private/public relations or partnerships. It also explores the structure, dynamics and integral components of the South African banking industry which is characterised by a balance of stability and ongoing transformation. I further explain why South Africa provides fertile ground for understanding the boundary conditions of political behaviour by senior leaders of regulated banking organisations, and thereby contributes to defining the factors that shape the dual nature of such behaviour.

Chapter 3 is a review of relevant literature on the phenomenon under investigation. This chapter delves into the existing literature on political behaviour in the context of strategic decision-making, leadership, and upper echelons theory. It explores the antecedents and manifestations of political behaviour and its implications for organisational outcomes. The chapter also clarifies the research questions, anchoring them within the context of the relevant literature.

Chapter 4 details the methodology and design of the research, giving the rationale for methodological choices and design decisions. The chapter covers specifics like the study population, sampling methods and size, as well as data collection techniques and analysis approaches. I also acknowledge the study's limitations.

Chapter 5 describes key empirical findings from the research. The chapter follows a structured format (as illustrated in Figure 5.1) which acts as a "findings roadmap". The roadmap includes: the overarching theme; three master themes; and 16 sub-themes identified in the study. It thereby provides a detailed and organised presentation of the results.

Chapter 6 discusses the empirical findings in relation to existing literature. I identify areas where the study findings converge with, or diverge from, established knowledge. Crucially, the chapter also highlights *new* perspectives and nuances related to the phenomenon under study.

Chapter 7 synthesises the entire study, revisiting the central research questions and providing clear answers. I further discuss the context and significance of the study, the methodological approach, key findings, and their interpretations. Additionally, the chapter outlines the implications of the research for scholarship and practice, suggests directions for future research, and acknowledges the study's limitations.

Chapter 2: South African context

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the research setting: namely the complex landscape of the Republic of South Africa and its regulated banking industry. Research conducted in diverse contexts has the potential to generate novel theories, especially when examining under-studied phenomena (George et al., 2016). However, whilst many theories have emerged from developed economies, scholars increasingly question their applicability to developing markets (Mukherjee et al., 2014), noting that these theories often overlook critical cultural and environmental differences (Izogo & Jayawardhena, 2018). To date, studies on the political behaviour of leaders in organisations have largely concentrated on the Global North (Shepherd et al., 2020) and the Middle East (Elbanna et al., 2018). By contrast, my study addresses this gap by focusing on South Africa: a multilayered, developing country whose distinctive characteristics – including political economy, business-government relations, unique cultural, racial, and gender dynamics, and a highly rated banking system – present a rich and pertinent context for examining and expanding the theory on the boundaries of political behaviour of senior executives at the apex of complex organisations.

South Africa is a middle-income country marked by deep socio-economic inequalities, poverty and unemployment (Sulla & Zikhali, 2018; Van Wyk et al., 2004). The Gini coefficient of 0.67 in 2018 is one of the highest globally (World Bank, 2019), reflecting South Africa's disproportionate distribution of economic resources and high socio-economic inequalities. In the third quarter of 2024, the official national unemployment rate stood at 32.1%, with the unemployment rate among youth (aged between 15 and 34) at 45.5% (Statistics SA, 2024). Since the advent of democracy in 1994, the South African government has frequently enlisted private sector support in delivering public goods, such as crime prevention, provision of health care and local government capacity-building (Business for SA, 2021; Business Leadership SA, 2021; National Business Initiative, 2021). Simultaneously, the business sector has often faced governmental criticism for perceived reluctance to support policies aimed at rectifying the economic legacies of apartheid.

Apartheid in the South African context was a legally enforced system of racial segregation and discrimination implemented by the minority white National Party government from 1948 to 1994. It divided society into racial categories – primarily "white," "black," "coloured," and "Indian" – and systematically marginalised non-white

populations. Under apartheid, the white minority controlled political and economic power, while non-whites faced restricted rights, forced removals, limited access to education and healthcare, and exclusion from meaningful political participation. The system was dismantled in 1994 with South Africa's first democratic elections, thus marking the end of institutionalised racial segregation.

As a newly industrialised, developing country, South Africa boasts the second-largest economy in Africa and ranks 35th globally (UNDP, 2018). Despite these economic strengths, the nation continues to grapple with structural unemployment, high poverty rates, and entrenched inequality (Sulla & Zikhali, 2018; Van Wyk et al., 2004). These challenges permeate the business sector. For instance, senior leadership in corporate South Africa still reflects outdated social divisions, with white males predominating in the top 40 companies on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange despite comprising less than 1% of the population (BASA, 2020). Anti-business rhetoric is, therefore, still a common tactic employed by political actors, and the country is classified as a "flawed democracy" (Centre for Risk Analysis, 2019), with corruption closely tied to political party financing (Zondo, 2022).

In summary, South Africa's multifaceted political, economic, and social landscape provides a distinctive and meaningful context for this research, promising insights that may contribute to the understanding and development of the theory of political behaviour within complex and regulated organisations.

2.2 South Africa's political economy and business-government relations

Since the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, relations between business and government in South Africa have fluctuated between tension and rapprochement (Parsons & Parry, 2018; Spicer, 2016). The establishment of the Republic of South Africa in 1948, marked by South Africa's departure from the Commonwealth, introduced a new era in corporate political activity. During apartheid, a complex and often adversarial relationship developed between much of the business community and the government, with apartheid-era ministers cautioning businesses to avoid political engagement (Parsons & Parry, 2018). Some corporations adopted quiet diplomacy to voice their concerns about the oppressive regime, but overall, businesses benefited economically under apartheid (Parsons & Parry, 2018; Spicer, 2016). Their alleged complicity in supporting apartheid was examined in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's

business sector hearings in 1997 (Business Sector Hearings Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1998; Cawe et al., 2016; Parsons & Parry, 2018).

Moreover, the role of business in South African politics has long been scrutinised and remains contested (Chipkin et al., 2018; Parsons & Parry, 2018). Despite the transition to democracy in 1994, the economy remains divided along racial lines, with the majority of the country's population having political power but lacking equivalent economic influence (Parsons & Parry, 2018). The apartheid-era political economy systematically excluded the Black majority from economic participation (Barnard & Luiz, 2018). Despite post-1994 policy efforts aimed at restructuring the institutional landscape, these inequalities persist, reflecting the limited impact of business initiatives on broad economic transformation. While South Africa has operated as a constitutional democracy since 1994, it is still classified as a "flawed democracy" (Centre for Risk Analysis, 2019), facing high unemployment and poverty. Meanwhile, the business sector's role in the transition to democracy remains contentious, with some viewing its engagement as self-serving, intended to maintain existing economic structures (Chipkin et al., 2018).

South Africa's corporatist political economy includes institutionalised social dialogue among government, trade unions, organised business, and community organisations through the National Economic Development and Labour Council (Nedlac). Established in 1995, Nedlac provides a statutory platform for negotiation on economic and labour issues in response to the socio-economic challenges of the newly democratic South Africa. The Nedlac Act was one of the first legislative acts following the 1994 elections, formalising public and stakeholder participation in policymaking. Since then, the business community has been active through over 50 different associations and organisations (Business Unity South Africa, 2019; Nedlac, 2020; Parsons & Parry, 2018). Despite these mechanisms, distrust between the ANC-led government and the corporate sector has been a recurrent theme (Spicer, 2016; Chipkin et al., 2018). Business leaders who openly criticised government policies have faced strong rebukes from senior political officials, including former President Thabo Mbeki (Spicer, 2016). Conversely, the corporate sector has been criticised for its passive response to economic regulation and concerns over corruption (Mathekga & Malala, 2016; Parsons & Parry, 2018).

Following democratisation, South Africa initially made notable strides in addressing apartheid's legacy. However, since 2012, the country has faced a new set of challenges, including widespread corruption across both private and public sectors and political interference in the operations of key state-owned enterprises (Barnard & Luiz, 2018; IMF, 2018). Corporate governance failures have affected the business environment and

undermined the private sector, which has struggled to retain talent as professionals are increasingly recruited to stabilise struggling state-owned companies. In 2019 alone, the CEOs of the Electricity Supply Commission (Eskom) – a state-owned entity established to generate, transmit, and distribute electricity in South Africa – the South African Post Office, and South African Airways left their positions, citing political interference and indecision as major factors (Prinsloo & Henderson, 2019). Public procurement processes, especially at Eskom, have been manipulated for private gain, leading to "gross mismanagement and rampant corruption" (The Economist, 2019; Zondo, 2022). This exploitation necessitated load shedding – controlled electricity cuts implemented to prevent system collapse – which has become a regular disruption in South Africa. Load shedding significantly impacts the economy, with daily GDP losses estimated between R358 million and R753 million (Business Tech, 2021; Business Tech, 2022). Eskom continues to pose a significant risk to the economy, yet a lack of successful prosecutions highlights the limitations of South African authorities in addressing such white-collar crime (Rossouw & Styan, 2019). However, there may be some green shoots. On 13 December 2024, Eskom reached a milestone of 261 conservative days without loadshedding, resulting in year-on-year diesel savings of ZAR 16.4 billion (Business Day, 2024).

2.3 Structure and dynamics of South Africa's banking industry

The South African banking industry plays a pivotal role in the country's economy and is characterised by a blend of sophistication, resilience, and structural challenges. It is inherently dualistic, with advanced banking services coexisting alongside initiatives to expand access to unbanked and underbanked populations. The industry has evolved significantly over the decades, shaped by regulatory reforms, economic fluctuations, and the broader socio-political landscape of South Africa. This section provides an overview of the industry's structure, major players, regulatory framework, and emerging trends, highlighting its strategic importance within the financial services sector and its role in supporting economic development.

According to Fitch Solutions (2020), South Africa has 37 registered banks: 13 locally controlled, four mutual banks, five foreign controlled, and 15 branches of foreign banks. Approximately 70 other foreign banks are represented by subsidiaries, joint ventures, or representative offices (Fitch Solutions, 2020). The South African banking system is regarded as one of the best in the world, and major local banks are highly regarded by

rating agencies such as Moody's, Standard and Poor, as well as Fitch (Research and Markets, 2021). However, the industry is dominated by a few large, well-established banks, often referred to as the "Big Four": Standard Bank, Absa, FirstRand, and Nedbank. These institutions collectively hold a substantial market share in terms of total assets, deposits, and loans (Fitch Solutions, 2020). Alongside these financial institutions are several smaller yet significant banks, including Capitec – which has made inroads into the market with a focus on low-cost banking for individuals – and African Bank, known for its consumer lending focus. The structure of the banking sector in South Africa is considered relatively concentrated, with the largest banks accounting for approximately 85% of the market (Fitch Solutions, 2020). This concentration provides stability and resilience to the sector but also presents challenges in terms of competition and innovation. Despite this concentration, the industry is undergoing a period of significant transformation, driven by digitalisation, fintech innovations, shifts in consumer behaviour and the COVID-19 pandemic, which pushed consumers and businesses toward digital channels. As a result, smaller banks and digital challengers have been gaining momentum with the emergence of digital-only banks such as TymeBank and Bank Zero, which leverage technology to provide accessible, cost-effective banking services.

Moreover, environmental, social, and governance considerations have gained prominence within the industry. South African banks are increasingly integrating environmental, social and governance elements into their lending and investment decisions, thereby responding to pressure from stakeholders and aligning with global sustainability trends. The transition toward a low-carbon economy and the management of climate-related financial risks are particularly critical for banks, given the contribution and reliance on coal and other carbon-intensive industries to the South African economy.

Despite its strengths, the South African banking industry faces several challenges. Economic volatility, high levels of retrenchments, muted economic growth, and socio-political uncertainties pose risks to the sector's stability. The legacy of apartheid continues to shape economic disparities, which in turn affects the banking sector's ability to extend credit and financial services to a broader segment of the population. Non-performing loans and credit impairments remain areas of concern, particularly in periods of economic downturn and high-interest rate environments. Additionally, the industry's image was tarnished by a scandal at VBS Mutual Bank in which senior bank leaders allegedly engaged in corrupt activities with political leaders (Mantshantsha, 2018). Following a corruption investigation, the former VBS Mutual Bank Chairperson was sentenced to 15 years in jail for theft, fraud, money laundering and racketeering that

culminated in the collapse of the bank (Chibelushi, 2024). This exemplifies the difficulty of separating South Africa's long-term political, economic, financial, and operational challenges (Van Wyk et al., 2004) from its business context. It also demonstrates the challenges senior leaders face in navigating both internal and external political pressures.

From a regulatory perspective, the South African Reserve Bank serves as the central regulatory authority tasked with overseeing the stability and integrity of the financial system. Its mandate includes ensuring the soundness of the banking system, promoting economic growth, and maintaining price stability. In addition, the Prudential Authority and the Financial Sector Conduct Authority were established under the Financial Sector Regulation Act (2017) to enhance regulatory oversight and consumer protection. This "Twin Peaks" model of regulation aims to address both prudential risks and market conduct, reflecting a shift toward a more comprehensive regulatory framework. The regulatory environment has also seen a focus on financial inclusion, with initiatives aimed at increasing access to banking services for marginalised communities. The Financial Sector Charter, established in 2004, is a notable example, setting targets for banks to extend financial services to low-income and rural populations. These efforts are aligned with broader government policies to reduce inequality and promote economic transformation, though challenges remain in achieving substantial progress in these areas.

Turning to upper echelon executives of South African banks, it should be noted that South Africa's senior banking leaders are among the most highly paid executives in the country (Business Tech, 2018). The top six executives – typically, the chief executive, chief financial officer, chief operations officer, chief executives of segments/business units (retail, commercial, corporate and investment, as well as wealth and investments) – of the six largest banks in the country together earn over R210 million per year: fixed (25%), with a 75% variable or performance bonus (BASA, 2020). Given the country's income inequality – one of the highest globally (AFD, 2018; IMF, 2018; World Bank, 2019) – it is hardly surprising that these executives have come under pressure: especially from organised labour unions. Moreover, because banking executives' pay is linked to company performance, they need the cooperation of other employees to achieve their deliverables and secure their performance bonuses. This inevitably necessitates political behaviour, and it is not inconceivable that personal interests can sometimes conflict with organisational interests.

This study sought to understand how senior banking leaders define the boundaries of political behaviour to safeguard organisational success. The inquiry focused on upper echelon leaders from 13 locally controlled South African banks, selected from retail, commercial, corporate and investment banking segments. However, the sample was biased towards the top four large, locally controlled banks (Bank A, Bank B, Bank C, and Bank D), which together account for around 70% of total South African banking sector assets (Fitch Solutions, 2020). The senior leaders shared rich and deep insights which should prove valuable to other financial services organisations and South African businesses in general.

Indeed, the above conditions – sustained socio-economic disparity creating competition for resources; apartheid's legacy for trust dynamics and transformation pressures; and "flawed democracy" that may have a bearing on perceptions of governance – are themselves a unique crucible for political behaviour within South African organisations. These pressures would most probably manifest themselves through certain political techniques like alliance building along demographic lines, intense competition for limited executive posts, and navigation through ethical dilemmas regarding transformation goals against shareholder value, among others. Thus, the study context provides an even stronger basis for identifying the limits of politically observed behaviour in the senior leadership of banks subject to financial regulation.

2.4 Conclusion

The South African banking industry is a dynamic and integral component of the nation's financial system, characterised by stability and ongoing transformation. While it faces significant challenges related to economic inequality, regulatory demands, and competitive pressures, the sector's adaptability and focus on innovation provide a foundation for future growth. As digitalisation continues to reshape the landscape and new players enter the market, the industry's ability to navigate these changes will be crucial for its continued contribution to South Africa's economic development. Therefore, as this chapter has described, the South African context provides fertile ground to explore the boundary conditions of political behaviour of senior leaders of regulated banking organisations. By so doing, it further deepens existing knowledge of the factors that influence the dual nature of such behaviour.

The socio-economic and regulatory context in South Africa adds complexity to the leadership dynamics within its banking sector, making it a rich environment for studying

political behaviour. Persistent inequalities, shaped by historical legacies, require senior leaders to address economic inclusion while simultaneously meeting strict regulatory requirements and driving innovation. This interplay of competing priorities often forces leaders to engage in political behaviours to balance organisational goals with external demands. While sometimes constructive in aligning divergent interests, such behaviours also risk crossing into conflict or inefficiency, emphasising the need to understand their boundaries and implications within this unique context.

Furthermore, the rapid digital transformation and heightened competition within the South African banking industry present additional challenges for senior leadership. The emergence of fintech disruptors and the push toward digital banking necessitate strategic agility and decision-making under uncertainty. In this evolving landscape, political behaviour becomes an important tool for negotiating power dynamics, fostering collaboration, and driving strategic change. Examining how senior leaders in South African banks navigate the boundaries of political behaviour will contribute to the broader discourse on organisational leadership and provide valuable insights into managing complexity in highly regulated and competitive industries.

Chapter 3: Literature review

3.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews extant literature on the political behaviour of upper echelon executives, and the intersection with strategic decision-making within the context of the complex and regulated South African banking industry. Despite recent research on political behaviour and its relationship to related constructs like strategic management, scholars suggest that more attention should be given to how senior leaders define political behaviour: particularly its *boundaries* (Elbanna, 2018; Elbanna et al., 2017; Shepherd et al., 2020). Therefore, I start this literature review by establishing upper echelons theory (Bromiley & Rau, 2016; Hambrick & Mason, 1984) as a theoretical framework for the research. I then explore how the theory relates to the political behaviour of top management teams, and how it shapes organisational outcomes – financial and non-financial. Finally, I summarise the gaps in knowledge that currently exist, and show how this study seeks to deepen understanding: specifically on the duality of political behaviour in such contexts. Figure 3.1 provides the literature review roadmap for this chapter.

Figure 3.1: Literature review roadmap

Source: Author's own.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

3.2.1 Theory of upper echelons

The theory of upper echelons asserts that the outcomes of an organisation are, to some extent, determined by the characteristics of its leaders (Bromiley & Rau, 2016; Hambrick & Mason, 1984). Essentially, an organisation's results echo its executive leaders' values and cognitive bases (Elbanna, 2018; Hambrick & Mason, 1984). Hambrick (2007, p.334) succinctly captures the essence of upper echelons theory, contending that it is the "executives' experiences, values, and personalities [that] greatly influence their interpretations of the situations they face, and, in turn, affect their choices. These choices, in turn, influence organisational performance".

Various scholars have explored the nexus between effective leadership and organisational performance. For example, Randeree and Al Youha (2009) define performance as an organisation's ability to implement strategies to achieve institutional objectives. In other words, performance reflects the extent to which an organisation has succeeded, over a specific period, in meeting its goals, objectives, outputs, and targets (Cho & Dansereau, 2010; Tomal & Jones, 2015). Organisational performance is also shaped by management's cognitive competencies in strategy formulation and implementation, as well as by the level of collaboration among leaders working as a team to accomplish organisational goals (Almatrooshi et al., 2016). Khatri and Ng (2000) further argue that strategic management is a critical component of organisational performance because it encompasses both financial and non-financial indicators and positions a firm relative to its competitors within the same industry. Such thinking highlights the multifaceted nature of performance, linking it to leadership effectiveness, team dynamics, and strategic execution.

The ability of senior leaders to manage both the internal and external environments of an organisation is another critical determinant of organisational performance (Olalekan & Nwadiuru, 2021). The dynamic and competitive nature of these environments significantly influences decision-making processes, which ultimately affect organisational outcomes. Internal environmental factors, such as organisational goals, strengths, and weaknesses, alongside external factors – conceptualised in Porter's Five Forces (1979) – including regulatory pressures, economic conditions, and emerging technologies, play a similarly pivotal role in shaping performance (Provan, 1989).

Organisational performance further encompasses variables such as profitability (Alhawamdeh & Alsmairat, 2019), business model effectiveness, operational efficiency,

and measurable outcomes (Deshpande et al., 1997). Additionally, leaders' social and emotional intelligence has been identified as a key contributor to effective and efficient organisational performance (Boyatzis & Ratti, 2009). Related attributes, such as innovation, motivation, communication, and the ability to delegate authority, have also been shown to be essential for achieving optimal performance (Boyatzis & Ratti, 2009; Olalekan & Nwadiuru, 2021). Such leadership capabilities enable organisations to navigate complex environments and align strategic decision-making with desired outcomes.

Figure 3.2 below shows how upper echelons theory explains the connection between organisational outcome and managerial characteristics.

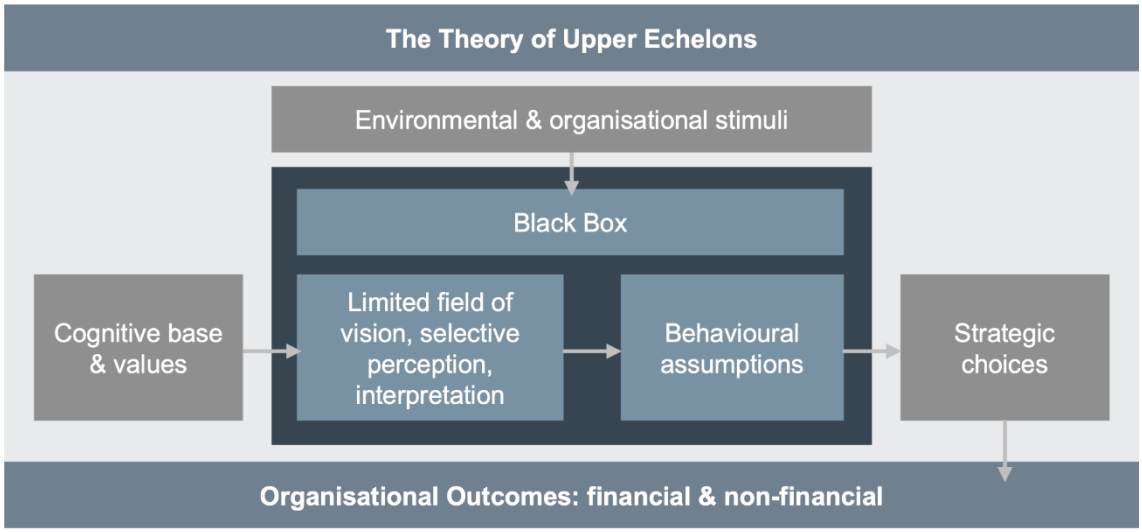

Figure 3.2: Theory of upper echelons

Source: Adapted from Hambrick & Mason, 1984.

Upper echelons theory has developed considerably since Hambrick and Mason (1984) published their seminal article. From the early 2000s, the focus widened to embrace values, reasonings, leaders' perceptions, influence on the strategic decision-making process, and resultant performance outcomes (Carpenter et al., 2004). Scholars such as Carter and Greer (2013) subsequently confirmed that an organisation's strategic decisions and outcomes are influenced by leaders' observable characteristics, namely: functional background, education, tenure, experience, and age. Over the last decade, research has revealed how social, behavioural, and cognitive factors influence top leaders' strategic choices and performance levels (Bromiley & Rau, 2016). Scholars have subsequently refined these factors to include: reasoning and behaviour (Harrison et al., 2019; Lovelace et al., 2018); substitute activities (Gupta et al., 2017; Wright &

Nyberg, 2017); the effect of compensation structures (Benischke et al., 2019); and the drivers and consequences of strategic leader indecision (Motloung & Lew, 2023)**.**

Neely et al. (2020) maintain that upper echelons theory is as relevant to strategic management today as it was three decades ago because top executives still make decisions and engage in behaviours that affect their organisations' health, wealth, and welfare (Bonelli, 2014; Neely et al., 2020; Quigley & Hambrick, 2015; Samimi et al., 2019). Moreover, they do so in a rapidly changing world, influenced by technology, politics, and economics (Hambrick & Quigley, 2014). These dynamics greatly affect the role of senior leaders – and their overall organisational impact (Wright & Nyberg, 2017). According to Hambrick, one of the pioneers of upper echelon theory, this offers researchers opportunities to counsel top leaders on how to navigate the ever-evolving business environment in which they operate (Hambrick, 2019).

However, upper echelon theory continues to be refined and critiqued. A recent review (see Table 3.1) reveals five major areas of concern and knowledge gaps, especially around the proverbial "black box" (Neely et al., 2020). The "black box" is a metaphorical term used to describe how the attributes and psychological predispositions (backgrounds, experiences, personalities, values, and cognitive styles) of senior leaders influence their strategic choices, and consequently affect the performance and direction of the organisation. The review identified two **conceptually based critiques**: (1) inadequate exploration of the *cognitive* black box; and (2) inadequate exploration of the *relational* black box. In addition, three **methodologically based critiques** were identified: (1) inadequate systematic evaluation of contingencies; (2) incongruence of constructs and measures; and (3) the need for more research on endogeneity. ***This study engages with the second conceptual critique by expanding current knowledge of the relational black box.***

Table 3.1: Summary of upper echelons theory review

CLASSIFICATION OF CRITIQUES	KEY OUTCOMES OF THE REVIEW	RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH
Conceptual critiques		
1. Inadequate exploration of the cognitive black box	• Progressive understanding of the cognitive processes of top management teams • However, limited attention given to the specific aspects	Additional focus is required on: • Conceptual integrations with other established lines of research (for example, leadership, sense-making) • Leveraging new methodological and

CLASSIFICATION OF CRITIQUES	KEY OUTCOMES OF THE REVIEW	RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH
	of the information filtering process	technological tools used in management and related literature
2. Inadequate exploration of the relational black box	Noteworthy progress in top management team-CEO relational research: • Evidence of a strong research stream focused on the relationship between CEOs and the top management team • Despite interest in the CEO-board relationship, little is known about specific relational dynamics within the top management team • Disparate evidence of the examination of the relationships between CEOs and other more distal stakeholders (media, investors, employees)	More systematic focus needed on specific leadership interfaces: • More direct examination of the behaviours and interactions of upper echelon leaders—***strategic interfaces*** • A further conceptual and empirical examination needed of the relational mechanisms between more distal stakeholders and top executives
3. Inadequate systematic evaluation of contingencies	Substantial progress has been made in multiple areas: • Moderators: Greater use of global samples, institutional context, top management teams and diversity characteristics	Broaden the narrative of this critique: • Shift focus to understanding where and how key contingency factors influence the upper echelons theory process
Methodological critiques		
4. (In)congruence of constructs and measures	Significant progress made: • The decline in the use of demographic proxies • Greater use of conceptual and empirical justification for proxy variables • Increased use of self-report measures	Establish new expectations and standards for measurement: • Focus on better understanding how distal a proxy/unobtrusive variable is from the focal variable • Focus on conceptually and empirically justifying measures and expanding the use of other reports

CLASSIFICATION OF CRITIQUES	KEY OUTCOMES OF THE REVIEW	RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH
		• Generate a stockpile of validated measures to increase consistency across studies
5. Need for increased attention to endogeneity	Progress made, but variability in treatment: • Continued reliance on archival designs susceptible to endogeneity • Evidence of wide-scale acknowledgement of the need to address endogeneity • Variance in the quality and appropriateness of empirical treatments	More consistency in addressing endogeneity is needed: • At a minimum, research must: ○ Identify why endogeneity is (not) a threat ○ Explain source, test for evidence, and explain the treatment of the threat ○ Be transparent in reporting results • Make greater use of alternative research designs (field experiments, mixed methods)

Source: Adapted from Neely et al., 2020 and Samimi et al., 2019.

3.2.2 Addressing gaps in upper echelon theory

As stated earlier, this study enhances current understanding of the *relational black box*: the second conceptual critique set out in Table 3.1. The literature shows that inadequate attention has been paid to leaders, members of executive teams, and stakeholder interactions in terms of the critical roles they play in "opening" the relational black box (Neely et al., 2020). Moreover, scholars have repeatedly called for deeper examination of the behavioural manifestations of executive orientation: specifically, how such behaviour influences the relationships, motivations, and actions of the various stakeholders who ultimately shape organisational outcomes (Felin et al., 2015; Klotz et al., 2014; Wowak et al., 2017).

By providing insights into how upper echelon leaders in complex organisations define and interpret the boundaries of political behaviour – as well as its inherent duality – this study addresses the knowledge gaps identified by Neely et al. (2020) and explores the relational black box in the context of executives operating at the organisation's apex (see Table 3.1). In the past decade, literature reveals significant progress in refining

understanding of relational dynamics among top management team members and CEOs (Bromiley & Rau, 2016; Simsek et al., 2018). However, this study expands current knowledge by focusing on the relational dynamics *between* upper echelon executives who head *different* business units in complex and regulated organisations.

To summarise: relational and behavioural dynamics are complex and multifaceted – not least for those at the apex of their organisations. These dynamics are shaped by both internal and external environmental factors, which influence decision-making and organisational outcomes. The need for a more relational approach in researching strategic leadership is well-justified (Menz, 2012; Neely et al., 2020), as relational black box dynamics remain underexplored: particularly in terms of the behavioural manifestations of senior managers. In support of this position, scholars such as Georgakakis et al. (2019) and Simsek et al. (2018) emphasise the importance of examining "strategic interfaces": the "social situations in which the attributes, aspirations, and/or activities of strategic leaders and/or salient stakeholders come into contact with and influence each other" (Simsek et al., 2018, p. 283). This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge by focusing on how senior leaders define and navigate the boundaries of political behaviour, thereby offering deeper insights into the duality of political behaviour and its impact on relational dynamics within complex and regulated banking organisations in South Africa. Furthermore, the inquiry addresses significant gaps in understanding how strategic leaders influence, and are influenced by, the relational ecosystems in which they operate.

In short, the purpose of this research was to open the “relational black box” of political conduct as perceived by senior leaders going through the ritual of coalition formation and negotiating competing interests with the top management team, through the use of influence tactics in strategic interfaces, and by building trust in political alliances.

3.3 The landscape of political behaviour in organisations

3.3.1 Political behaviour in the domain of organisational politics and strategic decision-making

Classically, organisational politics consists of three subtly different constructs: perceptions of organisational politics; political behaviour; and political skill (Ferris & Hochwarter, 2011; Ferris et al., 2017; Ferris & Treadway, 2012). Two closely related concepts are "political will" and "reputation" – both of which are growing areas of study

(Blom-Hansen & Finke, 2020; Ferris et al., 2019). Literature on organisational politics probably dates back to Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince*, first published in the 16th century and translated into English in 1903 (Byrne, 1917; Ferris & Treadway, 2012; Lasswell, 1936). The last three decades have seen several significant reviews (Ferris et al., 2018; Ferris & Hochwarter, 2011) which have further identified trends, and critically examined foundational principles, causes, and inconsistencies (Chang et al., 2009; Lux et al., 2008). Entrenched in many of these summaries are critiques of research design and recommendations for addressing existing conceptual and methodological deficiencies (Ferris et al., 2019; Shepherd et al., 2020). Scholars have also investigated the constructs of organisational politics. For example, Mintzberg (1985) identified organisations as "political arenas", while Pfeffer (1981) supported the view that politics is a constructive and legitimate element of organisational realities. However, many knowledge gaps remain – especially in the realm of theory (Cullen et al., 2018). This study, therefore, builds a theoretical understanding of how upper echelon leaders in complex organisations define the boundaries of political behaviour. By so doing, it deepens the existing understanding of this multifaceted phenomenon.

Within an organisational setting, political behaviour relates to how various parties seek to influence the process and outcomes of strategic decisions. This influence can be exerted through the power such parties hold, or the actions they take to assert their interests. Central to this is *how* and *why* specific individuals, teams, groups, or organisations attempt to shape strategic decisions to align with their objectives. Prior research has shown that such decisions often emerge from a process where decision-makers with differing goals and interests form alliances to achieve their aims. Ultimately, the preferences of the most powerful individuals or groups tend to prevail (Stone, 2002). Organisations, by nature, consist of diverse groups with varying motivations for engaging in decision-making processes (Hickson et al., 1986). In the main, these groups frequently employ political tactics to influence decisions in ways that align with their interests. Therefore, the extent to which strategic decision-making becomes politicised depends on the interplay of competing interests, conflicts, and power dynamics among the actors involved. This perspective underscores the inherent complexity and contestation within decision-making processes, driven by the differing priorities and influence of stakeholders.

Scholars have taken two different approaches when researching strategic decision-making (Child et al., 2010; Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1988; Elbanna & Child, 2007a). The first approach examines how individuals use political behaviour to influence decision-making for the sake of their own self-interest (Dean & Sharfman, 1996; Eisenhardt &

Bourgeois, 1988; Elbanna & Child, 2007b); the relationship between political dynamics and organisational outcomes, such as the effectiveness of decision-making and the organisation's results (Dean & Sharfman, 1996; Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1988; Elbanna & Child, 2007a); and politics within organisational units – as well as how such units acquire power in order to influence decision-making (Pfeffer & Moore, 1980; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1974). Such research further focuses on three aspects of political behaviour within an organisation: the use of political tactics, the main antecedents of political behaviour, and the relationship between political behaviour and decision outcomes. The second research approach is broader in perspective. It explores all kinds of influence on decision processes, whether exercised by internal actors – organisational members and organisational units – or external parties such as government agencies, unions, and customers (Hickson et al., 1986; Mintzberg et al., 1976; Pettigrew, 1973).

My research inquiry encompasses both approaches, with a bias towards the perspective outlined in the first. However, in order to explore the effects of contextual factors influencing political behaviour, I also drew upon the influential work of Rajagopalan et al. (1993), which contributed to Elbanna's subsequent (2014) comprehensive review of strategic decision-making. These scholars identify context in terms of four distinct yet interrelated dimensions: the nature of the decision, the characteristics of the organisation, the organisational environment, and the attributes of the decision-making team. These contextual elements, which significantly shape political behaviour in decision-making processes, are discussed in detail in Section 3.5.

The following sections investigate the definition, social construction, and inherent dualism – the "bright" and "dark" sides – of political behaviour, in relation to the central research question and its associated sub-questions.

3.3.2 Defining political behaviour

Extant literature contends that people not only give life to an organisation but are also its most important resources (Smit & Cronje, 1992). Various elements can affect this relationship – including political behaviour, which influences both leaders and subordinates during decision-making processes often beset by contesting agendas (Smit & Cronje, 1992). However, although many scholars recognise that political behaviour may be both positive and negative, it has largely been perceived through a pejorative lens. For example, one definition views it as a series of: "intentional acts from a broad repertoire that may include influence tactics, self-presentation, impression management,

voice and helping behaviour to manage (create, maintain, modify or abandon) the shared meanings of organisational situations to produce desired outcomes that would otherwise be unfeasible" (Kapoutsis & Thanos, 2016, p. 41). This definition implies that political behaviour is essentially egotistic and selfish. Conversely, Elbanna (2018, p. 9) offers a more neutral definition, describing political behaviour as "intentional forms of behaviour associated with the use of power and influence in order to serve the own interests of decision-makers or those of the organisation". This implies that such behaviour can either be destructive or constructive and is, therefore, inherently dualistic.

Dayan et al. (2011) connected the origins of political behaviour in strategic decision-making to political science literature of the 1950s. They argued that conflicting goals and interests of employees influence decision-making; and political decisions manifest where the preferences of the most potent dominate over those of the less powerful (Dayan et al., 2011). Given the ubiquity of political behaviour in strategic decision-making, a greater understanding of this phenomenon can, therefore, help strategic leaders to manage negative manifestations.

For other scholars, political behaviour is grounded in the self-serving behaviour of the individual. In this sense, organisations are "political arenas" in which motivated and capable individuals enact self-serving behaviour (Mintzberg, 1983, 1985). Likewise, political behaviour reflects inherently non-sanctioned and self-serving actions that potentially lead to adverse outcomes for the organisation (Mitchell et al., 2018). However, not all non-sanctioned behaviour is harmful, nor is all self-serving behaviour dysfunctional (Ferris & Judge, 1991; Zanzi & O'Neill, 2001). For example, environments permeated with threats often trigger self-serving behaviour as a protective mechanism (Lafrenière et al., 2016).

Mintzberg (1983, p. 172) identifies the divisive and illegitimate dimensions of political behaviour as "individual or group behaviour that is informal, ostensibly parochial, typically divisive, and above all, in the technical sense, illegitimate – sanctioned neither by formal authority, accepted ideology, nor certified experience politics". Conversely, Ferris et al. (2002, p. 127) offer a more positive view, describing political behaviour as "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 organisational objectives". Ultimately, although scholars disagree about the intrinsic nature of political behaviour, there has been some consensus that it is a non-sanctioned activity within organisational settings (Farrell & Petersen, 1982; Gandz & Murray, 1980; Mintzberg,

1983; Schein, 1977). Furthermore, researchers agree that political behaviour is a normal and sometimes essential element of functioning (Zanzi & O'Neill, 2001).

However, no definition yet exists that captures the *complexity* of political action (Ferris et al., 2019). Instead, conceptualisations have varied over time and across studies (Kidron & Vinarski-Peretz, 2018; Lampaki & Papadakis, 2018). In essence, the boundaries between political and non-political behaviour remain blurred. *Therefore, in seeking to enhance understanding of the complex issue of the duality of political behaviour, this study explores how executive leaders themselves define the limits of their own political behaviours*. To clarify, my research inquiry is guided by Elbanna's (2018) neutral definition of political behaviour, in that it views political behaviour as intentional actions involving the use of power and influence to serve either the self-interests of decision-makers or the interests of the organisation. This definition accentuates the dual nature of political behaviour, and affirms that it can be either constructive or destructive.

3.3.3 The social construction of political behaviour

Political behaviour has to be recognised as a socially constructed phenomenon (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Buchanan, 2016). Otherwise, everything that senior leaders say and do becomes synonymous with politics, manipulation, and control – which diminishes the value of these concepts (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In other words, a leader's behaviour can be seen as political if that is how observers and colleagues interpret it (Buchanan, 2016). Research in this field is dominated by a positivist social science approach, rather than a constructivist perspective. The positivist approach is based on an agreed definition which is then used to develop measures of politics – and serves to distinguish between political and non-political actions (Buchanan, 2016; Drory & Romm, 1988, 1990; Ferris et al., 2002). However, as discussed earlier, no consensus on such a definition has yet emerged.

Most related publications begin with a lengthy discussion of the definition problem, then rely chiefly on five "definition features" – influence, self-interest, damage, backstage and conflict – to build their argument. However, organisational behaviour is rarely so tidy (Buchanan, 2016; Drory & Romm, 1988, 1990; Ferris et al., 2002), as the following summary reveals.

Firstly, regarding **influence,** evidence shows that the repertoire of political behaviour *also* extends to other strategies, notably: blocking, undermining, delegitimating, delaying, subverting, sidelining, and out-manoeuvring others; preventing them from acting in

specific ways; closing off access to information and decision-making forums; and constraining their options so as to advance one's own ideas (Buchanan, 2016; Drory & Romm, 1988, 1990; Ferris et al., 2002).

Secondly, **self-interest** has conventionally been seen as the most dominant defining feature of political behaviour – and the most negative (Burns, 1961). However, it is easy to identify situations in which self-interested acts can actually *benefit* the organisation (Buchanan, 2016). Individual fortunes are often bound closely to those of the organisation, and it is unrealistic to claim that all self-interested acts must, by definition, run counter to organisational and wider social goals (Buchanan, 2016; Drory & Romm, 1988, 1990; Ferris et al., 2002). Thus, acting in pursuit of one's perceived self-interest may not always benefit oneself at all; while acting for what *appears* to be the common good may not always benefit others (Buchanan, 2016; Drory & Romm, 1988). What constitutes self-interest is therefore a matter of interpretation. This aspect of political behaviour is often presented in "either/or" terms: either one is acting for the organisation or for oneself (Buchanan, 2016; Drory & Romm, 1988, 1990; Ferris et al., 2002). However, literature also asserts that both sets of goals may be pursued simultaneously. Moreover, self-interested acts may be necessary to preserve a senior leader's credibility, "voice", and reputation. While short-term actions may not contribute to the organisation directly, the strengthening of a leader's reputation may sustain or strengthen their ability to shape events positively in future (Buchanan, 2016; Drory & Romm, 1988, 1990; Ferris et al., 2002).

Turning to **damage**, while it is true that political tactics can certainly *cause* damage, it would be wrong to label all political behaviour as inherently damaging (Buchanan, 2016; Drory & Romm, 1988, 1990; Ferris et al., 2002). Indeed, emerging literature increasingly focuses on the dynamics of *positive* political behaviour: how such behaviour can deliver personal and organisational benefits (Elbanna, 2018; Elbanna et al., 2017; Shepherd et al., 2020).

The fourth "definition feature" is **backstage** political behaviour. This can take the form of private meetings or conversations that take place in hidden locations (Buchanan, 2016). However, it should be recognised that organisational politics also has a very *public* face – as represented by openly-held meetings and openly-accessible correspondence and reports. Therefore, the extent of backstage political behaviour is best determined by intent, purpose, and motivation (Buchanan, 2016; Drory & Romm, 1988, 1990; Ferris et al., 2002).

The final feature is **conflict.** Most commentators agree that consensus on goals, and how to achieve them, obviates the need for political tactics (Buchanan, 2016; Shepherd et al., 2020). Therefore, political behaviour usually arises when parties are locked in disagreement and unlikely to reach a satisfactory compromise (Buchanan, 2016; Shepherd et al., 2020). Conversely, political tactics can also be used to orchestrate collaboration and thereby *avoid* conflict. Consensus can therefore be achieved through influence, agenda manipulation, and other strategies (Elbanna, 2018; Elbanna et al., 2017; Shepherd et al., 2020). However, such consensus is not invariably binding – and today's agreement can turn into tomorrow's dispute (Elbanna, 2018; Shepherd et al., 2020). Furthermore, while conflict is widely regarded as undesirable, it can often be positive: forcing issues into the open, stimulating wider debate, and leading to improved decision-making (Elbanna, 2018; Elbanna et al., 2017; Shepherd et al., 2020). This evokes the saying: "When two people always agree, one of them is unnecessary" (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006, p. 31).

Extant literature recognises that political behaviour can appear in various ways during strategic decision-making processes. This is represented in Table 3.2 and is subsequently discussed in detail.

Table 3.2: Appearances of political behaviour in strategic decision-making

Elements of the appearances of political behaviour	
• Use of power and exercise of influence, influence tactics, impression management, voice • Others: Formation of a coalition, controlling of the meeting agenda, using outside expert consultants, negotiation or bargaining, manipulation and controlling of crucial information	Elbanna, 2018; Elbanna & Child, 2007b; Elbanna et al., 2017; Kipnis & Schmidt, 1988; Li et al., 2014; Liden & Mitchell, 1988; Papadakis & Barwise, 1997; Pfeffer, 1981

Source: Author's own.

3.3.4 Using power and exercising influence

Scholars agree that political behaviour is displayed through power and the exercise of influence (Child, Elbanna & Rodrigues, 2010), engendered by competing interests (Elbanna, 2018; Elbanna et al., 2017; Pfeffer, 1981; Shepherd et al., 2020). Earlier literature asserts that such behaviour springs from incompatible personal ambitions

within different functional or hierarchical positions (Allison, 1971). In short, political behaviour is unavoidable and – if left unchecked – endangers the quality of strategic decision-making. It is therefore crucial to cultivate the ability of top leaders to manage this reality effectively (Shepherd et al., 2020).

3.3.5 Other appearances of political behaviour

Researchers have identified three other key appearances of political behaviour, namely: *influence tactics* (Kipnis & Schmidt, 1988; Yukl & Falbe, 1990); *impression management* (Liden & Mitchell, 1988); and *voice* (Burris, 2012; Ferris et al., 2019).

- **Influence tactics:** despite some disagreement over types of influence tactics (Kipnis & Schmidt, 1988; Yukl & Tracey, 1992), literature has extensively examined which tactics are most effective, and which boundary conditions affect success: for example, frequency of influence; direction of influence; power distance between enactor and receiver; and motivation (Dean & Sharfman, 1993a; Elbanna & Child, 2007b; Lee et al., 2017).

- **Impression management:** this refers to any political action intended to influence perception (Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984). It is manifested by ingratiation, self-promotion, exemplification, supplication, and intimidation (Jones & Pittman, 1982); and can be studied from either a tactical-strategic or assertive-defensive perspective (Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984). "Tactical-strategic" relates to short-term or long-term processes; "assertive-defensive" evokes behaviour that responds proactively or reactively to situational contingencies. More recent research cautions that poorly executed tactics can harm a leader's reputation (Bolino et al., 2016).

- **Voice:** this is a type of organisational citizenship behaviour by which employees suggest positive solutions for perceived problems (Li et al., 2014; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). Voice is essential for strengthening shared meaning in organisational contexts (Ferris et al., 2019) as it enables the communication of personal opinions and concerns (Burris, 2012). However, unlike many other forms of organisational citizenship behaviour, employee voice is essentially informal in nature (Ferris et al., 2019).

Other displays of political behaviour include: the *formation of coalitions* (Bacharach & Lawler, 1980; Child & Tsai, 2005; Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1988; Elbanna & Child,

2007b); *controlling of the agenda* (Eisenhardt & Zbaracki, 1992; Elbanna & Child, 2007a; Papadakis & Barwise, 1997); *dictating of time for communications and key meetings* (Elbanna & Child, 2007a; Wilson et al., 1986; March & Olsen, 1983); *using consultants* (Dean & Sharfman, 1993b; Mumford & Pettigrew, 1975; Papadakis & Barwise, 1997; Pfeffer, 1992); *negotiation or bargaining* (Bacharach & Lawler, 1980; Elbanna & Child, 2007a; Nutt, 1998; Papadakis et al., 1998); and *manipulation and controlling of crucial information* (Cyert & March, 1963; Eisenhardt & Zbaracki, 1992; Elbanna & Child, 2007b; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1974).

To conclude this description of the social construct of political behaviour it is important to recognise that while factors like influence, self-interest, manipulation, and backstage behaviours inform such behaviour, it is not always simple to clarify the distinction between what is political and what is not (Buchanan, 2016; Drory & Romm, 1988, 1990; Ferris et al., 2002). Therefore, by focusing on executive leaders of complex organisations, and exploring how *they* define and delineate the boundary conditions of their political behaviours, this study sought to deepen understanding of this complex phenomenon – namely, the duality of political behaviour.

Moreover, it is evident that political behaviour in strategic decision-making has various manifestations (as shown in Table 3.2), and includes actions such as the use of power and influence, coalition formation, impression management, and controlling critical resources or information. These behaviours are often shaped by competing interests and individual ambitions (Elbanna, 2018; Elbanna & Child, 2007b; Pfeffer, 1981). While some political actions – such as influence tactics and voice – can foster collaboration and innovative problem-solving, others – such as manipulation and agenda control – can undermine decision quality and organisational trust (Elbanna & Child, 2007b; Pfeffer, 1981). Understanding the spectrum of political behaviour is therefore essential for leaders who aim to balance personal, team, and organisational objectives effectively.

The South African banking industry offers a unique context for examining these dynamics. As a highly regulated, competitive, and innovation-driven sector, it demands that leaders navigate complex decision-making environments. The interplay of diverse stakeholder interests, regulatory frameworks, and economic inequalities further amplifies the necessity of political behaviour in ensuring strategic outcomes. Thus, by examining how senior executives in this setting define and manage the boundaries of their political behaviour, the study advances theoretical knowledge of the duality of political behaviour and provides practical insights into navigating power dynamics and influence in organisational contexts.

In view of these complexities, the aim of this inquiry was to counterpoise senior leaders' subjective interpretation and labelling of behaviours as “political behaviour” within their own context, rather than imposing one static, objective definition of political behaviour onto their experience.

3.3.6 The dark and bright sides of political behaviour

Traditionally, organisational politics was seen negatively. Political tactics were described as "unsavoury" (Calhoon, 1969) and a "social disease" (Chanlat, 1997); equated with "evil, corruption, and blasphemy" (Keen, 1981). Ferris and King (1991) further depicted such politics as "a walk on the dark side", while Gerard Egan's seminal book (1994) explored "the shadow side" of management. As Furnham (2018, pp. 5-6) commented:

> "The negative view is clear. Politics cause distrust, conflict, and lowered productivity. People do not openly share and are guarded. They spend too much time and energy ingratiating themselves to the ingroup and trying to work the system. The ingroup is as concerned with increasing or holding onto power as steering the company. Office politics is dysfunctional and worse, dishonest."

However, a growing body of research accentuates the *positive* aspects ("bright side") of political behaviour (Landells & Albrecht, 2017). For example, Mangham (1979, p. 16) notes that reasonable people often disagree and can therefore be expected "to fight for what they are convinced is right and, perhaps more significantly, against that which they are convinced is wrong". Frost and Egri (1991) further argue that political struggles may help to resolve competing perspectives and interests in times of organisational change. Butcher and Clarke (2003) add that debate sharpens the quality of decisions, while Harrison (1987) asserts that political behaviour can counter the use of illegitimate tactics.

Hardy (1996) goes further, arguing that political forces generate energy and creativity. Just as a tennis player will "lift their game" when faced with a worthy opponent, such forces can encourage organisational change agents to gather more evidence, develop more compelling arguments, consider the views of critics, and form supportive coalitions to support their initiatives. In short, there is growing acceptance that political behaviour, given positive intentions, can promote beneficial organisational outcomes (Maslyn et al., 2017). In this regard, DeLuca (1999, p. 41) developed an "interest grid" (shown below in Table 3.3.) to explore the key question: *whose interests are being served?*

Table 3.3: "Whose interests are being served?" grid

SELF-INTEREST	**HIGH**	Dysfunctional politics (Manipulative)	Functional politics (Savvy)
	LOW	Self-destructive politics (Career suicide)	Self-sacrifice (Martyrdom)
		LOW	**HIGH**
		ORGANISATIONAL INTEREST	

Source: DeLuca, 1999, p.4.

The grid shows that political behaviour which prioritises the interest of the organisation at the expense of the individual is self-sacrificial (leading to "martyrdom"). Conversely, political behaviour becomes optimally functional ("savvy") when it serves *both* sets of interests. For DeLuca (1999, p. 112), being politically savvy means "ethically building a critical mass of support for an idea you care about". Politically savvy leaders recognise the *power* of politics. They do not have a "political blind spot" but work behind the scenes and make an impact by being active, ethical players – what DeLuca calls "play makers". Savvy leaders also recognise the importance of safeguarding their self-interest, in order to protect their credibility and thereby maintain their value to the organisation.

A decade later, Gotsis and Kortezi (2010) advanced the notion that political behaviours may be used constructively. They identified a range of *positive* political tactics that could enhance an organisation's objectives, namely: persuasion, reference to super-ordinate goals, networking, and developing coalitions. They concluded that constructive political behaviour should encourage partnerships, collaboration, empowerment, connectedness, excellence, and participation, and should be based on values such as equity, integrity, honesty, kindness, humility, forgiveness, and trustworthiness (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010). However, they also identified a set of *negative* tactics – such as manipulation, control of information, and intimidation – that cause harm when used to promote self-interest.

3.3.7 Mitigating harmful political behaviour in organisations

Most extensive extant literature views political behaviour negatively (Ferris & Treadway, 2012; Hochwarter, 2012). However, in the past decade, scholars have explored some positive, mitigating aspects of political behaviour by upper echelon strategic decision-makers (Elbanna, 2018; Elbanna et al., 2017; Shepherd et al., 2020). Shepherd et al. (2020) found three ways in which the harmful effects of political behaviour on strategic decision-making can be mitigated: cognitive consensus within top management; power decentralisation; and behavioural integration.

Regarding ***cognitive consensus*****,** Shepherd et al. (2020) argue that political behaviour is less likely to trigger unproductive relational conflict where there is a higher level of alignment among upper echelon leaders. Top executives tend to be more open – and less retaliatory and aggressive in their interactions with others – because their seniority gives them a sense of security (Cannon-Bowers & Salas, 2001; Shepherd et al., 2020). ***Power decentralisation*** relates to how evenly CEOs distribute power and responsibility for strategic decision-making among top management team members (Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1996; Shepherd et al., 2020). Shepherd et al. (2020) contend that information elaboration is strengthened when power is not concentrated in the hands of an individual, or a small group of executives. Essentially, decentralisation enables top managers to neutralise potentially harmful political behaviour and thereby prevent minority preferences and biases from unduly influencing strategic choices (Dean & Sharfman, 1996; Shepherd et al., 2020). Lastly, ***behavioural integration*** relates to a collaborative culture within top management teams which promotes tactful communication, and de-escalates harmful relationship conflict (Shepherd et al., 2020). Thus, behavioural integration endows top management teams with a high degree of psychological safety. It also fosters free information exchange, decisive dispute resolution, and the creation of shared understandings of strategic issues (Lubatkin et al., 2006): all of which lessen the potentially pernicious effects of political behaviour on strategic decision quality.

To summarise, the adverse impact of political behaviour on strategic decision quality is mitigated when top management teams welcome shared decision-making, close collaboration, and the free exchange of information and ideas (Dean & Sharfman, 1996; Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1996; Lubatkin et al., 2006; Shepherd et al., 2020; Spears, 1996). Also, Shepherd et al. (2020) suggest that CEOs with a collectivist orientation foster group harmony and more readily emphasise the group's goals over personal interests. In this regard, carefully crafted engagement sessions – for example, strategic retreats and off-site discussions – build strong relationships among executives

(Shepherd et al., 2020), equipping them with skills to use politics more judiciously so that they can respond constructively to the political behaviour of others in decision-making processes (Elbanna, 2018; Shepherd et al., 2020).

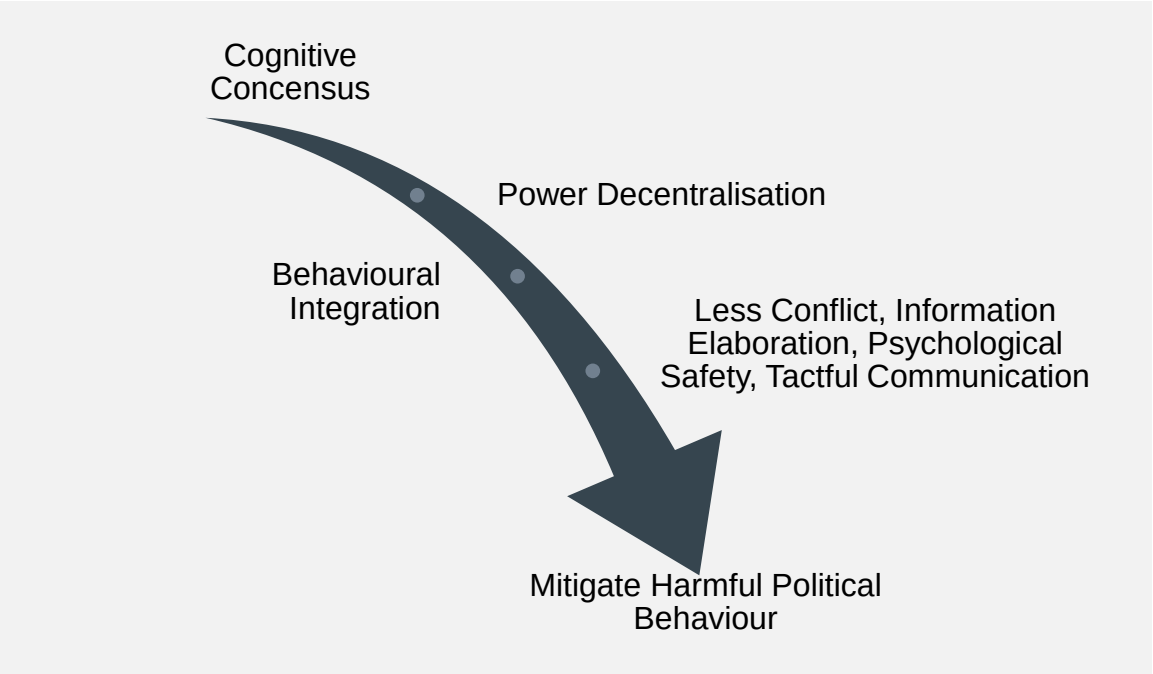

Figure 3.3: Mitigating harmful political behaviour in organisations

Source: Author's own.

3.4 The delineation of senior leaders in organisations

3.4.1 The role and responsibilities of senior leaders

As stated earlier, this study defines senior leaders as being leaders *of* rather than *in* organisations (Boal & Hooijberg, 2000), whether they are CEOs, heads of business units, and/or the dominant coalition (Samimi et al., 2019). These senior leaders shape the results of their organisations according to the decisions they make (Georgakakis et al., 2019; Samimi et al., 2019). Executive leaders are charged with specific organisational roles and responsibilities (Mintzberg, 1997). Table 3.4 compares the functions of upper echelon leaders, as subsequently captured by Hitt et al. (2010) and Samimi et al. (2019). Table 3.4 also reveals the complex, multifaceted roles of such leaders and their overall impact on an organisation's outcomes (Hitt et al., 2010; Samimi et al., 2019). It classifies and compares the functions of senior leaders in terms of: strategic decision-making; human capital management; and operational efficiency and governance.

Table 3.4: Comparison of the functions of upper echelon leaders

Themes	Hitt et al. (2010)	Samimi et al. (2019)
Strategic decision-making	• Set and cascade a vision • Focus on innovation and develop new technologies • Develop core capabilities • Engage in valuable strategies	• Make strategic decisions • Manage conflicting demands • Engage external stakeholders
Resource allocation and management	• Ensure effective deployment use of resources including, capital, liquidity, and human capital • Create and embed a healthy organisational culture and behaviours	• Allocate efficiently company resources – capital and human resources • Perform human resource management • Motivate and influence employees
Operational efficiency and governance	• Develop and implement balanced controls • Engage in ethical practices	• Manage information flow • Oversee operations and administration • Manage social and ethical issues

Source: Adapted from Hitt et al., 2010 and Samimi et al., 2019.

While Samimi et al. (2019) identified decision-making as a critical function of upper echelon leaders, Hitt et al. (2010) explored a range of related activities: setting and cascading a vision; focusing on innovation and developing new technologies; developing core capabilities; and engaging in valuable strategies. When combined, these activities implicitly equate to strategic decision-making. Gottfredson and Reina (2020) further emphasised the responsibility of senior leaders to create an enabling culture, so as to achieve success in a competitive environment. However, the literature also recognises that such leaders do not operate in a vacuum, but within an inherently political environment. Also, they make decisions and engage in behaviours that affect their organisations' health, wealth, and welfare – but they do so as flawed human beings (Bonelli, 2014; Neely et al., 2020; Quigley & Hambrick, 2015; Samimi et al., 2019). Consequently, the question of how they define and understand the boundaries of their political behaviour becomes crucial.

3.4.2 The junction of strategic decision-making and political behaviour

Decisions are integral to personal, professional, and organisational life. Broadly, decision-making involves formulating a judgment or selecting an option from two or more alternatives (Georgakakis et al., 2019; Samimi et al., 2019). As human beings, we make decisions continuously, often under the assumption that our choices are logical and rational, having considered the potential advantages and disadvantages of various outcomes (Olalekan & Nwadiuru, 2021). Indeed, a hallmark of effective leadership is the ability to make calculated, wise choices from a range of available options (Hitt et al., 2010; Olalekan & Nwadiuru, 2021; Samimi et al., 2019; Shepard et al., 2019).

In organisational contexts, decision-making is central to the functioning of both private and public entities, as well as profit and not-for-profit organisations (Elbanna & Child, 2007; Samimi et al., 2019; Shepard et al., 2019; Olalekan & Nwadiuru, 2021). Organisational success or failure often hinges on the quality of decisions made by its leaders, with the business world offering ample evidence of the consequences of both sound and poor decision-making (Bromiley & Rau, 2016; Elbanna & Child, 2007; Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Samimi et al., 2019). Consequently, it is crucial for leaders to develop the skills required for effective decision-making. A competent decision-maker chooses actions that maximise positive outcomes for all stakeholders by avoiding bias, evaluating alternatives thoroughly, and understanding the potential consequences of their choices (Olalekan & Nwadiuru, 2021). Rational decision-making, informed by research and critical evaluation, is therefore the cornerstone of leadership effectiveness (Olalekan & Nwadiuru, 2021).

Equally, strategy, as an analytical and rational positioning process, enables organisations to navigate challenges arising from competition, internationalisation, and evolving markets and technologies (Wilson, 2015). At the core of strategic management lies the critical task of selecting options that align with and fulfil the organisation's objectives (Georgakakis et al., 2019; Samimi et al., 2019; Shepard et al., 2019). In a global market where resources are universally accessible and many business operations exhibit convergence, the primary differentiator is the competitive advantage achieved through strategic decision-making aimed at maximising shareholder returns (CIMA, 2007). This dynamic has compelled organisations to leverage the opportunities presented by globalisation, ensuring their operations and decision-making processes are both effective and efficient. Such strategic agility allows organisations to adapt to changing environments and maintain a competitive edge in increasingly interconnected markets.

It follows that top-level management must predominantly bear the responsibility for **strategic decision-making**: a critical aspect of every organisation – whether for-profit or otherwise (Friedman et al., 2016; Samimi et al., 2019; Shepherd et al., 2020). This emphasis stems from the critical nexus between the decision-making process and organisational outcomes (Elbanna, 2018; Elbanna et al., 2017; Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Samimi et al., 2019; Shepherd et al., 2020; Olalekan & Nwadiuru, 2021). Strategic decisions are defined by Mintzberg et al. (1976, p. 246) as those that are "important, in terms of the actions taken, the resources committed, or the precedents set". Such decisions play a fundamental role in determining organisational success or failure (Dean & Sharfman, 1996; Elbanna & Child, 2007a; Walters & Bhuian, 2004).

As Wilson (2015) states, the core of strategy lies in decision-making. This involves analysing the environment, assessing organisational capabilities, and considering technological advancements to select a preferred course of action after evaluating possible alternatives. Strategic decisions, being fundamental to shaping or driving an organisation's actions, are difficult to reverse once made and have a profound impact on organisational performance (Elbanna, 2018; Elbanna et al., 2017; Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Samimi et al., 2019; Shepherd et al., 2020). They influence both short-term success and long-term sustainability, making them critical to the organisation's trajectory (Elbanna, 2018; Rudd, 2020; Shepherd et al., 2020).

Other scholars, such as Weihrich et al. (2010), describe strategic decision-making as a conscious process involving the selection of alternatives to achieve a desired future state. This perspective highlights the importance of decision-makers being in the right frame of mind: fully aware of the prevailing problems, and actively responding by choosing solutions from a list of viable alternatives. This intentional and informed approach underscores the responsibility of leaders in ensuring that strategic decisions are deliberate and effective in addressing organisational challenges.

Strategic decisions, according to Mintzberg et al. (1976), determine the flow and magnitude of all business activities required to achieve organisational objectives. They differ from administrative and operational decisions because they deal with organisational activities that are very uncertain and risk oriented. As such, they require significant resources, set precedents, and generate a series of lesser decisions (Mintzberg et al., 1976). Ivan and Ivana (2012) further suggest that strategic decision-making involves high stake problems, whose solutions have long-term implications for the organisation, especially in terms of organisational growth, prosperity, and survival. Accordingly, strategic decision-making strengthens organisational performance indices

by enabling an organisation to maintain its competitive edge, align internal operations with the external environment and survive threats and challenges. However, this is not without jeopardy. A poor decision can lead to the fall of an organisation, resulting in corporate embarrassment and large economic losses for stakeholders or even bankruptcy (Mueller et al., 2007).

In addition, extant literature suggests that strategic decision-making can be understood either as an **act** – in which one alternative is chosen from a set of options (Griffin, 2016) – or a **process**, which involves recognising and defining the nature of a decision situation, identifying viable alternatives, selecting the best course of action, implementing the decision, and evaluating its outcomes (Griffin, 2016; Olalekan & Nwadiuru, 2021). Such a process aims to move an organisation forward by creating visions of future possibilities and mobilising the necessary resources (Griffin, 2016; McShane & Glinow, 2015; Olalekan & Nwadiuru, 2021).

Strategic decision-making occurs in different contexts: certainty, uncertainty, or risk. Moreover, the process does not merely address immediate challenges but also prepares for the future by ensuring the availability and effective utilisation of resources to achieve long-term goals (Griffin, 2016; McShane & Glinow, 2015). As these authors emphasise, strategic decision-making is incomplete until the decision is translated into action. This aligns with Drucker's (1967) assertion that no decision is truly made until the leader commits to directives and allocates resources. Moving toward a desired outcome is therefore the essence of strategic decision-making, making it central to organisational planning and future-focused leadership.

Williams (2017) further incorporates the concept of rationality, defining strategic decision-making as a systematic approach whereby managers identify problems, evaluate alternatives, and select optimal solutions that yield maximum benefits for their organisations. This approach emphasises the decision-maker's ability to derive maximum satisfaction from their choice after a thorough analysis of available options. In this context, strategic decision-making becomes a conscious, rational process of addressing deviations from an organisation's desired position, selecting the best course of action, allocating resources, and aiming to satisfy stakeholders while achieving organisational objectives (Williams, 2017). In short, strategic decision-making encompasses actions before and after the actual choice is made, and involves identifying opportunities and resolving problems within an organisation (Daft, 2016; Griffin, 2016).

Robbins et al. (2018) support the idea that effective strategic decision-making is inherently a process, aligning with the earlier perspectives of Daft (2016) and Griffin

(2016). They argue that decision-making is not simply about choosing from a set of alternatives but involves a step-by-step, systematic approach that is objective, rational, and grounded in analysis. Leaders engaging in rational decision-making must fully understand the options available for achieving organisational goals, while considering the prevailing circumstances and constraints (Robbins et al., 2018; Weihrich et al., 2010). Additionally, they must possess the necessary information and analytical capabilities to evaluate alternatives while keeping the organisation's goals in focus (Robbins et al., 2018; Weihrich et al., 2010). Thus, the strategic decision-making process, according to Hart and Banbury (1994) may be one of the most important organisational sources of competitive advantage.

Other scholars have identified additional elements in strategic decision-making by senior leaders: notably, the ability to use logic and information; deal with unstructured and complex problems; and articulate desired organisational outcomes. According to McShane et al. (2015), upper echelon leaders who make the most effective decisions use logic and available information to identify and select the alternative with the greatest value. This insight highlights the importance of rationality, systematic thinking, and comprehensive evaluation in strategic decision-making, especially in complex organisational contexts. Moreover, Olalekan and Nwadiuru (2021), further assert that strategic decision-making is very useful when dealing with poorly structured problems for which there are no clear solution procedures.

Scholars agree that decision-making is one of the essential duties of every leader at every level of an organisation (Jankelova, 2017; Nooraie, 2012; Shepherd et al., 2020), and plays an important role in determining what an organisation must do, or is able to do. Increasing effectiveness in decision-making is therefore central to maximising organisational performance. According to Robbins and Coulter (2018), strategic decision-making is actually the essence of management as it defines what leaders strive to achieve – or aim to avoid. This perspective underscores the significance of decision-making, as leaders are ultimately judged by the outcomes of their decisions. Such evaluations are based on the effectiveness of decisions in meeting specific objectives, and the efficiency with which limited resources are utilised (Robbins & Coulter, 2018). Every decision yields an outcome, which can be either positive or negative. A positive outcome indicates that the decision successfully aligned with the desired organisational objectives, advancing progress toward the intended goals. Conversely, a negative outcome requires leaders to revisit the decision-making process to diagnose errors, understand what went wrong, and refine strategies accordingly. This iterative process

highlights the high stakes of strategic decision-making and its direct impact on organisational success or failure (Robbins & Coulter, 2018).

Nickols (2015) emphasises that strategic decisions are often fluid, ambiguous, uncertain and complex. They shape organisational direction, and have financial and non-financial implications (Georgakakis et al., 2019; Samimi et al., 2019). Additionally, such decisions often have profound implications for people in key organisational roles, because they can affect morale, motivation and commitment to the company (Hitt et al., 2010; Samimi et al., 2019). Finally, strategic decisions are characterised by considerable risk because their outcomes are very uncertain (Georgakakis et al., 2019; Samimi et al., 2019; Shepherd et al., 2020). According to Vasilescu (2011), it is impractical to assume that individuals can – or indeed should – always make rational decisions.

Ideally, decision-making involves identifying and comparing options to determine the optimal outcome for a given set of circumstances. However, in practice, the unpredictable behaviour of individuals means that people often deviate from rationality. Instead, they rely on mental shortcuts, such as intuition, previous experience, or common sense, to simplify and accelerate the decision-making process. This aligns with Simon's (1956) concept of bounded rationality, which posits that individual rationality is constrained by the limited information available at the time of decision-making, the finite capacity of the human mind to process and evaluate situations, and the restricted time available to reach decisions. Under these constraints, decision-makers frequently settle for satisfying (*good enough*) decisions rather than maximising *optimal* ones (Nwoye et al., 2017). This perspective highlights the reality that human decision-making is often shaped by practical limitations, rather than perfect rationality.

To summarise, extant literature asserts the following principles. Firstly, strategic decision-making essentially involves selecting the best options; a process of execution; and using the learnings to inform future decisions (Bromiley & Rau, 2016; Elbanna & Child, 2007; Friedman et al., 2016; Georgakakis et al., 2019; Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Samimi et al., 2019; Olalekan & Nwadiuru, 2021). Decision-making is also viewed as the process of selecting appropriate alternatives, so as to benefit from an opportunity or tackle a specific issue (Daft, 2016; Griffin, 2016; Kauppila et al., 2018; Williams, 2017). Furthermore, literature posits that management decision-making is a holistic process shaped by environmental influences like management's perspective, the external and internal environments of the organisation, and other decision-specific characteristics. Systematic analysis is therefore crucial to successful implementation and optimal performance.

Moreover, current literature on strategic decision-making and political behaviour advances other key theories. Firstly, that strategic decision-making is inherently political (Elbanna, 2018; Elbanna et al., 2017; Shepherd et al., 2020), often kindling political action due to its innate complexity, significance, and uncertainty (Elbanna, 2018). Somehow, this also stimulates dialogue around a range of suitable options and solutions and provides a power base for groups with superior knowledge or skills to navigate the complexity (Elbanna, 2018; Kauppila et al., 2018). Secondly, the inevitable limitation of organisational resources often leads to political behaviour (Pettigrew, 1973). Indeed, Friedman et al. (2016) noted that such behaviour is a frequent feature of decision-making and involves large-scale innovation, performance management, mergers and acquisitions, market entry or exit, and corporate restructuring. Such decisions often threaten prevailing forms of resource-sharing (Pettigrew, 1973). Thus, the strategic decision-making process is highly political (Hickson et al., 2003) because it is characterised by the interchange of interests, and power struggles between individuals and teams. Consequently, alliances engage in political tactics to influence decisions that affect their positions and interests in the organisation. In addition, in strategic decision-making the stakes are high, with much to gain or lose materially and reputationally (Elbanna, 2018; Samimi et al., 2019). Indeed, Wilson et al. (1986) argue that decision-making is influenced by a specified set of business units or executives – the so-called "decision-set". This grouping employs political tactics to exert influence over the decision-making process to ensure that it encompasses their objectives (Wilson et al., 1986).

To conclude, the literature shows that political behaviour within upper echelon leaders is inescapable. If left unchecked, it can be detrimental to strategic decision-making. Scholars have therefore called for a deeper exploration of how senior leaders, charged with responsibility for such strategic decision-making (Samimi et al., 2019), define and make sense of political boundaries whilst safeguarding the interests of their organisations (Shepherd et al., 2020). The research inquiry seeks to address this key question.

3.5 Contextual variables influencing political behaviour in strategic decision-making

Strategic decisions are often formulated and implemented in environments where leaders have limited power and control (Elbanna et al., 2013; Papadakis et al., 2010). This can hinder progress, unless the broader context is considered (Elbanna et al., 2013;

Papadakis et al., 2010). In strategic management literature, context is commonly defined as *a set of characteristics or a multiplicity of factors* (Elbanna & Child, 2007b; Papadakis et al., 2010). As such, it is inherently multifaceted and dynamic: a complex interplay of many diverse elements.

Context includes top management characteristics; decision-specific attributes (magnitude of impact, decision uncertainty, and crisis or threat conditions); external environmental factors (dynamism and hostility); and organisational characteristics – that is, past performance and size (Dayan et al., 2012; Papadakis et al., 1998), (Table 3.5). In a comprehensive review of the strategic decision-making context, Elbanna et al. (2014) confirmed the validity of these four groups of contextual factors. Thus, *top management* characteristics refer to the individual or collective traits of decision-makers and their interactions, while *decision-specific* attributes are unique to each situation. *Environmental factors* pertain to external elements, whereas *organisational characteristics* relate to internal factors. The following sections of this chapter delve into the four contextual variables, drawing from extant literature to provide a detailed exploration of their role in shaping strategic decision-making processes.

Table 3.5: Summary of contextual variables shaping political behaviour

Contextual factors	Description	Scholars
Top Management Team	• Dominant coalition of senior executives responsible for shaping an organisation's overall direction • Multifaceted nature of demographic and psychological characteristics in influencing strategic decision-making processes	Dayan et al., 2011; Selznick, 1949; Pettigrew, 1973; Mumford & Pettigrew, 1975; Shepherd & Rudd, 2014; Elbanna, 2018; Lewin & Stephens, 1994; Miller et al., 1988
Decision-specific	• Decision importance, uncertainty, and motives • The nature of the decision itself	Dayan et al., 2011; Porter & Allen, 1981; Dayan & Elbanna, 2011; Elbanna & Child, 2007b; Dean & Sharfman, 1996; Elbanna, 2010; Shepherd & Rudd, 2014
Environmental	• Locus of power, need for power, risk-seeking propensity, lack of personal power	Ferris et al., 1994; Porter & Allen, 1981
Organisational	• Three key organisational variables—performance, size, and type of ownership	Dayan et al., 2012; Papadakis et al., 1998

Source: Author's own.

3.5.1 Top management characteristics

As mentioned, strategic decision-making involves the interplay of various contextual variables, with particular emphasis on the characteristics of the top management team: often described as the dominant coalition of senior executives responsible for an organisation's overall direction (Shepherd & Rudd, 2014). While external and internal environments impose constraints on decision processes, the top management team significantly shapes organisational outcomes (Child, 1997).

Research on top management teams has largely focused on demographic and psychological characteristics of leaders within the teams. **Demographic traits** such as gender, age, tenure, and education have been extensively studied in relation to strategic decision-making (Elbanna, 2018). Some research examines the impact of individual demographic traits on decision-making, while others analyse top management team demographic diversity – defined as the degree of heterogeneity within the team (Finkelstein et al., 2009). Greater demographic diversity is often associated with broader perspectives and the use of diverse information sources during decision-making (Dutton & Duncan, 1987). However, while diversity can enhance performance (Wiersema & Bantel, 1992), it may also increase communication challenges, conflict, and political behaviour (Amason, 1996; Elbanna, 2009).

The literature provides mixed findings regarding the influence of specific demographic variables. For instance, age appears to shape decision-making processes as older leaders tend to adopt risk-averse and incremental approaches, while younger leaders prefer more analytical and rational methods (Brouthers et al., 1998; Wiersema & Bantel, 1992). However, some studies suggest that tenure may have a greater impact than age (Bantel, 1993). Similarly, tenure – whether in the organisation, position, or industry – has been linked to organisational performance, innovation, and risk-taking (Finkelstein et al., 2009; Henderson et al., 2006). While long-tenured top management teams often employ rational decision-making approaches, tenure diversity has been associated with increased team effectiveness (Greening & Johnson, 1996; Schwenk, 1988). Literature further asserts that a leader's educational background plays an essential role in shaping their decision-making processes. Leaders with higher education levels tend to favour rational approaches and leverage analytical techniques to assess options (Francioni et al., 2015). Additionally, specialisation in education influences leaders' strategic perspectives, as seen in studies linking the educational background of chief financial officers to the strategic directions of their firms (Alkaraan & Northcott, 2006; Wiersema & Bantel, 1992).

In addition to demographic traits, **psychological traits** such as locus of control, need for achievement, and risk-taking propensity have also been examined. Locus of control reflects an individual's belief in their ability to influence outcomes. Internally oriented leaders who perceive greater control over events are associated with decentralised decision-making and innovative organisational practices (Miller & Toulouse, 1986). However, evidence regarding the link between locus of control and rationality in decision-making is inconsistent (Cheng et al., 2010). The need for achievement, characterised by a desire for success and control, is associated with structured and rational decision-making approaches (Lewin & Stephens, 1994; Miller et al., 1988). However, conflicting evidence suggests that this trait may also foster political behaviour in decision processes (Francioni et al., 2015). Leaders' risk-taking propensity has been found to influence decision speed and organisational performance, particularly in stable environments (Gilley et al., 2002). However, its effects vary across contexts, with some studies reporting positive associations with rational and political behaviours in strategic decisions (Francioni et al., 2015).

Other traits, such as polychronicity – the ability to manage multiple tasks simultaneously – and transformational leadership, have been linked to organisational performance and the comprehensiveness of decision-making processes (Gu et al., 2012; Souitaris & Maestro, 2010). Additionally, relational leadership has been shown to foster team learning during strategic decision-making (Carmeli et al., 2012). Broader contextual factors, such as hostility, firm size, and ownership type, have also been found to exert a stronger influence on strategic decisions than individual top management team characteristics (Papadakis & Barwise, 2002). While demographic traits often predict decision-making tendencies, psychological characteristics such as meta-cognition, cognitive complexity, and shared mental models are increasingly recognised as influential (Bailey & Peck, 2013; Mitchell et al., 2011).

To conclude, the literature highlights the multifaceted nature of demographic and psychological characteristics in influencing strategic decision-making processes. While demographic variables such as age, tenure, and education provide measurable insights, their effects are often context-dependent and subject to interaction with broader organisational and environmental factors. Similarly, psychological traits introduce complexity, with mixed evidence regarding their direct influence on decision outcomes. Collectively, these findings underscore the importance of taking a holistic approach when understanding how top management team characteristics shape strategic decision-making.

3.5.2 Decision-specific characteristics

Strategic decision-making processes are significantly influenced by decision-specific characteristics, which have received growing attention in the literature. These characteristics – decision importance, uncertainty, and motive – are recognised for their profound impact on how decisions are made, often exceeding the influence of external and internal environments (Dayan & Elbanna, 2011; Elbanna & Child, 2007b). However, the examination of individual decision characteristics in isolation has been critiqued for limiting the depth of knowledge regarding their collective effects on decision processes (Elbanna, 2014). Moreover, the role of decision-specific factors has received limited empirical attention, making it challenging to generalise findings (Hutzschenreuter & Kleindienst, 2006). The following section reviews extant literature on decision importance, decision uncertainty, and decision motive.

3.5.2.1 Decision importance

Some strategic decisions are obviously more important than others (Dean & Sharfman, 1996; Elbanna, 2010; Shepherd & Rudd, 2014). Highly significant decisions are generally associated with the collection of extensive information and the application of structured, quantitative techniques to ensure rationality in decision-making (Elbanna, 2014; Judge & Miller, 1991). However, empirical evidence on this phenomenon is inconclusive. While some studies confirm a positive correlation between decision importance and rationality (Nooraie, 2008), others find no such association (Dean & Sharfman, 1993a; Elbanna & Fadol, 2016). These inconsistencies underscore the need for further research to clarify how decision importance influences strategic decision-making processes (Elbanna, 2014).

3.5.2.2 Decision uncertainty

Decision uncertainty, characterised by a lack of clear information and ambiguous relationships between means and ends, significantly impacts strategic decision processes (Dayan & Elbanna, 2011; Sharfman & Dean, 1997a; 1997b). Uncertainty often necessitates greater reliance on intuition and political behaviour as decision-makers navigate complex, novel problems (Elbanna & Fadol, 2016; Lyles, 1981). However, its relationship with rationality is debated. On the one hand, high uncertainty encourages the use of rational processes to reduce ambiguity through comprehensive information

gathering and analysis (Bourgeois & Eisenhardt, 1988). Conversely, uncertainty can constrain rationality by overwhelming decision-makers and increasing their reliance on heuristic or intuitive approaches (Butler, 2002). Moreover, uncertainty often fosters political behaviour, as decision-makers prioritise personal interests when managing ambiguous group dynamics (Boon & Holmes, 1991; Lyles, 1981). Thus, the literature suggests a clear relationship between decision uncertainty and political behaviour in strategic decision-making.

3.5.2.3 Decision motive

The motive behind a strategic decision, whether driven by opportunity or crisis, also shapes decision-making processes (Hurt & Abebe, 2015; Jackson & Dutton, 1988; Shepherd & Rudd, 2014). Crisis-driven decisions often require comprehensive approaches and involve high levels of cognitive and affective conflict, leading to political behaviour (Dutton, 1986; Hermann, 1963). Conversely, opportunity-driven decisions tend to limit political behaviour as they focus on exploiting positive outcomes (Elbanna, 2014). Decision motives have been shown to influence those who participate in the process, the methods employed, and the allocation of resources (Ashmos et al., 1997; Dutton et al., 1990). However, the literature provides mixed evidence regarding the generalisability of these findings (Elbanna & Child, 2007a).

In addition to the three characteristics described above, Dayan et al. (2011) identified the **nature of the decision** itself as another significant contextual feature. Earlier, Pettigrew (1973) argued that because strategic decision-making involves the allocation of scarce resources, it tends to generate political behaviour from those who compete for such resources. Porter and Allen (1981) subsequently asserted that the intensity of organisational politicking in these circumstances is determined by how *important* a decision is for the organisation's survival. Ambiguity and uncertainty also open the door for political behaviour (Ferris et al., 1994). Where decision-making parameters are blurred, competing proposals and options proliferate (Lyles, 1981). Moreover, as March and Simon (1958) noted, where there is a paucity of clear information, decisions tend to be based on selective perception.

In conclusion, decision-specific characteristics, such as importance, uncertainty, and motive, are critical determinants of strategic decision-making processes. While decision importance generally enhances rationality, uncertainty often increases reliance on political behaviour and intuition (Elbanna & Fadol, 2016; Lyles, 1981). Similarly, crisis-driven motives amplify political behaviour, whereas opportunity-driven motives reduce it

(Hurt & Abebe, 2015; Jackson & Dutton, 1988; Shepherd & Rudd, 2014). However, current empirical evidence in this field is inconclusive; hence, there is a need for more nuanced research to explore these relationships and their implications for strategic decision-making in diverse contexts (Elbanna & Child, 2007a). Understanding the interplay between these characteristics and political behaviour is essential for enhancing the effectiveness and transparency of strategic decisions.

3.5.3 Environmental determinism

Research shows that the external environment and its characteristics play a significant role in shaping strategic decision processes and outcomes (Elbanna, 2014; Elbanna & Gherib, 2012; Hitt & Tyler, 1991; Le Bris et al., 2019). Related literature can be broadly categorised into two streams. The first examines environmental attributes as determinants of strategic decision process dimensions (Elbanna, 2015; Meissner & Wulf, 2014), while the second investigates their moderating role in the relationship between decision processes and outcomes (Mueller et al., 2007; Walters & Bhuian, 2004).

Before proceeding further, it is important to address the concept of external control. This refers to the influence of external actors – such as government agencies, creditors, trade unions, clients, and suppliers – on organisational activities, including strategic decision-making (Child et al., 2010). According to this concept, organisations are open systems interacting with external stakeholders (Hickson et al., 1986). Under external scrutiny, decision-makers may attempt to validate their processes by emphasising rationality (Langley, 1989). However, Dean and Sharfman (1993a) find that external control can reduce rationality, possibly due to constraints on managerial discretion, which limit an organisation's ability to align with institutional logic (Greenwood et al., 2010).

Environmental uncertainty is another key element in this regard. Sparked by a combination of dynamism and complexity, it poses significant challenges to decision-making (Fredrickson & Laquinto, 1989; Le Bris et al., 2019). Environmental uncertainty has received substantial attention in the literature, with contingency theory highlighting its moderating role in the relationship between decision processes and firm performance. However, findings remain inconsistent. Some studies argue that rationality leads to better outcomes in stable environments (Fredrickson, 1984; Hough & White, 2003), while others suggest the opposite (Glick et al., 1993; Priem et al., 1995). Additionally, some scholars maintain that uncertainty does not significantly moderate performance outcomes (Dayan et al., 2012; Elbanna et al., 2013). Differences in operationalisation,

conceptualisation, and methodological approaches may explain these inconsistencies (Boyd et al., 2013).

Uncertainty has also been linked to increased political behaviour, as decision-makers, faced with ambiguous tasks, may resort to political tactics to defend personal interests (Elbanna, 2014). Furthermore, distinctions among types of uncertainty, such as technological or demand uncertainty, have been noted (Atuahene-Gima & Li, 2004). In short, the interplay between awareness, predictability, and adaptation under uncertain conditions may determine whether decision processes become more or less rational (Klingebiel & De Meyer, 2013).

Environmental munificence is another important concept, reflecting the availability of resources in an organisation's external environment (Dess & Beard, 1984). Hostile environments, characterised by intense competition and limited resources, restrict managerial discretion and heighten the need for comprehensive processes (Covin and Slevin, 1989; Khandwalla, 1973). As such, they restrict managerial freedom and limit organisational performance (Baum and Wally, 2003). While some studies suggest that hostility fosters consensus among decision-makers when addressing external threats (Stein, 1981), others argue that it actually discourages political behaviour due to the high stakes involved (Dess, 1987). In such settings, unjustified political behaviour could jeopardise decision-makers positions or the organisation's survival, suggesting a potential negative relationship between hostility and political behaviour (Child et al., 2010). Interestingly, Selznick (1949) states that leaders attempt to influence external stakeholders (for example, government agencies) when they rely on them for resources and approvals. However, this invariably strengthens the power of external parties to shape strategic decision-making (Dayan et al., 2011). Such stakeholders can withdraw their support or oppose decisions through legal, regulatory, or orchestrated public pressure (Pettigrew, 1973). This, in turn, places upper echelon leaders at a strategic disadvantage (Berry, 1997).

In summary, environmental characteristics, including uncertainty, dynamism, and hostility, play a crucial role in shaping strategic decision-making processes and outcomes. While uncertainty often increases political behaviour, dynamism and hostility have complex and context-dependent effects (Elbanna, 2014). Hostility, in particular, may constrain political behaviour due to the high risks involved (Dess, 1987; Stein, 1981). These mixed findings highlight the importance of further empirical research to clarify the interplay between environmental characteristics and political behaviour in

strategic decision-making, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of organisational adaptability and performance in varying environmental contexts.

3.5.4 Organisational characteristics

Organisational characteristics significantly influence strategic decision processes, which then shape organisational outcomes (Romanelli & Tushman, 1986). Some scholars have examined the moderating effects of these factors on the relationship between strategic decision processes and outcomes. This section reviews three key organisational variables – performance, size, and type of ownership – which have been widely considered in the literature. These variables have been recognised for their theoretical significance in strategic decision-making reviews (Rajagopalan et al., 1993) and in organisational behavioural theory (Cyert & March, 1963). Notably, they also serve as proxies for other organisational factors, such as structural complexity and decentralisation (Hart & Banbury, 1994; Ketchen et al., 1996).

Firstly, the relationship between **organisational performance** and strategic decision processes has yielded mixed findings. Some studies suggest that poor performance increases the comprehensiveness of decision-making processes (Amason & Mooney, 2008), while others report the opposite (Papadakis et al., 1998). Additionally, Elbanna et al. (2013) find no relationship between past performance and intuition, whereas other studies report positive links between past performance and rationality, decision implementation quality, and participation (Ashmos et al., 1997; Elbanna et al., 2015; Francioni et al., 2015). These inconsistencies suggest that different aspects of performance may influence distinct dimensions of the decision process (Elbanna & Naguib, 2009; Elbanna et al., 2014). Moreover, the literature suggests that performance may moderate the effects of decision processes on outcomes, although this area remains mostly underexplored (Elbanna & Child, 2007a). Related research in performance feedback and aspiration-level theory may offer insights, emphasising the adaptive behaviour of decision-makers based on past performance (Gavetti et al., 2012). In terms of political behaviour, high past performance appears to reduce political activity within organisations. Indeed, positive performance creates favourable decision frames and fosters confidence among decision-makers, minimising conflicts and political debates over priorities (Bateman & Zeithaml, 1989; Dess, 1987; Papadakis, 1998).

Investigations into the relationship between **organisational size** and strategic decision processes have also produced mixed results. While larger firms are often associated

with rational and comprehensive approaches (Elbanna, 2010; Fredrickson & Iaquinto, 1989), smaller firms tend to rely on intuitive processes (Brouthers et al., 1998). Additionally, larger firms may experience less agreement among top management teams (Iaquinto & Fredrickson, 1997) and lower managerial involvement in decision-making (Duhaime & Baird, 1987). Some studies find no significant relationship between size and decision processes (Dean & Sharfman, 1993a). However, as firms grow, political behaviour within the organisation tends to increase. Larger organisations typically involve more individuals with competing interests, decentralised power structures, and complex decision-making processes, which can foster political activity (Sharfman et al., 2009; Papadakis & Barwise, 2002). Conversely, smaller firms with centralised power and streamlined communication display fewer political dynamics (Brouthers et al., 1998).

Ownership structure is another critical organisational characteristic influencing strategic decision processes. Studies indicate that ownership type – public versus private – affects multiple dimensions of decision-making (Papadakis et al., 1998). For instance, public organisations (as compared to private entities) may face greater external scrutiny, which can alter decision processes (Elbanna, 2012). However, empirical evidence remains sparse, and further research is necessary to establish robust and generalisable conclusions (Elbanna, 2014).

Pettigrew (1973) identified three organisational characteristics relevant to the politics of strategic decision-making: the hierarchical centralisation of power; the degree of horizontal differentiation; and the influence of occupational groups. It was found that the **hierarchical centralisation of power** may shift, according to changing conditions (Pettigrew, 1973). Overall, centralisation *reduces* the pervasive power of political behaviour, since it suppresses conflict (Pfeffer, 1981). However, in high-technology organisations where relevant knowledge is distributed among middle-level staff, centralised power can become dysfunctional. Political behaviour, therefore, emerges to counter or bypass it (Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1988). Regarding the **degree of horizontal differentiation**, Mumford and Pettigrew (1975) show that modern organisations are characterised by the proliferation of specialists. Moreover, the diversity of work-related cultures, values, and career interests within such groups increases the likelihood of rivalry and conflict (Pettigrew, 1973). Political behaviour is then used to influence strategic decisions. Finally, **occupational groups**, according to Pettigrew (1973), exert significant control in times of strategic contingency when events like plant failure, inappropriate purchase of expensive equipment, or failure in liquidity management threaten organisational wellbeing (Mumford & Pettigrew, 1975). When the competencies of such specialist groups are indispensable, they are able to influence

strategic decisions relating to their areas of expertise (Mumford & Pettigrew, 1975; Pettigrew, 1973). Crozier (1964) further highlighted the power of maintenance workers and technical engineers in this regard, suggesting that organisations should clarify procedures for dealing with contingencies in order to curtail any undue influence from such groups. Subsequently, Hickson et al. (1971) refined and formalised this idea.

In conclusion, it can be seen that organisational characteristics, such as performance, size, and ownership type, are critical factors influencing strategic decision processes. While high past performance and smaller firm size generally reduce political behaviour, larger organisations and varying ownership structures introduce complexity, often increasing the potential for political activity. These findings accentuate the need for additional empirical studies to address inconsistencies in the literature and enhance our understanding of how organisational factors shape both decision-making processes and outcomes.

3.5.5 Summary: contextual factors influencing strategic decision-making

The summary of scholarly perspectives on the four contextual factors influencing strategic decision-making is shared below. Firstly, research shows that **top management characteristics** significantly influence political behaviour in strategic decision-making by shaping how decisions are approached and executed. Demographic attributes such as age, tenure, and educational background, alongside psychological traits like risk-taking propensity and locus of control, affect both the likelihood and nature of political activity (Carpenter et al., 2004; Hambrick & Mason, 1984). For instance, diversity in top management teams can enhance decision-making by incorporating multiple perspectives but may also increase conflict and politicisation (Bantel & Jackson, 1989). Thus, while leaders' psychological traits can foster consensus or exacerbate tensions, the overall impact of these characteristics on political behaviour underscores the complexity of team dynamics and the importance of effective leadership in mitigating unnecessary political activity (Boal & Hooijberg, 2001).

Secondly, **decision-specific attributes**, such as magnitude of impact, decision uncertainty, and crisis or threat conditions, clearly play a critical role in driving political behaviour in strategic decisions. Highly impactful decisions tend to shift focus from individual agendas to organisational goals, thereby reducing political behaviour (Dean & Sharfman, 1996). Conversely, decision uncertainty often heightens ambiguity, fostering political tactics as decision-makers seek to navigate unclear relationships between

means and ends (Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1988). Crisis-driven decisions are particularly prone to political activity as leaders face heightened stakes and competing interests (Hickson et al., 1986). These dynamics highlight the need to tailor decision processes based on specific attributes to balance rationality and reduce politicisation effectively.

Thirdly, the **external environment**, particularly its dynamism and hostility, heavily influences political behaviour in strategic decision-making. In dynamic environments, unpredictable changes and uncertainty in means-ends relationships often escalate political activity, as decision-makers seek to protect their positions and interests (Dess & Beard, 1984). Similarly, hostile environments with limited resources and fierce competition can heighten political behaviour, although some evidence shows that high-stakes scenarios may also drive consensus among leaders (Boyd, 1991; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). These mixed findings emphasise the critical role of environmental factors in shaping decision processes and suggest that organisations must develop adaptive strategies to navigate external pressures while minimising internal conflict (Miller & Cardinal, 1994).

Finally, **organisational characteristics**, such as past performance and company size, are key drivers of political behaviour in strategic decision-making. High past performance fosters confidence and alignment, reducing political activity, while poor performance often intensifies conflicts and competition among decision-makers (Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1990). Similarly, larger organisations, with decentralised power and structural complexity, are more prone to political behaviour compared to smaller firms, where centralised decision-making reduces opportunities for politicisation (Rajagopalan & Spreitzer, 1997; Thomas et al., 1993). These findings suggest that managing political behaviour requires a nuanced understanding of organisational context, with strategies tailored to size and performance, to enhance decision effectiveness and minimise conflict.

It can be theorised from the literature reviewed and in the context of South African banking provided in Chapter 2, that environmental factors (more regulatory pressures and socio-political transformation demands), as well as top management team characteristics (the demographic diversity associated with transformation goals in particular), may prove to be important in defining and expressing political behaviour among senior leaders in this study. Such political behaviour might be worsened by high levels of resource competition, causing interaction effects between organisational size and past performance.

3.6 Literature review conclusion and research questions

Extant literature describes the core roles and responsibilities of senior leaders of all organisation types: whether for-profit or otherwise (Georgakakis et al., 2019; Samimi et al., 2019). The literature also shows that senior leaders matter to company outcomes because they make decisions and engage in behaviours that affect their organisations' health, wealth, and welfare – but they do so as flawed human beings (Bonelli, 2014; Quigley & Hambrick, 2015). In order to execute their responsibilities, senior leaders clearly need to win the trust of others, and this requires political behaviour. But how do such leaders define and interpret the *boundaries* of such behaviour?

This qualitative, in-depth study builds on existing knowledge to make three significant contributions to the current understanding of key aspects of political behaviour. These relate to **definitions**, **social constructs** (appearances, and aftermaths of political behaviour), and the **contextual variables** shaping leaders' behaviour. Firstly, the study defines the *boundaries* of the political behaviour of senior leaders who, by virtue of their roles, must influence and work with others. Scholars recognise that political behaviour is a normal and often essential element of organisational functioning (Zanzi & O'Neill, 2001), but no universally agreed definition yet exists that captures the complexity of such political action (Ferris et al., 2019). Secondly, the study offers insights into the *constructive and damaging effects* of politicking (Kapoutsis & Thanos, 2016) to help upper echelon leaders manage their inherent political behaviour for the benefit of their respective organisations. Finally, it deepens awareness of the conditions that might *regulate* the political actions of senior leaders (Maslyn et al., 2017).

The overarching research question (RQ1) of this study asks: ***How do senior leaders in complex organisations define the boundaries of political behaviour?*** This question is a response to the findings of Shepherd et al. (2020) that "surprisingly … the boundary conditions of political behaviour remain little understood", and their subsequent comment that "strategic decision theory has not adequately explained how top management teams cope with the inevitable politics in play" (Shepherd et al., 2020, p. 15). The question is further shaped by the work of Kapoutsis and Thanos (2016, p.4), who urged scholars to "explore new boundary conditions that might regulate political efficiency". They also noted that "… strategic decision theory has not adequately explained how top management teams cope with the inevitable politics in play". Moreover, while many researchers agree that political behaviour is a normal and sometimes essential element of functioning (Zanzi & O'Neill, 2001), it is significant that no definition yet exists that captures the *complexity* of such action (Ferris et al.,2019).

In Research Question 2, the study further asks: ***What factors influence the duality of political behaviour among senior leaders?*** This is a response to the call by Kapoutsis and Thanos (2016, p. 4) for "new insights on the constructive and damaging effects of politics". Given that political behaviour is a broad term capturing activity across organisational levels enacted by different sources (including the self, others, groups, and organisations), future research has been called upon to redefine the construct within the appropriate and intended theoretical level (Hill, Thomas & Meriac, 2016).

Finally, Research Question 3 asks: ***What contextual factors regulate political behaviour of senior executives in the organisation?*** This question was inspired by Kapoutsis and Thanos (2016, p.4), who called on future research to "explore new boundary conditions that might regulate political efficiency", including the conceptualisation and measurement of political behaviour. The study broadens the scope of this challenge to explore constructs that give rise to neutral and positive manifestations of such behaviour (Maslyn et al., 2017).

Chapter 4: Research methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methodology I adopted to answer my research questions. I chose a phenomenological, qualitative approach because it best suited the exploratory, theory-building nature of the research. Moreover, this inquiry also seeks to garner rich insights into individuals' real-world conditions; represent the views and perspectives of upper echelon leaders (the participants); recognise the context of their lives; and build knowledge about the existing phenomenon. All these elements align with what Creswell and Cresswell (2018) declare to be critical characteristics of qualitative research.

Scholars recommend using qualitative methodology in studies where the variables are unknown. Unlike quantitative or mixed approaches, it employs open-ended interview questions (Morrow, 2007). It is a comprehensive, discovery-based method (Austin & Sutton, 2014, p. 436) which enables the researcher to investigate participants in their natural environments – and thereby comprehend and explain phenomena, based on the meanings they ascribe to them (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In short, qualitative methodology is a multi-method technique that takes a naturalistic, interpretive approach to its subject (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Additionally, qualitative research involves the collection and utilisation of a vast array of empirical data which embody multi-layered events, unravelling their meaning for the lives of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). Thus, qualitative researchers do not attempt to simplify observed phenomena. Instead, they recognise the intricacy of the subject they are examining and strive to explain its complexity. Using such methodology, this inquiry has been able to unearth new knowledge (Gioia et al., 2013) about the phenomenon under review: the boundaries of political behaviour of senior leaders in an organisation.

In writing this chapter, I was guided by Denzin and Lincoln's (2004) ideas about research processes, and by Hofstee's (2011) understanding of generic research structure. The chapter therefore includes theoretical paradigms and perspectives, research strategies, methods of data gathering (one-on-one interviews) and analysis, as well as the art, practices, and politics of interpretation and presentation. Informed by Hofstee (2011), I also address research design, methodology, limitations, and key ethical considerations – namely, procedures for obtaining informed consent and maintaining participant confidentiality, as well as strategies for ensuring the integrity of the study. I further describe the ethical challenges encountered during the research process – and how

these problems were solved. Integrating Denzin and Lincoln's (2004) and Hofstee's (2011) respective processes and structures, I systematically examine four core areas: (a) theoretical paradigms and perspectives, (b) research design and strategies, (c) methods of data collection and analysis, and (d) quality and ethical considerations. I also show how this comprehensive approach ensured a robust and transparent methodological foundation for the study.

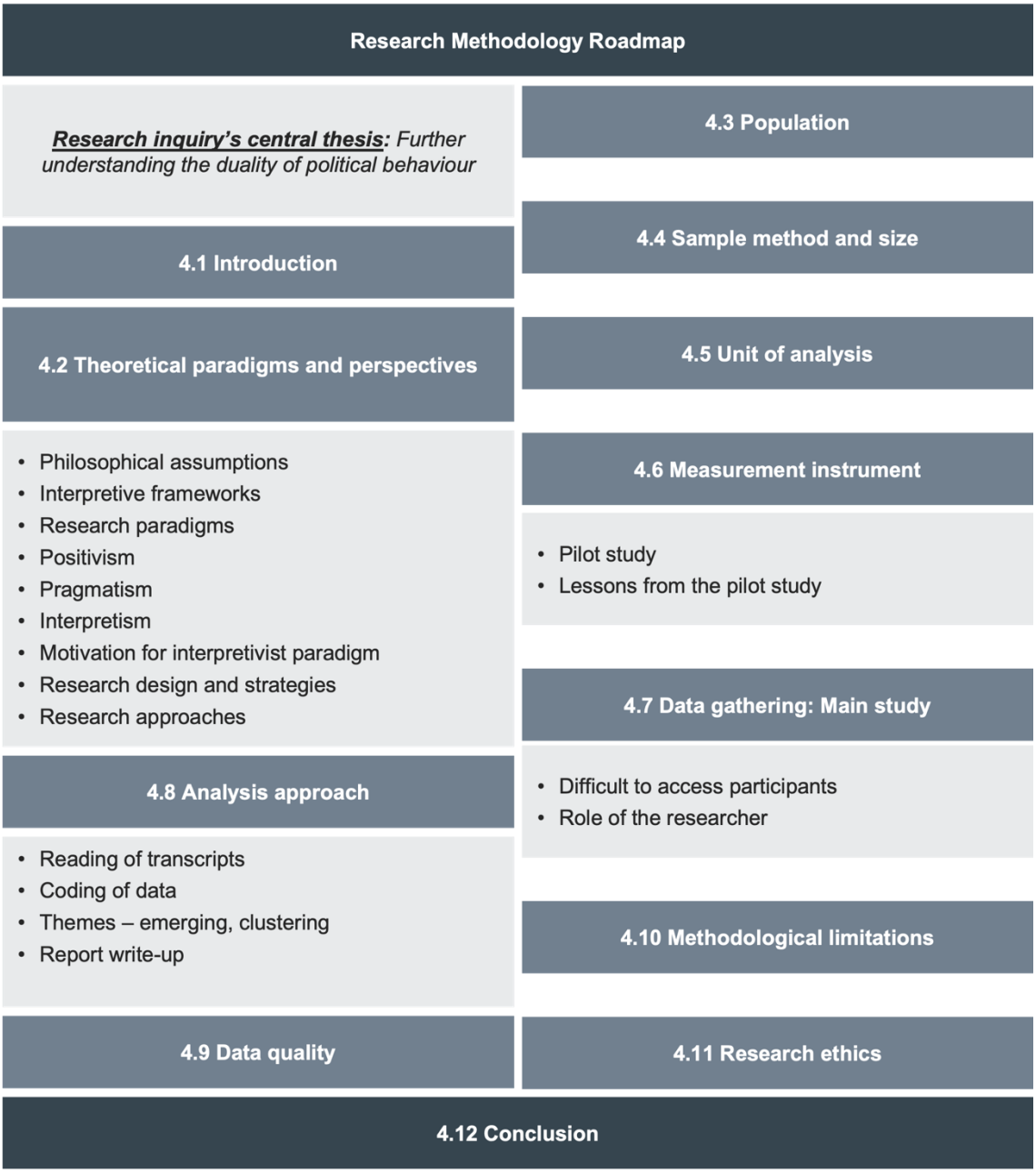

Figure 4.1: Research methodology roadmap

Source: Author's own.

4.2 Theoretical paradigms and perspectives

In business research, the terms "paradigms" and "philosophies" are often used interchangeably, potentially leading to conceptual ambiguity. According to Saunders et al. (2019), both terms refer to the foundational beliefs and assumptions that inform researchers' methodologies and approaches. However, Ghauri et al. (2020) distinguish research paradigms as encompassing specific philosophical presuppositions, suggesting that while paradigms and philosophies are closely related, they are not synonymous. Rather, paradigms share a philosophical affinity with research philosophies, offering a structured lens for inquiry.

Brough (2019) defines research philosophy as a framework grounded in beliefs about the nature of reality (*ontology*) and the nature of knowledge (*epistemology*). These underlying beliefs shape how researchers perceive the world, and guide their interpretation of data. Similarly, Denzin and Lincoln (2003, p.33) describe a research paradigm as the lens through which researchers "see and act in the world", thus influencing their methodological and analytical choices. Theoretical paradigms, according to Danermark et al. (2001), are composed of philosophical assumptions and interpretive frameworks, both of which provide structure and direction for research. Creswell (2013, p.16) further defines philosophical assumptions as "the use of abstract ideas and beliefs that inform . . . research", while interpretive frameworks are seen as social science theories that serve as theoretical lenses to shape research studies (Creswell, 2013; Danermark et al., 2001). In this study, I define the research paradigm by the foundational philosophical assumptions and interpretive frameworks which informed the study's design and execution. Below, I outline the key philosophical assumptions and interpretive frameworks that underpin the study, and I provide a detailed explanation of the paradigm guiding the inquiry.

4.2.1 Philosophical assumptions

Research philosophy is a system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge, including: human knowledge, realities, and one's own values (Saunders et al., 2019). These assumptions determine how the researcher structures data collection and the research process as a whole. A credible research philosophy should be well thought out and consistent, with coherent methodology, research strategy, data collection techniques and analysis procedures. Hammersley (2003) states that such a framework

should also complement the researcher's philosophical stance and the social science phenomenon to be investigated.

Scholars have noted how contemporary research is made difficult by the ambiguous classification of four major philosophical assumptions underpinning scientific research: ontology, epistemology, methodology, and axiology (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Pandey & Pandey, 2021). Ontological assumptions clarify the nature and characteristics of reality, while epistemology addresses the nature of knowledge and the justification of knowledge claims. Methodology pertains to the processes through which knowledge is gathered – whether deductively, inductively, abductively, or reproductively – and axiology examines the influence of researchers' values on the production of knowledge (Creswell, 2013; Danermark et al., 2001; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

Importantly, the philosophical outlook should be guided by the specific requirements of the research study and should not rigidly adhere to a single approach to the exclusion of others (Tuohy et al., 2013). Given that this study focused on understanding the duality of political behaviour, which scholars have described as involving unobservable attitudes or behaviours (Ferris et al., 2002; Drory & Romm, 1988; 1990; Mintzberg, 1983; Pfeffer, 1981), I employed a realist ontology. Such ontology posits that reality exists independently of empirical observations and individual experiences of factual events (Bhaskar, 1978; Danermark et al., 2001; Easton, 2010; Welch et al.,2011). However, because the nature of reality is inherently complex and not always directly observable, a disciplined and interpretive approach is essential (Ackroyd, 2010; Danermark et al., 2001). This approach, therefore, optimises the exploration of deeper structures and mechanisms that underlie observable phenomena.

4.2.2 Interpretive frameworks

Mindful of the diversity and typologies of interpretive frameworks, I conducted an in-depth review of these frameworks before choosing to adopt an interpretivist epistemology and a realist ontology for my inquiry. The review covered mainstream interpretivist frameworks such as foundationalism, positivism, post-foundationalism, and post-positivism, all of which have shaped research within organisational studies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; 2005). However, as a result of my investigation, I ultimately selected a different research paradigm for this study: **critical realism**, as conceptualised by Bhaskar (1978).

Critical realism provided the most suitable foundation for investigating my research questions, which centred on the duality of political behaviour among upper echelon

executives in the complex and regulated South African banking industry. The decision to adopt this approach was driven by the need to suspend normative assumptions about the duality of political behaviour, and rather approach the phenomenon via a framework that accommodates both realist and interpretivist perspectives. Critical realism, being a dualist paradigm, enables researchers to explore phenomena across multiple planes simultaneously – thereby unearthing observable events and the deeper, often hidden, structures and mechanisms that generate them. This approach proved particularly effective for unpacking the layered complexities of political behaviour, as it allowed me to account for both the subjective experiences of senior executives and to identify the broader contextual forces shaping their behaviours. Through this paradigm, I was thus able to interrogate the interplay of structure and agency and capture the nuanced dynamics of political behaviour in intricate organisational contexts.

My understanding of the evolution of qualitative research was guided by Denzin and Lincoln's (2005) comprehensive account, which identifies nine historical phases. The **traditional period** is characterised by the lone or classical ethnographer and positivist paradigms; the **modernist phase** emphasises social realism, naturalism, and participant observation; the **blurred-genres phase** incorporates symbolic interactionism, constructionism, naturalist inquiry, phenomenology, grounded theory, narrative inquiry, and case studies; the **crisis-of-representation phase** is marked by critical inquiry, feminist approaches, and ethnographies of colour; the **triple-crisis phase** introduces postmodern experimental ethnographic writing and methodical contestation; the **now phase** is shaped by government backlash against qualitative research; and the **fractured-future phase**, speculates on the future trajectory of qualitative inquiry.

Denzin and Lincoln (2003, 2005) also proposed a typology of research approaches, including positivist, post-positivist, constructivist, feminist, ethnic, Marxist, cultural studies, and queer theory frameworks. This typology closely aligns with Lincoln and Guba's (2004) classification, which highlights positivist, post-positivist, critical theory, and constructivist approaches, as well as Creswell's (2013) framework emphasising interpretive paradigms such as post-positivism, social constructionism, transformational postmodernism, pragmatism, and critical race theory. Additionally, scholars like Welch et al. (2011) have proposed research-phase typologies that encompass additional approaches such as positivist-empiricism, interpretive-constructionism, and critical realism. Some typologies include both quantitative and qualitative methods (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, 2005; Guba & Lincoln, 2005), while others, such as Stake's (1995) case-study methods, focus exclusively on qualitative approaches, including naturalistic, holistic, phenomenological, and biographic methods.

Clearly, a single researcher can only partially engage with the multiplicity of interpretive frameworks available. Inevitably, their choice will reflect their own philosophical orientation and bias (Creswell, 2013; Danermark et al., 2001). Acknowledging this, I utilised Creswell's (2013) typology of interpretive frameworks and philosophical beliefs as a foundational guide (see Appendix G) to articulate the ontological assumptions (*nature of reality*) and epistemological foundations (*how reality is known)* underpinning my study. This framework enabled me to align my research design with the critical realist paradigm adopted for the inquiry, thus ensuring coherence between philosophical foundations and methodological choices.

4.2.3 Research paradigms

A paradigm is a worldview: a set of guiding beliefs and assumptions (Hlady-Rispal & Jouison-Laffitte, 2014) that influences the way a researcher conducts an inquiry process (Carter, 2007; Hlady-Rispal & Jouison-Laffitte, 2014; Tuli, 2010). Creswell et al. (2007) noted three such orientations: positivist, pragmatist, and constructivist. Positivists believe in a single reality which can be quantitatively measured. Conversely, pragmatists believe that reality is continuously renegotiated, debated and interpreted. Consequently, they use mixed methods, design-based methodology, or action research to measure this reality. Finally, constructivists believe there is no single truth – therefore, multiple realities need to be interpreted, using qualitative methods.

4.2.4 Positivism

To establish the nature of reality, positivists observe and measure the world objectively and impartially, minimising researcher intervention and eliminating the damaging impact of individual values and beliefs (Ryan, 2018). Positivists favour experimental research methodology, viewing qualitative data as secondary or inferior to quantitative data. As Sharifani (2019, p. 23) points out, positivists believe that science, empirical observation, and rationality can reveal all-embracing epistemic systems (grounded in experience, materialism, and the denial of revelation) which encompass individual and social destinies (Sharifani, 2019, p. 1). However, positivism downplays the importance of *context*, because it is based on the idea that theories can be applied universally (Flick, 2014). For this reason, its usefulness has been questioned, and its status has declined (Jaja et al., 2022, p. 224).

Considering the above, I discounted positivism as a useful paradigm for this study because its ontological premise assumes the existence of a single, objective reality. While this premise may hold true, it is impossible to access fully accurate knowledge about such a reality. At best, researchers can merely approximate it (Danermark et al., 2001). My study was not intended to uncover a singular, unknowable reality. Instead, it was designed to explore different ways of accessing real data from diverse participants in the South African banking industry. The goal was to generate insights that contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the duality of political behaviour among senior leaders. Therefore, despite positivism being a dominant paradigm in much political behaviour research it was not suited for addressing the exploratory and nuanced goals of this study. By contrast, constructionism, with its ontological assumption that reality exists only as the multiple, subjective realities of various actors, could have provided a potential lens for this research. However, constructionism limits understanding of co-constructed realities and does not extend to exploring objective realities beyond those interactions (Danermark et al., 2001; Gergen, 2009). This limitation rendered constructionism inappropriate for my study, which required me to engage with both the subjective and objective dimensions of political behaviour.

Other philosophical frameworks identified by Creswell (2013), such as transformative postmodernism and critical race, feminist, queer, and disability paradigms, were also considered. However, while these lenses offer refreshing and progressive perspectives, particularly in organisational research, they were not suitable for this study. Ontologically, these paradigms are decidedly emancipatory (Creswell, 2013), whereas this study, although critical, was not focused on emancipation but rather on deepening the understanding of political behaviour within its specific organisational and contextual boundaries.

4.2.5 Pragmatism

Creswell and Creswell (2018) assert that pragmatism goes hand in hand with pluralism. As such, this adaptable approach accommodates mixed research methodology (qualitative and/or quantitative) and embraces a wide range of reasoning: inductive, deductive, and even abductive (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019, p. 12). Pragmatism's emphasis on practical problem-solving and its focus on research questions rather than strict adherence to a single philosophical stance make it a versatile and widely applicable paradigm. However, while this flexibility could have made pragmatism a viable option for my study, I deemed it unsuitable because it lacks the precision and depth required to

address the complexity and duality of political behaviour in the specific context of senior leaders in the South African banking industry.

Furthermore, the inherent adaptability of pragmatism can sometimes actually compromise the philosophical rigour necessary for exploring deeply layered phenomena such as political behaviour. This study sought to investigate the subjective experiences of senior leaders as well as the structural and contextual mechanisms shaping their behaviour. Therefore, pragmatism could not provide the sharp philosophical lens required for such depth of inquiry (Easton, 2010). Moreover, its emphasis on practical outcomes and problem-solving often prioritises immediate action over uncovering underlying structures or mechanisms. This study required a paradigm that could address the interplay of agency and structure – a fundamental aspect of critical realism – which pragmatism, with its more fluid approach, was not equipped to support.

The versatility of pragmatism can also lead to a lack of ontological commitment, making it less effective for studies that require a robust engagement with both observable and unobservable realities. By contrast, critical realism provided the necessary philosophical depth to bridge the gap between subjective interpretations and objective structures, enabling a richer understanding of the duality of political behaviour. In short, while pragmatism's practical orientation is appropriate for many research contexts, its lack of focus on deeper explanatory frameworks rendered it unsuitable for this study. Conversely, the ability of critical realism to address both empirical realities and underlying causal mechanisms made it the most suitable paradigm for investigating the duality of political behaviour within a complex and regulated environment.

4.2.6 Interpretivism

Interpretivism, which typically employs qualitative methodologies, remains a widely used research paradigm for understanding human behaviour and social phenomena (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). Unlike positivism, which assumes an objective and singular reality, interpretivism argues that knowledge is inherently subjective and emerges from individuals' lived experiences, which are shaped by cultural, historical, and social contexts (Ryan, 2018). This paradigm acknowledges that human beings construct meaning from their own realities rather than adhering to an external framework. Moreover, interpretivism recognises the complex, multi-layered nature of human experiences and emphasises the importance of understanding individuals' perspectives – as well as the meanings they assign to their actions and environments.

A key aspect of interpretivism is its rejection of researcher objectivity. As Flick (2014) argues, researchers cannot detach themselves entirely from their own cultural and experiential biases. Instead, interpretivist researchers must immerse themselves in the participants' world, striving to understand their perspectives and realities through close engagement (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This involves acknowledging that multiple realities exist, each valid in its own context, and embracing the richness of these diverse perspectives (Ryan, 2018). For this study, I adopted an interpretivist paradigm because it aligns with the research goal of exploring the nuanced, subjective experiences of senior leaders in further understanding the duality of political behaviour. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of the social, cultural, and organisational factors that shape political behaviour, as described in the following section.

4.2.7 Motivation for selecting the interpretivist paradigm

This study explores the nuanced, multi-layered ways in which upper echelon leaders of complex organisations view their own political behaviour. It seeks to understand the rich contexts in which they operate and to examine their subjective experiences and shared understanding. It does not aim to validate hypotheses, quantify variables, or establish causal relationships. Given this, my inquiry is anchored in the **interpretivist-constructivist paradigm and complemented by an inductive approach to theory development**, as outlined by Loh (2013). This stance recognises that reality is not objective or external but is rather interpreted, constructed, and experienced through individual perceptions and social interactions (Carter, 2007; Tuli, 2010).

I have adopted this approach because interpretivism endorses in-depth exploration of human behaviour, interactions, and societal dynamics, and thus facilitates a deeper comprehension of these phenomena (Pulla & Carter, 2018). Although critical realism aims to unveil underlying causal mechanisms, interpretivism, as a guiding paradigm, was ultimately chosen since the primary research goal is to explore the subjective meanings and interpretations that senior leaders themselves construct in defining the boundaries of political behaviour rather than identifying objective structures that govern this behaviour. This stance also underscores the value of subjective interpretations – and the meanings individuals attribute to their experiences and interactions within specific social contexts. Interpretivist research requires scholars to investigate phenomena from the viewpoints of many diverse individuals (Saunders et al., 2019). This is achieved through interaction between the researcher and the subjects, using qualitative methodologies involving observation and interviews (Bell et al., 2019; Josselson, 2013; Rubin & Rubin,

2012). Open-ended questioning is key to this interaction because it helps the researcher to listen intently to participants' perspectives in their respective surroundings (Brough, 2019).

This phenomenological method examines lived experiences with the objective of transforming these experiences into meaningful expressions (Dilthey, 1985; Moustakas, 1994). As such it resonates with the core aim of this study which attempts to unravel the meanings and interpretations of political behaviour boundaries among leaders whose roles inherently involve influencing and collaborating with others. I have further adopted a subjective epistemological stance (Creswell & Poth, 2018), premised on the understanding that top leaders actively construct meanings around the concept of political behaviour based on their own experiences and interpretations. Using an exploratory approach, as suggested by Saunders and Lewis (2012), this inquiry therefore delves into the nuances and complexities of such behaviour in specific organisational contexts: an area where existing knowledge is limited.

4.2.8 Research design and strategies

In this section, I discuss the research approach and design used in my study. I describe the study's design – and explain the choices I made about research strategy, unit of analysis, population, and sampling. Each choice was informed by the research questions set out in the previous chapter, with the aim of contributing to theory development on the duality of political behaviour.

Research design – the logical structure of the inquiry – involves identifying question(s), essential data, the method for collecting the data, and analysing the data collection results (Zikmud et al., 2013). The design also encompasses strategy, process, time frame, and how to transform the research query into a project (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Saunders et al. (2019) further describe research design as the argument for the logical, consistent steps linking the research question(s) to data collection, analysis, and interpretation. In brief, the design should describe how a researcher – guided by the selected paradigm – intends to move from one step to the next, so as to answer the research question. In this regard it is crucial to distinguish between design and tactics. Design relates to the broad view; tactics relate to details – for example specific interviewing techniques (Saunders et al., 2019).

Furthermore, most scholars agree that a research design should provide an outline of the process of collecting, measuring, and analysing data, with the primary aim of

providing credible results (Sanders, 1982; Yin, 2016). Other scholars suggest that a research design should focus on the selection of subjects, research sites and data collection procedures that will be used to answer the research question/s (Creswell et al., 2007). Meanwhile, Given (2008), succinctly comments that a research design *transforms* a research idea into a research project. For the purposes of this study, the research design is essentially a blueprint for collecting, measuring, and analysing data.

While research design provides a bridge between the research paradigm and the empirical world, research strategy indicates how this bridge is traversed. Outlining research strategy requires articulating a "bundle of skills, assumptions and practices . . . that anchor paradigms in specific empirical sites" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 36). In this study, I acknowledge that the skills, assumptions, and practices of qualitative research appear in several forms, including ethnological methods, phenomenological methods (Creswell, 2012; van Manen, 2014), grounded theory methods (Suddaby, Bruton & Si, 2015), biographical methods, narrative inquiry methods, and case-study methods (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Hlady-Rispal & Jouison-Laffitte, 2014; Yin, 2016). The extant literature outlines several research designs for qualitative research (Creswell et al., 2007). Table 4.1 provides a synopsis of the research strategies discussed by Creswell (2013).

Before embarking on any investigation, it is essential for researchers to ensure they possess the necessary training and experience to conduct the study effectively (Flick, 2014). To equip myself for this research, I completed a formal course in **advanced qualitative research methodology** as part of my Master of Philosophy in Corporate Strategy at GIBS. This elective course provided me with a strong foundation in qualitative methods, enabling me to design and execute the study with rigour. Additionally, I participated in two rounds of **Atlas.ti training**, before and after data collection. This software training enhanced my ability to efficiently code, organise, and analyse qualitative data, ensuring systematic handling of the large volume of information gathered during the study. Moreover, recognising the importance of ethical considerations and compliance in research, I undertook a **data protection training course**. This training was instrumental in helping me to understand and implement robust measures for safeguarding participant confidentiality, securely storing sensitive data, and ensuring compliance with relevant regulations and ethical guidelines. These steps reinforced my commitment to maintaining the integrity of the research process while protecting the rights and privacy of the participants. Collectively, this training ensured that I was adequately prepared to manage the complex demands of qualitative research, from methodological design to ethical execution and data analysis.

Table 4.1: Characteristics and criteria of selected qualitative strategies

	Phenomenology	Grounded theory	Case study	Narrative research
What is it?	Inquiry is used when the researcher wants to understand the essence of a particular lived experience	Refers to a set of systematic inductive methods for conducting qualitative research aimed toward the development of theory	Detailed investigation to explore complex issues. Best for 'how' or 'why' questions	The design approach is used when the question requires a researcher to understand a whole story or life experience
When is it appropriate to use it?	Understanding the essence of the lived experience	Developing a theory grounded in data from the field	Description and analysis of a case or multiple cases	The life of an individual
What are the criteria for sampling, collecting, analysing, and reporting data?	Anchored in philosophical propositions, emphasis on the phenomenon, exploration of the phenomenon with a group of individuals, bracketing of the researcher – especially for transcendental phenomenology	A focus on phased process, theory building, interviewing as the primary source of data collection, structured data analysis, comparative analysis	Contemporary setting, identification of a specific case, in-depth understanding, description of the case, intent to conduct case research, identification of themes and issues, theoretical models, ending with assertions	Collection of stories focusing on individual experiences, multiple data sources, shaped chronologically, multiple analytical techniques, context-specific

Source: Author's own.

4.2.9 Research approaches

There is much debate about different research approaches and their efficacy, but generally such approaches are guided by deductive or inductive reasoning (Young, 2019), depending on the nature of the inquiry. In this study I synthesised both methods, as described by Bell et al. (2019). When developing the research questions, I used a

deductive (top-down) approach; subsequently, I employed inductive reasoning for the purposes of primary data collection and initial analysis, adhering to the methodologies outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Qualitative research – also known as the "bottom-up" method – is integral to inductive reasoning. Researchers observe and examine participants' unique experiences and gather data. In the data analysis phase, they hunt for patterns and construct a theory to explain these trends (Azungah, 2018). The bottom-up approach used in this study generated new insights into how senior leaders within complex organisations define and navigate the boundaries of political behaviour, as highlighted by Bansal, Smith & Vaara (2018) and Gioia et al. (2013).

The study was structured according to a cross-sectional research design, as described by Saunders et al. (2019). This design facilitated direct, face-to-face engagement with respondents and enabled the conducting of semi-structured in-depth interviews. Apart from three instances where follow-up interviews were required, a single interview session was conducted with each respondent. Therefore, the findings of this study capture specific moments in time: each reflecting the perspectives and experiences of the respondents on the date of their interviews.

My research was designed to capture the complexity and dynamic nature of political behaviour within organisational contexts – not to establish findings that would be replicated in subsequent studies. Inspired by Saunders et al. (2019) this approach aimed instead to cultivate understanding among future researchers: specifically, that the circumstances surrounding political behaviour in organisations are multifaceted and subject to continual change. Thus, the study underscores the evolving nature of organisational dynamics and the necessity for ongoing research to keep pace with these changes.

4.2.10 Motivation for selecting phenomenological design approach

I selected a hermeneutic phenomenological design approach as the most effective way to structure this study. Phenomenology is particularly suited to in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of individuals from multiple perspectives, thereby providing rich, nuanced insights into the phenomenon under investigation: in this case, the boundaries of political behaviour among senior leaders. Ethnography, a related approach, is valuable for uncovering shared patterns within a cultural group, but I deemed it less suitable in this instance because the study is centred on individual perceptions rather than cultural patterns. Similarly, I decided against following a case study approach, involving detailed

analysis of a single or multiple cases. Case studies provide broader organisational context but cannot capture the subjective nature of individual experiences and interpretations.

Conversely, hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on understanding the essence of experiences. It offers "a grasp of the very nature of the thing" (van Manen, 1990, p. 177) and aligns seamlessly with the study's objective of exploring how senior leaders define and interpret their complex political behaviour within organisational contexts. As van Manen points out, the approach seeks not merely to *describe* such experiences, but to *interpret* them, through delving into underlying meanings and patterns. In this regard, hermeneutic phenomenology differs from empirical, transcendental, or psychological phenomenology, which focuses more on describing the experiences of participants (Moustakas, 1994).

Although van Manen (1990) does not offer a set of rules or methods, he describes the hermeneutic cycle as a dynamic interplay of research activities. In such a process, the researcher focuses on a phenomenon which interests them and reflects on the essential themes that constitute the nature of this lived experience (van Manen, 1990, 2014). The researcher then writes a description of the phenomenon, maintaining a strong relation to the topic of inquiry and balancing all parts of the writing with the whole (van Manen, 1990, 2014). Phenomenology is therefore "an interpretive process in which the researcher makes an interpretation – that is, the researcher 'mediates' between different meanings" (van Manen, 1990, p. 26).

Despite their differences, all phenomenologists recognise the social and cultural context of human interactions, and value human consciousness as a source of interpretations of these actions (Petruzzo et al., 2017). Phenomenological research therefore explores *how* and *why* participants construct their knowledge of a particular phenomenon – a process that primarily relies on qualitative investigation (Smith, 2016). Hermeneutic phenomenological design complements inductive research based on qualitative data (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). It allows for a flexible, exploratory approach, where themes and patterns can emerge organically from the data, rather than being confined by pre-established frameworks or hypotheses. In summary, I considered the hermeneutic phenomenological approach, with its focus on interpretation and understanding of lived experiences, as the best way to achieve the objectives of this study. It positioned me well to capture the depth and complexity of senior leaders' perspectives on political behaviour within their organisational contexts.

This design also enabled me to explore the interplay between individual agency and broader structural contexts, particularly in the unique and complex regulatory environment of the South African banking industry. Hermeneutic phenomenology provided a framework for interpreting how senior leaders navigate and define the duality of political behaviour, also shedding light on how personal experiences and perceptions are influenced by organisational structures, power dynamics, and cultural norms. Unlike descriptive approaches that focus solely on observable actions or outcomes, this method explored the underlying drivers of political behaviour, capturing the implicit and explicit factors that shape leaders' decisions and interactions. The approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the tension between leaders' personal interpretations and the external pressures they face, thereby offering a holistic perspective on political behaviour in high-stakes organisational settings.

Additionally, this approach facilitated a context-sensitive exploration, acknowledging the importance of both time and place in shaping participants' lived experiences. By grounding the analysis in the specific realities of the South African banking sector – characterised by its complexity, regulatory demands, and competitive pressures – hermeneutic phenomenology allowed me to interpret how these contextual elements interact with individual and collective political behaviour. This focus on context was crucial for identifying the unique ways in which senior leaders construct meaning around political behaviour in their organisational roles. The innate flexibility of this methodology also supported the emergence of unanticipated insights, ensuring that the study remained responsive to the data and the dynamic organisational realities it sought to understand.

4.3 Population

According to Saunders and Lewis (2012), the term "population" encompasses people, organisations, and places, whereas a "study population" refers to a subset of participants (Majid, 2018) who are specifically selected for their ability to articulate personal experiences relevant to the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this study, I followed Eisenhardt's (1989b, p. 537) guidance to select a "set of entities from which research is sampled". I did not intend to study the total qualifying population as this would have been impractical and inappropriate for the primary research question. Therefore, a carefully curated sample of the population formed the basis of this investigation.

With this in mind, the population from which the sample was drawn consisted of approximately 260 senior executives from regulated and complex organisations operating within South Africa. These executives were uniquely positioned to provide valuable insights, due to their rich experiences with the research phenomenon: understanding the duality of political behaviour among senior leaders. Participants were deliberately selected from the top four South African banks, which together accounted for more than 65 percent of the total banking assets in the country as of March 2021, valued at approximately R3.8 trillion (Business Tech, 2021). This targeted sampling strategy ensured that the study included participants with relevant expertise and direct exposure to the complexities of political behaviour in high-stakes, regulated organisational environments. By focusing on this population, the study was able to generate nuanced insights into a phenomenon that is critical to leadership and organisational dynamics within the South African banking sector.

4.4 Sampling method and size

It is impractical, time-consuming, and seldom affordable to research an entire population – especially as some may be inaccessible (Mujere, 2016). Sampling is therefore essential, although it is not always easy to choose a sampling strategy. There are two primary sampling methods: statistical sampling and theoretical (or purposeful) sampling (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2013). I considered statistical sampling inappropriate for this study because it is typically employed in quantitative research where the goal is to achieve a representative sample of a population, thereby enabling the generalisation of findings to a larger group. This method relies on probabilistic techniques and necessitates larger sample sizes to ensure statistical validity and reliability (Creswell, 2013). Given the qualitative nature of my inquiry and its focus on exploring the nuanced experiences of senior leaders, the emphasis was not on generalisation but on depth of understanding – making statistical sampling less suitable.

On the other hand, theoretical sampling – defined by Creswell (2013, p. 156) as selecting "individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study" – was ideally suited to my inquiry. This approach aligns with Eisenhardt's (1989b, p. 533) perspective that theoretical sampling "focuses efforts on theoretically useful cases – that is, those that replicate or extend theory by filling conceptual categories". Theoretical sampling allowed me to purposefully select senior executives from the top South African banks whose

experiences with political behaviour could deepen the theoretical understanding of this complex phenomenon. This method provided the flexibility to adjust sampling decisions as insights emerged during data collection, thus fostering a more refined and context-sensitive exploration of the duality of political behaviour in organisations.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) describe two options: *convenience* sampling (where participants happen to be willing and available at the time) and *snowball* sampling (where participants are asked to recommend others who may be outside the pre-defined sample criterion). However, neither of these approaches can guarantee that the most appropriate participants will be sourced, so their popularity has waned. Instead, I adopted a *homogenous purposive* sampling strategy for this study in order to recruit participants whose characteristics/attributes were most relevant to the phenomenon under investigation (Sanders, 1982; Welman & Kruger, 1999). This approach aligns with Patton's (2002) recommendation for inductive inquiries, which states that selecting information-rich samples is crucial for effectively addressing the research purpose. By focusing on participants with more than five years' experience in senior leadership roles, I tapped into a wealth of knowledge and insight that was directly pertinent to the phenomenon of political behaviour within organisations. These individuals provided deep and nuanced insights into how political behaviour manifests, is perceived, and is navigated within the upper echelons of complex banking organisations.

This strategy of selecting participants based on specific criteria related to the research question, enabled a more focused and in-depth exploration (Suzuki et al., 2007). Furthermore, the homogeneity of the sample, in terms of their professional experience, ensured a certain level of consistency in the context and background of the participants: crucial for the success of a phenomenological study that aimed to investigate and interpret lived experiences. To summarise: purposive sampling (also known as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling) allows the researcher to identify a group that will represent the larger population, based on their anticipated richness of knowledge and experience of the phenomenon under investigation (Eisenhardt et al., 2016). Importantly, this should include sources whose data will *challenge* the researcher's thinking – not just support it (Rothausen et al., 2017).

Table 4.2 explains the sampling strategy employed in this study in more detail.

Table 4.2: Sampling strategy and criteria

Criteria	Description	Rationale
Industry	Regulated banking sector	• Fits the definition of complex organisation—section 1.4. • Likely to solicit deep insights that could be used in the broader financial services and other industries.
Sampling method	Purposive sampling	• Purposefully selects participants with characteristics or attributes—knowledge and experience of the phenomenon under inquiry.
Population size - approximately 260 senior leaders.	Between 35 and 40 interviews.	• An appropriate population size for a qualitative study is considered to optimally capture new insights into the phenomenon under study, and 32 interviews are considered a norm (Saunders & Townsend, 2016).
Experience	Minimum five years of experience working as a senior leader in the banking industry in South Africa	• Participants with this level of experience are likely to share deep and new personal insights into the phenomenon under investigation
Employment status	Current senior executives	• Current executives can provide detailed information about the phenomenon
Gender	Male and female	• Important to solicit both genders and appreciate their perspectives
Functional representation	Senior leaders from the front, middle or back office – functional diversification	• Participants to include a mix of senior leaders from across the organisation – that is, the front and middle to back-office strategic leaders

Source: Author's own.

4.5 Unit of analysis

Identifying the unit of analysis is crucial to any research process (Patton, 2002), but even seasoned researchers frequently conflate the concept of an observational unit with the unit of analysis (Hamilton & Finley, 2020). True, these terms can sometimes be

synonymous, but not always (Rahman, 2020). For the purposes of this study, variables are defined as characteristics of observational units (Dolma, 2010), while the unit of analysis is more closely related to the data analysis method (Tuohy et al., 2013). Vogt (2005, p.2) further defines the unit of analysis as "the person or things being studied".

In the literature on political behaviour, the dominant unit of analysis typically focuses on four areas. Firstly, **individuals**: examining attributes, perceptions, motivations, and behaviours of actors engaged in organisational politics (Ferris & Kacmar, 1992; Mintzberg, 1985). Secondly, **groups or teams**: exploring political dynamics within teams or coalitions, particularly in decision-making contexts (Papadakis et al., 1998). Thirdly, **organisations**: investigating how political behaviours shape outcomes and processes at the organisational level (Pfeffer, 1981). Finally, **processes or phenomena**: analysing specific manifestations of political behaviour such as influence tactics or decision-making processes (Elbanna, 2018). Among these, the focus on individuals and groups is especially popular, due to the inherently interpersonal and relational nature of political behaviour.

In this study, the **unit of analysis** is the phenomenon of the boundaries of political behaviour of senior leaders, while the **unit of observation** is individuals occupying upper echelon positions in regulated and complex banking organisations operating in South Africa. I chose to focus on the boundaries of political behaviour as the unit of analysis for three reasons. Firstly, political behaviour is inherently contextual and situational, necessitating an understanding of the phenomena and boundaries within which it occurs (Kapoutsis & Thanos, 2016). In this regard, the study of boundaries is crucial because political behaviour exists at the intersection of formal organisational norms and informal interpersonal dynamics (Mintzberg, 1983). Secondly, senior leaders – due to their authority and influence – are uniquely positioned to define, engage in, and regulate political behaviour (Elbanna, 2018). Political behaviour among upper echelon leaders therefore has far-reaching implications for organisational outcomes, decision quality, and strategic alignment (Georgakakis et al., 2019; Samimi et al., 2019). The boundaries of such behaviour are crucial in determining whether it is constructive or destructive (Ferris & Treadway, 2012; Shepherd et al., 2020). However, the "*boundary conditions of political behaviour among senior leaders remain poorly understood"*, (Shepherd et al., 2020, p. 2). My study seeks to address this significant gap in knowledge. Finally, the centrality of the concept of boundaries in political behaviour literature highlights the fluidity and contested nature of political actions (Pfeffer, 1981; Mintzberg, 1983). Understanding these boundaries is essential to clarifying when political behaviour transitions from being legitimate and constructive, to illegitimate and destructive (Kapoutsis et al., 2017).

Therefore, an examination of these dynamics generates deeper insights into the mechanisms that regulate political behaviour.

In summary, I selected the boundaries of political behaviour among senior leaders as the unit of analysis because this focus is well-supported by the literature. My investigation aligns with existing studies that emphasise the situational, contextual, and strategic dimensions of political behaviour, particularly among senior leaders whose actions profoundly influence organisational dynamics and outcomes. Scholarly support for my selection includes Mintzberg (1983, 1985) on the dynamics and illegitimacy of political behaviour, Pfeffer (1981) on organisational politics and power, Elbanna (2018) on senior leaders' roles in political behaviour, Kapoutsis and Thanos (2016) on boundary conditions, and Shepherd et al. (2020) and Samimi et al. (2019) on the strategic implications of political behaviour.

4.6 Measurement instrument

Measurement instruments are tools which gauge and gather research data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), using methods like interviews, surveys, and observation. In this exploratory inquiry, I used structured interviews grounded on open-ended and non-leading questions as a measurement instrument, as recommended by Eriksson and Kovalainen (2016) and Josselson (2013). In the process, I followed an interview guide (Appendix D2: interview guide) and conducted one-on-one, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with upper echelon leaders and executives of regulated and complex banking organisations.

Guided by extant literature, I conducted structured conversations (face-to-face or via an online platform) to gather information (Josselson, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I followed a semi-structured interview format, where participants were asked open-ended questions linked to the central research question (Guest et al., 2006). I then asked follow-up or "clarity" questions and observed the participants' body language and tone (Josselson, 2013). These probing questions encouraged interviewees to elaborate on how events happened, and how they made sense of them. I introduced such questions with phrases like: "Tell me more", or "That is interesting: please elaborate". This technique decreased the risk of participants withholding rich data and ensured the research question was adequately addressed.

4.6.1 Pilot study

Good qualitative research is iterative: circling between data acquisition and analysis, as the methodology is revised and enhanced (Busetto et al., 2020). A pilot study plays an important role in this process because it enables the researcher to conduct trial interviews with a small sample of respondents in order to test, evaluate and revise key elements. These may include the efficacy of the draft interview guide; the suitability of the location; and whether interviews can be audio-recorded (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The pilot phase also helps the interviewer to determine the most effective wording for questions, the best types of questions, and the optimal duration of an interview for individuals who may have difficulty concentrating for extended periods (Gentles et al., 2015).

Accordingly, the pilot study in this research inquiry was a small-scale replication of the actual study in that it focused on a small number of persons with characteristics similar to those of the participants of the target population. In terms of representation, it included five participants purposively sampled from the study population, selected per the criteria stated in section 2.5, and spanning three of the four banks that control 65% of total South African banking sector assets (Business Tech, 2021). The pilot representation amounted to two percent of the total target population for this study, and took the form of semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with the participants who were not part of the final sample, as Table 4.3 shows.

Table 4.3: Profile of the pilot interview participants

Pilot interview	Participant profile	Organisation	Time	Meeting format
PRPT1	Global Executive Head – Financial Institutions Group	Company A	56 minutes	In-person
PRPT2	Chief of Staff – Office of the Group Chief Executive Officer	Company A	30 minutes	Virtual
PRPT3	Regional Product Executive Head – Global Markets	Company A	48 minutes	Virtual

PRPT4	Group Managing Executive – Africa Regions	Company B	50 minutes	Virtual
PRPT5	Group Executive Head – Corporate Citizenship	Company A	53 minutes	In-person

Source: Author's own.

4.6.2 Lessons from the pilot study

As mentioned earlier, pilot studies evaluate the viability of methodologies and procedures prior to their use in larger-scale investigations (Pearson et al., 2020). In this inquiry, the findings garnered from the pilot study guided my revision and reshaping of the measurement instrument before I embarked on the main interviews (See *Appendix D1*: research questionnaire before the pilot; and *Appendix D2*: adapted research questionnaire after the pilot interviews).

One major refinement involved the introduction of a three-minute "framing the discussion" section. This defined key research constructs; articulated the problem statement; and ensured participants' confirmation of understanding. In addition, I simplified the language of interview questions, and devised a rough time allocation for each section of the measurement instrument. The pilot study involved the following steps: sending invitation letters to request an interview; following-up when no responses were received; scheduling the interviews (in-person or virtually); and confirming the interview time and venue via office assistants/gatekeepers.

I sent 10 pilot interview requests to participants from the four institutions that facilitated my engagement with difficult-to-access participants. After three follow-up emails and phone calls with the offices of the target participants, five respondents accepted the interviews: four from company A, and one from company B. Three participants from companies B and D declined, and two from company C never responded. The five pilot interviews were conducted over a period of six weeks. The average interview time was 48 minutes: the longest being 56 minutes, and the shortest 30 minutes. These times broadly aligned with what later transpired in the main study.

Each pilot interview recording was then sent to the transcriber, who had signed a Non-Disclosure Agreement. Prior to this, I assessed and selected the appropriate software for transferring large audio recording files: WeTransfer for in-person recordings; and a

confidential folder for the MS Teams recordings, which restricted access to the researcher and the transcriber only. Thereafter, I reviewed the pilot transcripts: editing them for accuracy and immersing myself in the insights that had been generated. The edited versions are submitted separately.

To conclude, the pilot process gave me a valuable opportunity to practise managing the one-on-one interviews end-to-end, and to learn critical lessons by so doing. Firstly, the process highlighted the opportunities and challenges of virtual and in-person interview meetings. I found that difficult-to-access participants tended to prefer virtual one-on-one meetings, as these allowed them to schedule interviews early in the mornings or later in the day. Such meetings were seen as part of the normal day's diary schedule. Secondly, the process affirmed the need to test the functionality and suitability of the recording instruments: whether for in-person interviews (Samsung phone voice recorder); or virtual interviews (MS Teams). Thirdly, I learned the importance of reflection as soon as possible after each interview. I did this by reading through the field notes taken during each interview and capturing key points in written form. I have included Appendix E containing a detailed insights and leanings report from the pilot study – Appendix E: Pilot Study Insights Report.

4.7 Data gathering: main study

The major data collection method in this study was the one-on-one, in-depth interview: an intrinsic tool in phenomenological research (Eisenhardt, 1989b). This method particularly aligns with hermeneutic phenomenology which strongly emphasises the knowledge co-construction process, involving a reflexive and joint-authored approach (Gordon, 1998). According to Rubin and Rubin (2005), the goal of interviewing is to obtain a "solid, deep understanding of what is being studied, rather than breadth. Depth is achieved by going after context, dealing with the complexity of multiple, overlapping, and sometimes conflicting themes, and paying attention to specifics of meanings, situations, and history" (p. 35). Rubin and Rubin (2005) also provide a typology of interviews: narrowly focused, semi-structured (in-between), and broadly focused. They further distinguish between focusing on meanings and frameworks, versus focusing on events and processes.

For Giorgi (1985), semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to construct interview questions relevant to the research question. Such an approach not only ensures that key aspects of the inquiry are covered; it also gives participants the space to discuss other

information that may prove relevant. Semi-structured interviews thus enable the researcher to keep a balance between focusing on the research topic and allowing for a disciplined naturalness in phenomenological research (Giorgi, 1985; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Consistent with this research-protocol approach, I therefore developed a measurement instrument based on clearly-worded questions, grounded in literature (Eisenhardt, 1989a) and learnings from the pilot study.

Scholars differ in their view of the number of individuals who should be interviewed. Polkinghorne (1989) suggests between five and 25; while Saunders and Townsend (2016) consider 32 to be the norm. In this study, I conducted a total of **27 semi-structured one-on-one interviews** (plus three follow-up interviews) over eight months, as detailed in Table 4.4. The five pilot interviews, described in section 4.7, were excluded.

Table 4.4: Profile of research respondents for the main study

Participant ID	Business Title	Company	Interview		
			Time minutes	Type	Follow-Up
RPT1	Global Executive Head: Business Transformation	A	66	Virtual	
RPT2	Global Executive Head: Investment Banking	A	58	Virtual	
RPT3	Executive Head: Strategic Partnerships	A	59	In-person	
RPT4	Chief Digital Officer	A	44	In-person	
RPT5	Group Executive Head: Operations	A	21	Virtual	48 minutes: in-person
RPT6	Chief Information Officer	C	54	In-person	
RPT7	Chief Financial Officer	A	40	In-person	
RPT 8	Chief Risk Officer	B	48	Virtual	
RPT 9	Chief Marketing Officer	B	45	Virtual	
RPT 10	Group Executive Head: Strategy and Business Solutions	A	56	In-person	
RPT 11	Group Executive Head: Mergers and Acquisitions	A	59	In-person	37 minutes: in-person
RPT 12	Group Executive Head: Africa Regions	A	54	In-person	

Participant ID	Business Title	Company	Interview		
			Time minutes	Type	Follow-Up
RPT 13	Regional Head: People and Culture	A	43	Virtual	
RPT 14	Group Chief Strategy Officer	A	47	In-person	
RPT 15	Group Chief Information Officer	A	46	Virtual	
RPT 16	Group Executive Head: Investor Relations	A	36	In-person	
RPT 17	Group Chief People and Culture	A	44	In-person	
RPT 18	Chief Executive: International Businesses	A	53	Virtual	
RPT 19	Group Executive Head: Organisational Development	A	52	Virtual	
RPT 20	Global Executive Head: Legal Counsel	A	40	Virtual	28 minutes: in-person
RPT 21	Group Managing Executive: Client Coverage	D	64	Virtual	25 minutes: Virtual
RPT 22	Group Executive: Strategy and Corporate Affairs	B	53	Virtual	
RPT 23	Group Chief Risk Officer	A	51	Virtual	
RPT 24	Managing Executive: Public Sector and Growth Capital	C	42	Virtual	
RPT 25	Managing Executive: People and Culture	C	53	Virtual	
RPT 26	Group Managing Executive: Retail and Business Banking	D	50	Virtual	
RPT 27	Global Executive Head: Industrials Sector	A	49	Virtual	
RPT 28	Group Executive Head: Chief Financial Officer	A	44	Virtual	
RPT 29	Managing Executive: SME and Platform Banking	B	58	Virtual	37 minutes: Virtual
RPT 30	Chief Financial Officer: Relationship Banking	C	51	Virtual	
RPT 31	Global Executive Head: Energy and Infrastructure Sector	A	56	Virtual	

Participant ID	Business Title	Company	Interview		
			Time minutes	Type	Follow-Up
RPT 32	Global Executive Head: Transaction Banking	A	46	In-person	
RPT 33	Chief Marketing Officer	A	38	Virtual	
RPT 34	Group Executive Head: Company Secretary	A	48	In-person	
RPT 35	Global Executive Head: Consumer Sector	A	54	Virtual	

Source: Author's own.

The research inquiry was conducted via one-on-one personal interviews according to a pre-determined schedule. Fifteen such interviews were conducted in person, and 25 via online platforms, depending on participants' circumstances. Inevitably, I encountered some challenges in accessing the targeted population – partly due to time constraints, and also because I was seen as a colleague and/or competitor by some institutions (Mason, 2010). However, **the 30 interviews equate to about 15% of the targeted population size**: an extremely encouraging proportion, given the difficulties I had to overcome, and the general challenges of gaining access to "difficult to access individuals".

The split between in-person and virtual interviews broadly aligns with the 60% preference for virtual interviews witnessed during the pilot study, with 40% of interviews held in person. With participants' prior consent, all interviews were recorded (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The in-person interviews were recorded via audio only, and virtual interviews were recorded using the MS Team platform, which captures both audio and video. Following guidance (Giorgi, 1985; Josselson, 2013), every interview started with a brief introduction from the interviewer, followed by the interviewee's confirmation of their willingness to be recorded. An additional three-minute framing discussion – introduced as a result of lessons learned during the pilot study – proved to be invaluable (*See Appendix D2: The adapted research questionnaire post pilot study)*.

4.7.1 Challenge of difficult-to-access participants

During my proposal phase, I acknowledged that accessing the targeted population for this study would be a serious challenge. Indeed, "difficult-to-access participants" (Crow & Lockhart, 2014; Neely et al., 2020; Samimi et al., 2019) have long proved problematic

for top management team scholars researching issues related to senior leaders: for example, indecision (Motloung & Lew, 2023), and the strategic interface among executives (Neely et al., 2020).

This study employed the following strategies to mitigate the challenge of access. Firstly, I leveraged my pre-existing professional relationships with participants (Westphal & Milton, 2000). My networks with complex businesses operating in South Africa span more than 25 years, and I have been an executive of a large, local banking organisation for 15 years.

Secondly, the invitation and consent letters sent to the targeted population were carefully worded. They stated that the study intended to explore participants' deep insights of their lived experiences of political behaviour, with the intention to build a better understanding of how executive leaders of complex organisations define the boundary conditions of their political behaviours. These letters ensured that the subsequent conversations were not based on preconceived ideas (Connelly et al., 2011).

Lastly, the invitation and consent letters stated that the inquiry would focus on upper echelon leaders of 13 locally controlled South African banks across retail, commercial, corporate, and investment banking segments. This was to assure potential participants that the study would not focus on their specific organisations, and would therefore not jeopardise the reputation of their firm. I further assured potential participants that the output of the study would be reviewed by a legal professional (an attorney or advocate) to establish whether the data had sufficiently been anonymised, and that no harm would come to any interviewee because of this study. The objective of this strategy was to reassure participants that I was concerned about their well-being (Yin, 2009). Table 4.5 reflects the challenge of accessing senior leaders of the targeted complex organisations.

Table 4.5: Number of interviews across target organisations

Target organisation *(where interview permission was granted)*	Number of interviews				
	Requested	Accepted and completed	Conducted Follow-up	Declined	No response
Company A	38	25	3	7	5
Company B	10	4	1	3	3
Company C	10	4	1	1	5
Company D	8	2	None	2	4
Total	**62**	**35**	**5**	**13**	**17**
Company E	• No interviews were held with any of the target population in Company E. • The company duly considered the request through its Human Capital, Risk, Legal and Compliance functions. • The decision to decline the request was cited for the following reasons: the researcher is senior in his organisation, which is a competitor, and it would not be appropriate for him to engage with our senior leaders on the topic. • The researcher appreciated Company E's response, albeit adverse, and understood the reasons for the refusal.				
Other banks Company F – M	• No interviews were held with any target population in Company F – M. • Despite numerous follow-up attempts, the companies did not respond. • What is common about these companies is that the researcher does not have strong relationship networks within these institutions, and they are all predominately retail banking businesses – the researcher has strong professional networks with banking institutions and corporate and investment banking units.				

Source: Author's own.

At the time of the study, in addition to the day-to-day running of their businesses, the targeted participants across all four institutions were engrossed in heightened seasonal corporate activities including: annual business and staff performance reviews; annual results preparations for the markets; auditors' reviews; and signoffs. Moreover, all four targeted institutions have a 31 December year-end, and publish their annual financial results no later than 31 March, as per Johannesburg Stock Exchange listing requirements. This inevitably put a strain on the scheduled interview timetable, which ran from September 2022 to April 2023. To compensate for consequent delays during the data collection phase, I therefore embarked on a parallel process of data analysis (Miles,

Huberman, & Saldaña, 2019). This revealed some early emerging themes that were further explored in subsequent interviews (Saunders et al., 2016).

The raw data collected from the interview recordings was transcribed into Word documents using a transcription service. Transcription itself can be seen as interpretive, selective, and representational. This increases the importance of ensuring quality during the resultant data analysis (Davidson, 2009). I therefore personally reviewed the transcripts to confirm their accuracy and quality. I also took manual notes during interviews, which were later digitised and added to the transcripts to enhance the insights gained. All interview data (voice, video recordings, and transcripts) was stored without identifiers to ensure the participants' confidentiality.

Overall, the take-up rate for one-on-one interviews with senior leaders across the four institutions exceeded 55%. This can be seen as a significant success. Again, the participation rate was in line with the pilot study – further cementing the value of that study. The detailed research analysis phase generated rich insights and understanding of the topic, reaching beyond the banking industry to broader financial services and other non-financial services industries.

Using prior professional networks was of utmost importance in accessing such a hard-to-reach population. However, I noted that this approach could introduce potential bias, and possibly influence participants' responses. I was therefore mindful to adopt practical strategies to mitigate this challenge.

4.7.2 Role of the researcher

In qualitative research, it is the researcher's responsibility to access participants' thoughts and emotions (Barrett & Twycross, 2018). This is difficult because it requires asking people to discuss potentially personal matters. Sometimes, the experiences are still fresh in their consciousness, but at other times participants may struggle to recall the past. Regardless of how the data is obtained, the researcher's primary responsibility is to protect the participants and their information (Arifin, 2018). These safeguards must be properly communicated to participants and authorised by the relevant research ethical review board prior to the commencement of the study.

My role as researcher comprised six key activities and responsibilities:

- Securing approval from the GIBS Research Ethics Committee. This was obtained in August 2022 before embarking on data collection.
- Engaging with institutional gatekeepers in the study sample to solicit the go-ahead for the inquiry. I approached 13 target institutions for access to the study population. Four institutions granted permission, but one declined on the grounds that the research might compromise their business. The rest of the institutions never responded *(See Table 4.5 above)*.
- Ensuring that all facets of data preparation and collection (that is, participant engagement during interviews, scheduling appointments, etc.) and data analysis were managed and monitored with the utmost integrity and professionalism in line with ethical standards for social science research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).
- Obtaining informed consent from all participants via physically-signed or online email consent forms, following the request for an interview.
- Building a relationship of trust with participants during the data collection phase.
- Ensuring that the identities and names of participants were not revealed at any stage of the data collection process.
- In order to prepare for this inquiry, I sought help from an experienced qualitative researcher, attended qualitative plenary sessions provided by GIBS faculty, and learned valuable lessons from the intense eight weeks programme on qualitative research methodology – an elective course that I attended during my Master of Philosophy, Corporate Strategy degree programme.

4.8 Analysis approach

Creswell and Creswell (2018, p. 193) urge researchers to "look at qualitative data analysis as a process that requires sequential steps to be followed, from the specific to general, and involving multiple levels of analysis". Thus, methodological coherence depends on research design, research question, and the topic itself – all of which influence the data analysis method (Byrne, 2017; Creswell, 2012; Janesick, 2000). A researcher may choose one or more methods for such analysis (Byrne, 2017), but the ultimate objective is to learn the meanings "participants hold about the problem or issue"

(Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 182). Qualitative data analyses provide *context* for a set of data which may include conversational data, observations, text and picture data, as well as unstructured, semi-structured, or structured interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lester et al., 2020). Scholars emphasise that there is no single correct method for analysing qualitative data. Instead, it is essential to establish innovative methods of thinking *about* the data (Lester et al.,2020). The procedure requires a series of steps – from the specific to the general – and multiple layers of analysis.

This study follows a hermeneutic phenomenology approach. The research methodology therefore generated detailed textual descriptions of how individuals experienced selected phenomena relating to the boundaries of political behaviour of senior leaders in complex organisations in South Africa. During the in-depth data analysis phase, the broader relevance of such insights was explored (Smith, 1997). In line with hermeneutic phenomenology, the data analysis followed key steps: the close reading of transcribed interviews; writing notes; establishing emerging themes; clustering themes; writing up data for each participant's case; and producing a consolidated write-up of summary statements. The final product also consolidated theoretical statements about the lived experience of senior leaders (Smith, 1999). Computer data analysis software, Atlas.ti 8, was used to document the notes and emerging themes. Atlas.ti is an analytical tool that organises, rearranges, and manages data in a creative yet systematic manner.

4.8.1 Detailed reading of transcripts

Using the idiographic approach (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014), I repeatedly examined every interview transcript and audio recording to fully engage with each participant's account of their experiences (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). This process allowed me to immerse myself in the data, recalling the atmosphere and context of the interviews (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith & Osborn, 2015), and noting significant observations along the way. This rigorous engagement ensured that I remained sensitive to the nuances of each participant's narrative, capturing both explicit and implicit meanings embedded in their accounts. In addition to fostering a deeper understanding of individual experiences, this approach aligned with the principles of hermeneutic phenomenology, which emphasises the importance of interpreting lived experiences within their specific contexts (van Manen, 1990, 2014). By systematically revisiting the data, I was able to get a sense of high-level meaning units while maintaining a strong connection to the original accounts of each participant. This iterative process later in the data analysis process, enriched the

interpretation of the data and ensured that the analysis remained grounded in the participants' perspectives (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

4.8.2 Generating preliminary meaning units

I wrote comprehensive notes on all 30 transcripts and interpreted them for meaning, following the guidelines outlined by Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014). These detailed notes allowed me to capture both the explicit content and the underlying significance of each participant's narrative. From these initial reflections, I refined the notes into preliminary meaning units, carefully distilling the essence of each participant's insights (Cope, 2011; Smith & Osborn, 2015). These meaning units represented key themes and patterns that emerged from the data, reflecting the unique experiences and perspectives of senior leaders while highlighting commonalities across the dataset.

4.8.3 Coding the data

Coding is a method for translating unstructured qualitative data into a coherent and credible narrative (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). It involves identifying significant portions of empirical data – whether a word, paragraph, or page – and assigning a single word or phrase that encapsulates their essence. Beyond categorising data, coding also helps recognise and classify themes, effectively indexing the data for analysis. This process is critical in qualitative research as it reduces the volume of raw data, makes it more accessible for systematic analysis, and ultimately enhances the rigour and quality of both the analysis and findings (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Coding can be conducted manually by human investigators ("coders") or, in some instances, by computer programmes using specific search techniques (Brough, 2019).

In this study, I coded and reviewed data for all 30 transcripts, ensuring that themes were systematically identified and categorised. The coding of the first 12 transcripts was reviewed in collaboration with an experienced coder to establish consistency and refine the coding process. As recommended by Busetto et al. (2020), the initial stages of coding involved a team-based approach to ensure reliability and alignment. A subset of four transcripts from the initial 12 was independently coded by an experienced coder and me. We then compared and consolidated our work through regular discussions. This collaborative process ensured that codes were consistently applied across the data,

helping to establish a robust coding tree and shared understanding of the meaning of individual codes. This iterative approach strengthened the credibility of the analysis and fostered a shared framework for interpreting the complex and nuanced accounts of political behaviour among senior leaders.

4.8.4 Emerging themes

Themes which emerge from coding process are a cornerstone of the analytical process, as they connect detailed observations from the data to the broader inquiry. In this study, I ensured that the emerging themes were firmly grounded in participants' narratives, accurately reflecting their accounts without being influenced by researcher bias (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Smith, 1999). This required a rigorous, iterative approach to analysing and refining the themes, constantly checking them against the original data to preserve their authenticity. By doing so, the thematic analysis illuminated the complex perceptions and experiences of senior leaders and ensured that the findings remained true to the voices of those at the heart of the research. This process underscored the importance of maintaining integrity and transparency throughout the qualitative inquiry, while delivering rich, nuanced insights into the boundaries of political behaviour in organisational contexts.

4.8.5 Clustering of themes

This stage of the analysis involved identifying, interpreting, and connecting themes to construct a comprehensive written summary of each participant's experience (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith & Osborn, 2015). I carefully reviewed and grouped themes together based on similarities, reflecting the shared meanings and patterns that emerged across the data. In cases where certain themes did not align with the emerging structure, I excluded them to ensure the analysis remained coherent and focused. This iterative process resulted in the development of a final list of themes and sub-themes, providing a structured framework to represent the nuanced experiences of participants (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith & Osborn, 2015). The interpretive process of compiling narratives was further enriched by integrating direct extracts from participants' interview transcripts (Smith, 1999). These excerpts added authenticity and depth to the findings, allowing the participants' voices to resonate within the analysis. By linking themes to specific examples, the narratives captured the complexity of participants' lived

experiences while ensuring that the interpretations remained grounded in the empirical data. This process of connecting and refining themes highlighted the rich interplay of individual and collective perceptions, enabling a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation and ensuring the integrity and credibility of the study's findings.

4.8.6 Write-up of hermeneutic phenomenological study

For the final consolidated write-up, summary statements were developed to encapsulate the cross-cutting patterns that emerged from participants' experiences (Smith, 1999). I took care to ensure that these patterns were derived organically from the data, rather than being shaped or constrained by pre-existing theoretical frameworks. By grounding the developing framework in participants' narratives, the analysis remained authentic and reflective of their lived realities. The summary statements were designed to capture general insights while preserving the richness and nuance of individual cases, allowing the study to balance broad patterns with specific, personal perspectives (Smith, 1999).

The final write-up included a detailed synthesis of all participants' accounts, combining participants' quotes with interpretative commentary to provide a layered understanding of the phenomenon. This integration of direct quotes ensured that participants' voices were central to the narrative, while the interpretative commentary offered deeper context and analysis, bridging individual experiences with the broader themes. By combining these elements, the write-up provided a comprehensive, nuanced account of the phenomenon under investigation, highlighting both the shared patterns and unique dimensions of participants' experiences. This approach ensured that the findings were both rigorous and reflective of the complexities inherent in the boundaries of political behaviour.

4.9 Data quality

To ensure rigour, transparency, and trustworthiness throughout the study, I adopted a comprehensive qualitative validation strategy guided by established literature (Yin, 2016; Aguinis et al., 2018). Drawing on Creswell’s (2013) synthesis of qualitative research standards, I applied multiple strategies aligned with the interpretivist and phenomenological paradigms underpinning this study. Table 4.6 summarises

perspectives and terminology that inform data quality in qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2013).

Table 4.6: Data quality validation

Study	Perspective	Terms
LeCompte and Goetz (1982)	Use of parallel, qualitative equivalents to their quantitative counterparts in experimental and survey research	Internal and external validity, reliability, objectivity
Lincoln and Guba (1986)	Use of alternative terms that apply more to naturalistic axioms	Credibility, authenticity, transferability, dependability, confirmability
Eisner (1991)	Use of alternative terms that provide reasonable standards for judging the credibility of qualitative research	Structural corroboration, consensual validation, referential adequacy
Creswell (2013)	Synthesised view	Triangulation, member checking, thick description

Source: Adapted from Creswell (2013).

***Credibility and authenticity*:** To establish credibility, I engaged in prolonged immersion with the research context by conducting 30 in-depth interviews with senior leaders across South Africa's banking sector, including three follow-up conversations. I recorded each interview, transcribed the content verbatim (used the services of experienced transcriber who had signed an NDA), and took detailed field notes. After transcription, I re-listened to the recordings to verify transcription accuracy and refine interpretive clarity. This iterative process enabled rich contextual understanding and fostered reflexivity during analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Creswell, 2013). I also shared emerging themes with selected participants for respondent validation, which ensured that interpretations faithfully represented participants' lived experiences (Bell et al., 2019).

Dependability and confirmability: To ensure dependability, I maintained a comprehensive audit trail of decisions made throughout data collection, coding, and theme development (Morse, 2015). I documented coding frameworks, revised iterations, and analytical memos to enhance methodological transparency. To bolster confirmability, I consciously bracketed personal biases and reflected critically on my assumptions and professional experience. I also sought feedback from experienced

qualitative researchers during data interpretation to reduce potential bias (Tracy, 2010; Wood et al., 2020).

Transferability: I provided thick descriptions of participant narratives and contextual variables to allow readers to assess the applicability of findings to similar settings (Creswell, 2013). While I did not triangulate data using external corporate or regulatory reports, I ensured internal triangulation through data source diversity, interviewing leaders from various institutions, functions, and demographic backgrounds. This cross-sectional design enhanced the robustness of interpretation (Nowell et al., 2017).

Additional techniques: Beyond the above validation strategies, I employed the following additional techniques to reinforce rigour (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016; Rahi, 2017):

- Actively considered how my own worldview and professional background might affect interpretation (Austin & Sutton, 2014).
- Recognised and addressed sample bias by selecting diverse participants across leadership levels, business units, and demographics.
- Prioritised thorough interview planning and piloted the interview guide (Saunders et al., 2009).
- Maintained detailed field notes, documented reflective insights, and tracked key methodological decisions (Morse, 2015).
- Compared individual accounts to identify converging and diverging themes (Noble & Smith, 2015).
- Embedded verbatim quotes in the findings chapter to illustrate the lived experiences of participants (Ghauri et al., 2020).
- Demonstrated logical coherence in the data interpretation process (Morse, 2015).
- Engaged in peer debriefing to test the defensibility of interpretations (Tracy, 2010).

4.10 Methodological limitations

As with any exploratory qualitative research, this study had its limitations. These are outlined below:

- The subjective nature of qualitative research inevitably introduces interviewer and interviewee bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), which may adversely impact data and its interpretation. In this study such bias included: the researcher's proximity to the data collection process; the data's trustworthiness; and the

researcher's lack of extensive experience in conducting interviews for research purposes.

- The design setting for this study took place within multiple complex organisations operating in South Africa. Although homogeneity was prioritised, a different participant population of between 27 and 30 interviewees might have given different answers to the research questions. However, this limitation was mitigated by the relevance of the population's composition to the research topic.
- The selection and use of the non-probability sampling technique for this inquiry introduced selection bias because of the researcher's prior knowledge of the organisations studied. Potentially, this could have affected the generalisability of results, but the researcher set rigorous selection criteria for the population under study (including experience, role, diversity of functions, and various executive levels), so this factor was not considered a significant limitation.
- Interview questions were crafted from the literature reviewed. This may have influenced their substance and form, but is not viewed as a dominant limitation.

4.11 Research ethics

Ethics is integral to research design and methodology, and all research projects should adopt ethical norms to protect participants from deception, pressure, or incentives. Due to their in-depth nature, qualitative studies are particularly vulnerable to ethical challenges (Arifin, 2018), and qualitative researchers are frequently questioned about their role. From concept formulation to design, interviews, transcriptions, analysis, verification, and reporting, the researcher is involved in every step of the qualitative research process (Lester et al., 2020) and has a responsibility to safeguard every human encounter (Qu & Dumay, 2011).

In this study, I ensured that data generation was compliant with the Protection of Personal Information Act (Republic of South Africa, 2013). I also obtained the necessary ethical clearance from the GIBS research ethics committee before approaching any field activity, including initial overtures to potential participants. Signed consent forms were collected, strict confidentiality was followed throughout the report writing process, and participants' pseudonyms were used to anonymise individual contributions.

Given the targeted population, I had to seek management consent for participants to engage in the study (Greenwood, 2016). I allayed potential concerns and built trust by

emphasising that all data would remain confidential. Furthermore, participants were assured that participation was voluntary – and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. An explanation of informed consent was attached to the questionnaires and was also verbally explained before participants signed their consent letters.

As researcher, I recognised that the ethical review process would continue throughout the research inquiry (Bos, 2020). I also acknowledged that this ongoing process would provide an opportunity not only to reflexively engage with ethical practice (Bell & Bryman, 2007; Jeanes, 2017) but also to conduct "ethics in practice" (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

4.12 Conclusion

This chapter has explained how and why the study adopted an inductive, qualitative approach, based on hermeneutic phenomenological design, to understand how senior leaders define the boundaries of political behaviour in an organisation. The chapter also described how data was generated: via one-on-one, semi-structured, in-depth interviews with top decision-makers of regulated and complex banking organisations operating in South Africa. Finally, the processes for collecting data, conducting analyses, and recording results were outlined, and the study's limitations and ethical challenges were discussed.

Chapter 5: Research findings

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I describe the results of my research findings into the duality of political behaviour within senior leadership. Framed by the introduction and conclusion, the chapter comprises three main sections, each of which presents these findings and relates them to the research questions.

In the first section (5.2), I explore how participants conceptualise and define political behaviour and its boundaries. I also explore the *nuances* of the definition – generated by my research findings – which partly constitute my novel contribution to current theory. In the subsequent section (5.3), I describe the factors (positive, neutral, context dependent and negative) that influence the political behaviour of senior leaders in an organisation. Importantly, I also attempt to deepen the understanding of the *dual nature* of political behaviour by exploring the *varying implications* of such factors in "constructive" and "destructive" political behaviour. Thirdly (in section 5.4), I present guidelines as to how organisations can embed/mitigate senior leaders' positive/negative political behaviour to ensure short-term success and long-term sustainability. Finally, I summarise my findings in relation to the research questions.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to revisit the nature of political behaviour and the motivation for my research. Political behaviour emerges from the intricate interplay of differentiation and interdependence among individuals and groups striving to influence an organisation's strategic agenda and outcomes (Eisenhardt & Bourgeois,1988; Shepherd et al., 2020). Although top management leaders are responsible for delivering results in their respective business units, they also rely on collaboration with other divisions to achieve overall organisational objectives. However, the scarcity of resources generates competition and tension between individuals and groups (Mumford & Pettigrew, 1975), thereby igniting potentially destructive political behaviour which may adversely affect strategic decision-making (Hickson et al., 2003; Shepherd et al., 2020).

The aim of this research was to gain insight into how senior leaders – whose roles inherently necessitate political behaviour – define and interpret such behaviour and the boundaries thereof. The study further sought to identify measures which might mitigate potential dysfunction within top management teams, thus safeguarding the financial and non-financial outcomes of the organisation. By so doing, the study deepens understanding of the implications of political behaviour by individuals whose primary function is to influence and foster collaboration among others.

The research was based on 30 interviews – including three follow-up interviews. The data analysis was conducted using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA): a qualitative thematic approach (Love et al., 2020). After analysing multiple iterations of data, an over-arching theme, master themes, and sub-themes were developed from codes derived from participants' direct quotes. The "Findings Roadmap" outlined in Figure 5.1 aligns the study's findings with the three research questions posed at the outset of this inquiry.

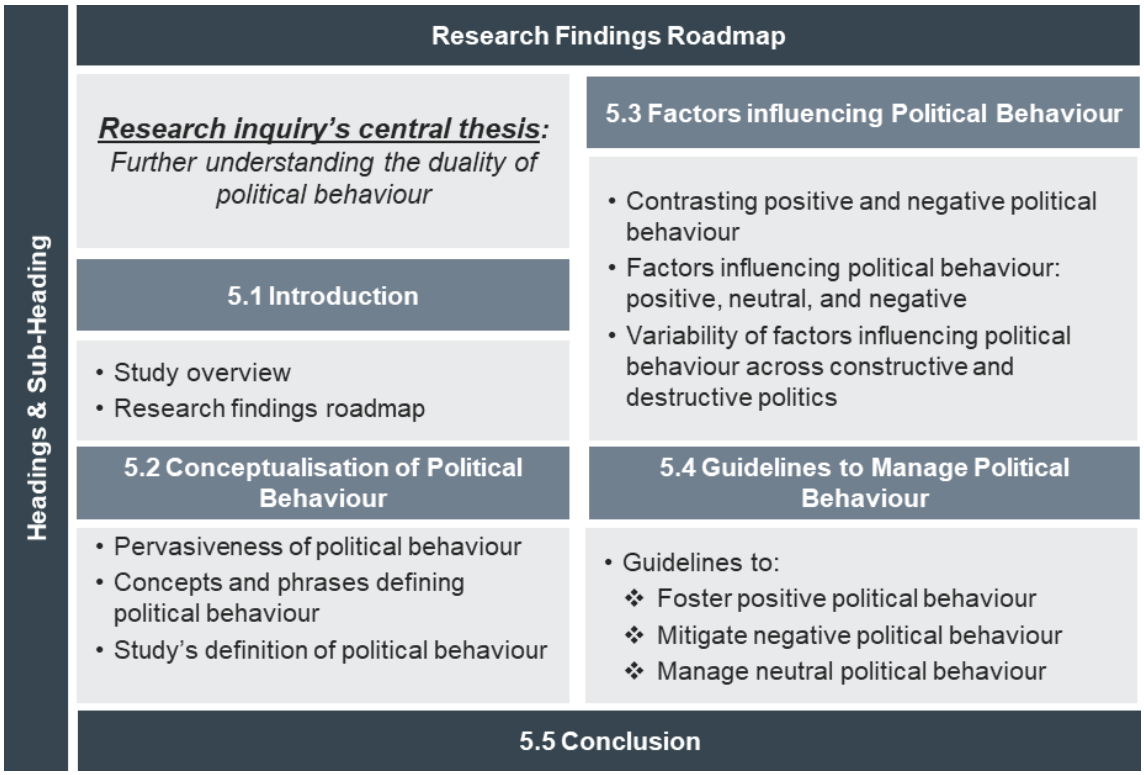

Figure 5.1: Research findings roadmap

Source: Author's own.

In this chapter I will systematically explore key aspects of each theme and sub-theme in the "Findings Roadmap", thus shedding light on the intricate dynamics and phenomena uncovered during the data gathering and analysis phases. As mentioned earlier, the study was based on in-depth interviews with a select, diverse group of senior leaders (seven female and 20 male) from four major South African banks. The sample included chief executive officers, chief financial officers, a chief operations officer, chief information officers, global business unit / departmental heads, chief people and culture officers, and chief marketing officers. Each interview lasted approximately 47 minutes, which enabled a thorough exploration of participants' rich insights and lived experiences

in the context of the study's objectives. A selection of edited comments is included in the chapter to show the range and diversity of their voices.

5.2 Senior leaders' conceptualisation of political behaviour and its boundaries

To answer the first research question of this inquiry, I investigated participants' conceptualisations and interpretations of political behaviour, and subsequently explored how they defined its scope and boundaries, based on their own lived experiences. This section summarises my findings in relation to three major themes that emerged from the data gathering phase.

The first such theme is the *pervasiveness* of political behaviour (section 5.2.1). The second theme presents *key concepts* (positive, neutral and negative) used by participants to *define* political behaviour (section 5.2.2). The final theme (section 5.2.3) focuses on participants' perceptions and how they *conceptualise* the dual nature of political behaviour.

5.2.1 Pervasiveness of political behaviour

Senior leaders from all types of organisations clearly acknowledged the pervasiveness and dominance of political behaviour. They felt it was intrinsic to organisational dynamics – and entrenched in the fabric of human interactions. Participants typically broached the ubiquity of political behaviour within three to fifteen minutes of their respective interviews and shared a wide range of perceptions drawn from personal experiences – as shown by the following quotes.

According to PPT1, politicking "exists the world over… I would say political behaviour within the workplace is inevitable", while PPT2 adds: "I'm not a political person. I don't even enjoy politics. But I do know how it affects us". PPT16 further asserted that political behaviour goes hand in hand with being human: "I'm not in the camp that believes political power in the organisation is negative. No. I'm one of the guys that believe it's human behaviour". In essence, participants agreed that organisational operations – formal or informal – and indeed performance itself, are strongly influenced by political behaviour. This is further accentuated by PPT 30, who states that: "I have come to appreciate that it's actually a reality. So, the political environment is actually real".

5.2.2 Key concepts in defining political behaviour

In conceptualising the definition of political behaviour by senior leaders, some participants highlighted the dichotomous nature of such behaviour, noting its positive and negative aspects. Other participants saw this dichotomy as essentially context dependent: potentially either positive or negative, depending on the situation. Furthermore, participants frequently drew parallels and analogies to communicate the complex, dynamic nature of such behaviour, as they perceived it within the workplace. Another major concept that emerged from the interview process was the interplay of personal values, individual traits, and the strategic dimensions of political actions.

At this point, it is worth summarising participants' positive, neutral, and negative interpretations of political behaviour and the boundaries thereof. PPT1 highlights the positive nature of such behaviour: "Consistency, honesty, and transparency – that is my political behaviour. Those traits are typically why people in the business will listen to me and do what I want them to do". This comment is noteworthy because it diverges from traditional interpretations of political behaviour and shows how positive personal values can build trust and compliance within the workplace. PPT1 thus offers a compelling insight into how political behaviour can be viewed through the lens of ethical leadership and value-driven strategies.

Other participants identified the importance of context-dependence and neutrality when defining behaviour within variable organisational environments. They agreed that such behaviour is not monolithic in nature but varies in intensity and form depending on situational factors. For example, PPT3 says: "I would argue that the more 'too many' people there are, in any organisational situation, the less commercial the environment, the more political it is".

Finally, some leaders were seen to engage in negative political behaviour through abusing their positional power: leveraging their influence to prioritise personal interests over the well-being of the organisation, thereby conflating their personal and professional identities. PPT20 describes the behaviour of such leaders thus: "They assimilate the power and person. There's no distinction between the office and the person now. They become one thing [and in the process they abuse power for self-interest]".

Furthermore, participants provided a diverse array of concepts which influenced their definitions of political behaviour, with each respondent offering unique insights. Table 5.1 gives a comprehensive overview of their perceptions – positive, neutral and negative

– and summarises their interpretations of political behaviour within their respective organisational contexts.

Table 5.1: Participants' conceptual basis for defining political behaviour

Key Concepts	Participants' comments
Positive concepts in defining political behaviour	
Consistency, honesty, and transparency	*Consistency, honesty, and transparency that is my political behaviour, but nobody would frame it as such. But those traits are typically why the people in the business will listen to me and do what I want them to do. That's political behaviour – PPT1.*
"Biology" and resource distribution	*Politics is necessary for the functioning and the preservation of every organism, mostly biological organisms, for their existence. Even in one's own body, a level of politics is at play within your organs, within the energy that you receive and the energy you consume. So, as a principle, there are resources. Those resources are limited, but the resources need to be distributed – PPT 9.*
Profit motive	*What is political behaviour? Let's just look at a capitalist lens and let's use it loosely to drive shareholder value and generate profits for the commercial enterprise. And that is the primacy of our objective. Therefore, the theoretical construct is every decision, every engagement and every move you make – PPT 10.*
Corporate dynamics	*Over time I've realised what is loosely referred to as office politics. I, in my own mind, have changed the phrase to* ***corporate dynamics****. The reason is very simple. I think office politics has a negative connotation. So, the disposition when people hear that word is negative, whereas I firmly believe that corporate dynamics are integral to the functioning of a large, complex corporation – PPT 14.*
Natural "human" behaviour	*Number one, I'm not in the camp that believes political power in the organisation is negative. No. I'm one of the guys who believe it's human behaviour. When one or two people come together you would have to inadvertently look at things from your point of view, from your priority and your perceived outcome – PPT 16.*
Power dynamics	*You have your Board, and then you have your executives. That very construct, even when you look at an employment contract which links up the rest of the people in the organisation to this directing and controlling mind, that very construct tells you that you will always have power and influence distributed at different levels – PPT 19.*

Key Concepts	Participants' comments
Shared purpose	*As a leader of the country or a leader of the region, you have the same aspirations as a CIB head in Zambia, Uganda or Nigeria. So, you have to play the political dynamics behind that. And some of those political dynamics are not just specific to the division that we work in or the cultural differences that we need to mention; they're also [specific] to the regional dynamics – PPT 29.*
Core mandate and performance	*Ultimately, we are all employed to do a job. We have a role to play in moving the organisation forward for the benefit of the shareholders and various stakeholders around us. And when you're an executive, you're obviously expected to get results – PPT 31.*
Neutral or context-dependant concepts in defining political behaviour	
"People-heavy" environment	*When is political behaviour necessary to succeed? I would argue that the more people there are and the less commercial the environment, the more political it is – PPT 3.*
Reciprocity, shared cause	*It's often associated with, with something which is negative [but] shared values are shared viewpoints that you feel you can get aligned to further a certain cause – PPT 4.*
Psychological safety	*It's really around the association, to be honest with you. I just think that people psychologically have a need to belong – PPT 6.*
Inescapable political participation	*You hear a lot of people saying to you; I don't get involved in politics. [But] if you want to or not, you are involved in politics because you're dealing with humans. You're dealing with humans who've got a particular interest and a particular style and certain things that drive them – PPT 11.*
Political capital	*When I'm talking to people I use the phrase political capital, and often I use that in a positive sense. Although, actually, you can use political capital in a negative sense. And one of the reasons I use that phrase is because capital is something that it's a scarce resource – PPT 18.*
Power, influence, credibility and position	*How you define politics in an organisation is power and influence – PPT20. So, for me, I would say that it's all about having the ability to create influence or have influence – PPT 21. I talk about the need to use position/influence to achieve objectives – PPT 23*
Leadership disposition: *(born or made leader) and (innate political instinct)*	*So, I come from a school of thought that says that leaders are born but also can be made. And so, I find that it comes a lot more naturally to those who are born leaders to navigate politics that exist within an organisation because they exist as a result of human beings. Human beings who choose to say that they would like to progress and as they want to progress then they want to look for the shortest route to achieve that progression – PPT 24.*

Key Concepts	Participants' comments
Contrasting yet coexisting politics: (*simultaneously acting as an individual and collective as part of a team)*	*I think political dynamics have been in existence for a very long time. And I agree that there are two views to some extent. The third one is where you have the extreme opposites, and I think they've been operating either individually or even collectively – PPT 24.*
Duality of political behaviour	*It is true that it can be both negative and positive. I've had the privilege of having the positive side of politics, but most recently, the negative side – PPT 27.*
Navigating relational politics	*When you need to push through things like campaigns, you have to lobby, and this organisation, in particular, is a relational one. So, power and influence are actually quite key – PPT 33.*
Negative concepts in defining political behaviour	
Playing political power games	*As a leader you kind of get an understanding of the political power games that happened to you, and you also play them. Why do I say that? Because I'm a leader of 180-odd people in my finance team. So that means within those 180 people, there's always politics. If I've got an affinity with something, let's say, Manchester United, that's already a hook for somebody because that is something that somebody can ask me – PPT 7.*
Corporate compromise	*So, my first point is I've learned to accept politics are there; I hate it, and I think it's destructive. But if you can understand it and navigate it, you can get a bit out. You can't avoid the political dynamics around you. Regarding the negatives of organisations, I say* **corporates are a process of compromises***. And that's why we are always suboptimal in our outcomes. Always suboptimal because we constantly compromise to make it work – PPT 14.*

Source: Author's own.

5.2.3 Summary of findings for Research Question 1: senior leaders' perceptions and conceptualisation of the definition of political behaviour

The empirical data from participants' interviews, as covered in the preceding sections, including details outlined in Table 5.1, presents a multifaceted view of the key ideas that form part of the conceptualisation of the definition of political behaviour in a complex organisational context. Key concepts and phrases identified by participants indicate a

diverse range of perspectives: positive, neutral, and negative. The insights garnered from these perspectives may be distilled into seven broader concepts.

One: ***the dual nature of political behaviour –*** many participants noted that political behaviour has both positive and negative aspects, often shaped by the strategic use of influence and power within the organisation. Two: ***ethics and morality in politics –*** a recurring theme was the importance of ethical conduct in political behaviour. Participants emphasised positive personal values such as consistency, honesty, and transparency as vital traits. Three: ***power dynamics and influence –*** the ability of senior leaders to influence and drive change, particularly in challenging socio-economic environments. This includes the ability to navigate power games and internal politics. Four: ***the role of personal and organisational values –*** participants emphasised the significance of aligning political behaviour with both personal and organisational values, recognising the impact of leadership on the distribution of resources and decision-making. Five: ***diversity of thought and experience –*** the importance of embracing diverse viewpoints and experiences, and the recognition that diversity can lead to innovative ideas and robust decision-making. Six: ***navigating complex environments –*** particularly in non-commercial and environmental contexts, and the need for leaders to navigate these dynamics adeptly. Seven: ***the impact on organisational culture –*** the role of political behaviour in shaping an organisation's culture was also noted, with a focus on building social capital, networking, and fostering a culture of empowerment and autonomy.

Drawing from empirical data, it can therefore be concluded that senior leaders define political behaviour within an organisation as a **pervasive influence** that is **dualistic in nature** – and can be either positive or negative. This aligns with extant literature (Elbanna, 2018; Ferris & Judge, 1991; Kapoutsis & Thanos, 2016; Zanzi & O'Neill, 2001). Moreover, this understanding also recognises that **personal values and perspectives,** as well as **contextual factors**, all play a role in the achievement of **desired objectives.** This is a further novel theoretical contribution made by my research**.**

Desired objectives can manifest themselves in **dual forms**: they can be positive, leading to empowerment, guidance, and access/resource distribution; or negative, resulting in the suppression of individual interests, or the favouring of select groupings (Elbanna, 2018; Ferris & Judge, 1991; Kapoutsis & Thanos, 2016; Zanzi & O'Neill, 2001). This aligns with the definition of political behaviour in extant literature. However, my study broadens current knowledge in revealing the importance of including personal values and perspectives, as well as contextual factors, when defining such behaviour. This is further discussed in Chapter 6 (section 6.1).

In conclusion, Figure 5.2 presents a summary of senior leaders' conceptualisation of the definition and boundaries of political behaviour, reflecting the key insights from findings to Research Question 1. In short, political behaviour is a pervasive phenomenon within all organisation types – including profit and not-for-profit businesses – and concepts that inform the definition of political behaviour carry positive, neutral and negative connotations. The definition derived here extends Elbanna's (2018) neutral view by explicitly considering the way that personal values and contingent elements operate in mediating behaviour and its boundaries. This construct thus departs from earlier definitions that were mainly oriented toward intention and power use (Mintzberg, 1983) to focus instead on subjective interpretation influenced by ethics and context.

KEY CONCEPTS OR PHRASES

(positive, neutral and negative) informing the definition of political behaviour

	Positive, neutral and negative conceptual concepts
Politics exists world over and part of human nature – it is real; pervasive; and inevitable	**Positive concepts:** • Consistency, honesty, and transparency • Biological concept influencing resource distribution • Theoretical construct driving capitalistic objective • Reframing politics to constructive corporate reality • Political power as DNA of human behaviour • Structured power dynamics • Shared purpose within political landscapes • Focused on core mandate and accountability of outcomes **Neutral concepts:** • Politics intensifies in people-heavy environments thus reduce commerciality • Power, influence, credibility and position • Leadership disposition (born or made leader) and innate political instinct • Contrasting yet coexisting politics – simultaneously acting as an individual and collective as part of a team • Duality of political behaviour • Navigating relational politics **Negative concepts:** • Playing political power games • Unavoidable political dynamics often leading to corporate compromises.

Figure 5.2: Political behaviour defined and its boundaries – conceptualisation

Source: Author's own.

5.3 Factors influencing the duality of political behaviour among senior leaders

5.3.1 Introduction

The analysis conducted in this study shows a clear dichotomy between the enablers and preventers of political behaviour among senior leaders, thereby illuminating the multifaceted nature of politics within organisations. This finding is particularly relevant to Research Question 2 (RQ2), which seeks to further understand the duality of political behaviour through identifying the factors that either facilitate or inhibit such behaviour at senior leadership level: ***RQ2: What factors influence the duality of political behaviour among senior leaders?***

In the following section, I start by contrasting positive and negative political behaviour, (summarised in Figure 5.6 below). I then present findings about the factors influencing ***positive political behaviour*** (section 5.3.2) and explain how such factors have a constructive impact on both organisational performance and individual well-being. Thereafter, I share findings about the factors influencing ***negative political behaviour*** (section 5.3.3) and show how such factors typically involve unethical practices and manipulative tactics that prioritise personal gain or influence at the expense of the collective well-being of both the organisation and its members. Thirdly, I describe the ***neutral or contextual-dependent*** factors that influence political behaviour among senior leaders (section 5.3.4) and show how such factors operate as both enablers and constraints, depending on situational dynamics. Lastly, I discuss the variability of positive and negative factors across constructive and disruptive politics in the organisation (section 5.3.5).

Overall, the findings illuminate the nature of both the positive and negative factors of political behaviour. The experiences of the participants clearly indicate that political behaviour is not only pervasive but also varies in its manifestations within organisational settings. As summarised in the expanded definition of political behaviour (section 5.2.3), the delineation of the boundaries of political behaviour is thus contingent upon the individual's value system and ethical considerations; how they distinguish between what is deemed acceptable and ethical, from what is considered unacceptable and unethical.

This distinction generated the identification of two distinct categories of political behaviour, as depicted in Figure 5.3. These categories emerged from the research findings and broadly align with extent literature. The discussion chapter (Chapter 6) further explains how the findings converge with – and diverge from – current literature.

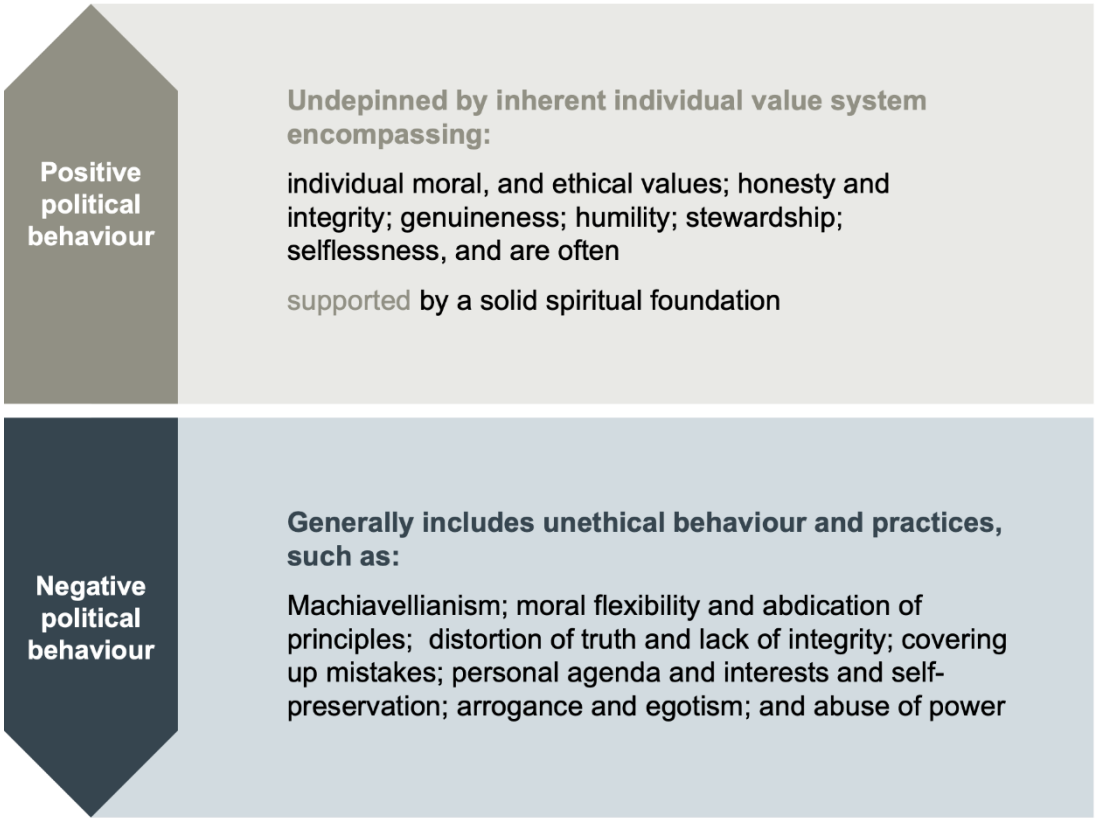

Figure 5.3: Contrasting positive and negative political behaviour

Source: Author's own.

5.3.2 Factors influencing positive political behaviour

It is worth exploring participants' perceptions of positive political behaviour in more detail. As Figure 5.3 shows, "positive political behaviour," is characterised by its constructive impact on both organisational performance and individual well-being. This type of behaviour is principally underpinned by a robust individual value system, which embodies individual ethical and moral values (like honesty, authenticity, humility, stewardship, and selflessness) and is often supported by a strong spiritual foundation. The following section explores other underlying aspects of the individual value system that influence positive political behaviour, as captured in Figure 5.3. Namely, individual moral, and ethical values; honesty and integrity; genuineness; humility; stewardship and selflessness – also supported by a solid spiritual foundation.

5.3.2.1 Moral and ethical value systems

The role of values in determining constructive, as distinct from detrimental, political behaviour was a central theme in participants' discussions. Interviews with senior leaders clearly demonstrate that individual values are a critical driving force in shaping political behaviour within organisations. Indeed, there was a unanimous recognition of the profound interconnection between an individual's values and that of their organisation's values and culture. This underlines the significant responsibility of leaders as custodians: emphasising their duty to embody and uphold such values to promote positive political conduct within their organisations. As PPT31 succinctly states: "I think values are very important. They separate bad political behaviour from constructive political behaviour and are interlinked with the culture of an organisation. As leaders, we are custodians of that culture, and we need to live by those values". This statement encapsulates the crucial influence of values in shaping the nature of political behaviour, and highlights the pivotal role of leadership in fostering a values-driven organisational culture. Moreover, this perspective is integral to understanding the undercurrents of political behaviour in organisational settings and the importance of ethical leadership in guiding such behaviour towards constructive outcomes.

Furthermore, the interviews with senior leaders posited that individual values are derived from *various* sources such as religious beliefs or personal life experiences. As such, they significantly influence leaders' approaches and interactions in the political realm of their organisations. As PPT26 explains:

> "People come from different backgrounds. Some are religious but I have a cousin who has no religion at all. He was head of the Tender Board, and he would not accept any gift whatsoever. I asked him why. He's like: 'Look, we were taught these things' – and he comes from a political background."

This anecdote shows how deeply ingrained values, irrespective of their origin, can influence decision-making and actions in the political context of an organisation. Such insights underscore the importance of moral and ethical values in the realm of political behaviour, revealing how these deeply held beliefs shape the conduct and choices of leaders within their organisational environments.

5.3.2.2 Honesty and integrity

Senior leaders interviewed in this study consistently highlighted integrity and truthfulness as fundamental to effective leadership. They further emphasised the essential role of

transparency and self-reflection in their decision-making processes, marking these values as indispensable for ethical and responsible leadership. PPT26 comments: "We stand for honesty in our leadership, where we can say: ‘Guys, are we still reflective as leaders?’" Such insights underscore the importance of continuous self-assessment, honesty, and integrity as key attributes of leadership. They also highlight how these core values not only guide leaders in their actions and decisions but set a standard for ethical conduct within the organisation. This is seen as crucial for building trust, fostering transparency, and ensuring the overall integrity of the organisational culture.

5.3.2.3 Authenticity

The interviews consistently underscored the importance of prioritising authenticity and cultivating genuine relationships. Authenticity was recognised as crucial for leaders when navigating political situations, enhancing their ability to function in complex, continually evolving environments. PPT29 says: “I’m very clear about my personal values, and that’s the place that I know how to lead from. Actually, just being authentic and building real relationships”. PPT21 adds: “Authentic leaders use political behaviour for the benefit of the broader organisation or community”, which suggests that authenticity in leadership involves using political acumen not for personal gains but for the greater good – actively fostering genuine connections.

5.3.2.4 Self-awareness and humility

Self-awareness and humility were seen as integral traits for leaders who prioritise collective well-being over personal achievement, thus reflecting their commitment to altruism and community-focused approaches. PPT9 states: “I’m not operating at a level where I am still trying to be successful. The work that I do is not for me. Now I’m ensuring there’s a context and environment for others to come and grow and thrive”. This comment highlights a shift from self-centric to others-centric leadership. Such insights further suggest that leaders who are cognisant of their strengths and limitations, and who approach their roles with humility, are more likely to positively influence their organisations – and foster environments where others can succeed.

5.3.2.5 Stewardship and selflessness

Discussions with senior leaders revealed a profound understanding of the importance of pursuing stewardship, rather than self-centred career goals. As PPT14 says, a leader should understand “that their position in the organisation is stewarding for future generations, rather than maximising their own careers”. Endorsing this sentiment, PPT24 adds: “Leave a place better than you found it. Once you really have stewardship as part of your core, [other] aspects such as servant leadership will emanate from that”. This further illustrates the belief that stewardship is integral to fostering sustainable growth and positive organisational transformation.

5.3.2.6 Spiritual grounding

Some senior leaders indicated that spiritual grounding can bestow a profound sense of purpose, which subsequently guides them towards nurturing positive political behaviour within their organisations. As PPT6 remarks: “At the end of the day, if we don’t have people that are pushing the good, then we are always going to be challenged”. PPT20 further suggests that spirituality builds self-knowledge: “I would say it influences how you get into conversations, because you know who you are – your values, your own boundaries”.

In summary, the collective insights regarding the factors that foster positive political behaviour among senior leaders highlight the central role of spirituality, self-awareness, and ethical grounding in shaping leadership conduct and responses to political subtleties within organisational contexts (Figure 5.4).

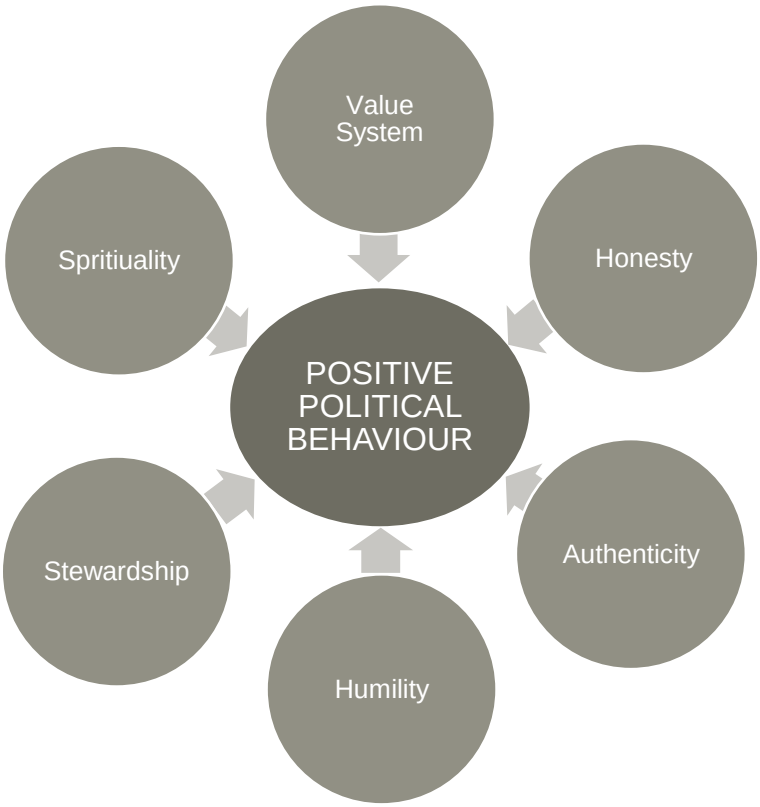

Figure 5.4: Positive political behaviour

Source: Author's own.

5.3.3 Factors influencing negative political behaviour

Participants linked negative political behaviour with specific personality traits and behavioural patterns. They asserted that such behaviour is identified by its tendency to erode organisational effectiveness and diminish individual job satisfaction. Such behaviour typically involves unethical practices and manipulative tactics that prioritise personal gain or influence at the expense of the collective well-being of both the organisation and its members. Negative political behaviour includes Machiavellianism; moral flexibility and a departure from principled conduct (Figure 5.5). Related practices include the abuse of power; prioritisation of personal agendas and self-interests; and the perpetuation of inequality and discriminatory actions within organisational settings. Participants also highlighted the detrimental implications of such behaviours, accentuating their potential to significantly undermine both the overall effectiveness of an organisation and the well-being of individual members. Furthermore, participants urged vigilance and the use of proactive measures to identify and address such

behaviours, to safeguard the integrity of organisational environments. The following section further explores these unethical behaviours and practices in more detail.

5.3.3.1 Machiavellianism

The study revealed that negative political behaviour often involves manipulative practices for personal gain. This type of behaviour is characterised by actions that distort the truth, prioritise self-preservation over principles, lack integrity, and display arrogance and egotism. A notable aspect of this behaviour includes leaders withholding or altering information to advance personal agendas, thus undermining the principles of truth and transparency. PPT11 articulates this concern: “The space for political behaviour is greater if the truth is not what’s said. We are not going to the core of the business decision to maximise profit and shareholder value or prevent a loss of profit or shareholder value”.

5.3.3.2 Lack of integrity

Negative political behaviour can also manifest as a lack of integrity, where personal interests are prioritised over ethical considerations. This behaviour can result in leaders engaging in activities that are not in alignment with their authentic selves, thus contradicting their true values and beliefs. PPT33 shares a personal experience:

> “My father was like: ‘Work must speak for itself. You can go anywhere as long you’re excellent in everything you do’. But actually, I’m finding that in some organisations, that’s not it. So, I’m in a very uncomfortable position now where I’m having to try, at my very advanced age, to lean into this power and influence and have lunch with someone for the sake of building a relationship that might benefit me in the future. It’s uncomfortable. It doesn’t feel authentic. It feels insincere.”

Such insights accentuate the complex and often detrimental nature of negative political behaviour in organisations, highlighting the importance of ethical leadership and authentic, principled conduct in professional settings.

5.3.3.3 Covering up mistakes

Participants indicated that negative political behaviour in organisations sometimes includes actions such as covering up mistakes or withholding crucial information. These actions are typically motivated by a desire to protect personal reputation or position, thereby demonstrating a prioritisation of self-interest over the principles of transparency and accountability. PPT4 candidly describes this phenomenon: “It’s not for the outside world to know. We’ll keep this [between us]. But between you and I, we know that you’ve messed up, and you’ll cope”. Such practices not only compromise an organisation's ethical standards but also hinder the establishment of a culture of trust and responsibility. This behaviour further underscores the challenges in fostering an environment where accountability is valued and upheld, and where mistakes are viewed as opportunities for learning and improvement rather than threats to personal standing.

5.3.3.4 Personal agenda, interests, and self-preservation

Insights from senior leaders suggest that those primarily driven by personal agendas often prioritise their own interests, potentially conflicting with the broader welfare of the organisation and its members. This tendency represents a shift away from a holistic and inclusive leadership approach that values the collective well-being and progress of the entire organisation. Consequently, leaders with such a disposition are more prone to engage in negative political behaviour. PPT16 comments: “Why is crying more than the bereaved a problem? So, when you start getting worked up for a decision that didn’t go your way, that’s really when I put a flag on the person [for having] a personal agenda”. The study also reveals that such leaders often exhibit reluctance to collaborate or report to certain individuals, reflecting a preference for personal security over collective achievement and organisational synergy.

PPT29 observes:

> “It’s across various organisations that one witnesses this. It’s a combination, I think, of self-preservation but also sometimes a function of ego and arrogance where they just feel that they do not agree with this direction, or they will not report to certain individuals. They will just not allow certain things to happen.”

PPT24 adds:

> “So, it is an ideal that I hope we will be able to achieve: to put self-interest aside, do away with self-preservation and self-progression, and focus rather on looking

for ways to build the group for the success of the whole, instead of the success of the individual."

These insights emphasise the dichotomy within leadership motivations and the impact this has on organisational dynamics. The inclination towards self-preservation and personal agendas can lead to a misalignment with the organisation's collective goals, underscoring the need for leadership that prioritises the greater good over individual aspirations.

5.3.3.5 Arrogance and egotism

The study highlights instances where certain leaders exhibit negative political behaviour marked by arrogance and egotism. These leaders often elevate themselves above their peers, frequently disregarding the perspectives and contributions of others. Such behaviour disrupts the balance within top management teams and erodes the organisation's collective intelligence and collaborative ethos. PPT24 offers a pertinent observation:

> "You will find that people suddenly display behaviour that you didn't expect – arrogance and ego. Almost as though they're better than their peers because some of these peers now report to them. And you ask yourself, what happened? This person was seemingly somebody down to earth, and now they can just behave in ways that you didn't expect."

This reflection points to the transformative effect that power and authority can have on individuals, leading to unexpected changes in behaviour and attitude. Such narratives reveal the detrimental impact of arrogance and egotism in leadership roles. When leaders prioritise their ego and self-image over the collective needs and goals of the organisation, it can lead to a toxic work environment and hinder the organisation's progress. Recognising and addressing such behaviours is crucial for maintaining a healthy and effective organisational culture.

5.3.3.6 Abuse of power

The interviews show that certain leaders engage in negative political behaviour through abusing their positional power. This behaviour involves leveraging their influence in ways that give precedence to personal interests over the well-being of the organisation. Such misuse of authority often results in decisions and actions that are harmful to the

organisation's overall health and progress, signifying a departure from responsible and ethical leadership practices. PPT20 observes the conflation of personal identity with professional roles: “They assimilate the power and person. There’s no distinction between the office and the person now. They become one thing”. This comment underscores how the blending of personal and professional identities can lead to an abuse of power, as the individual begins to view the authority of their position as an extension of their personal identity. Such reflections emphasise the crucial need for checks and balances in organisational structures to prevent the abuse of power. They also highlight the importance of maintaining a clear distinction between personal and professional roles, and the need for leaders to adhere to principles of ethical and responsible conduct when they exercise power.

5.3.3.7 Moral flexibility and abdication of principles

The study reveals that leaders engaging in negative political behaviour may often display what can be described as moral flexibility. This involves a willingness to forsake established principles and ethical standards in favour of achieving goals rooted in self-interest. Such a tendency marks a troubling departure from the expectations of principled and value-driven leadership. PPT31 reflects on this phenomenon: “In a competitive environment, you tend to have some moral flexibility”. PPT19 further comments that, when leaders forsake their principles, “they buy trust”. This statement describes a manipulative tactic where trust is commodified, further emphasising the ethical compromises that can occur in the realm of negative political behaviour. The insights described in the sections above highlight the critical importance of maintaining ethical integrity in leadership. The tendency towards moral flexibility and the abandonment of principles not only undermines the credibility and trustworthiness of leaders but also poses significant risks to the organisation's ethical fabric and overall health. This aspect of the study underscores the need for consistent ethical standards and strong, principled leadership to counteract such negative tendencies.

In summary, the research revealed important concerns regarding negative political behaviour, often characterised by Machiavellian strategies, moral ambiguity, abuse of power, and self-serving motives (Figure 5.5). Such behaviour shapes how leaders navigate and respond to the political complexities within the organisation and can undermine individual and organisational ethical conduct and behaviours.

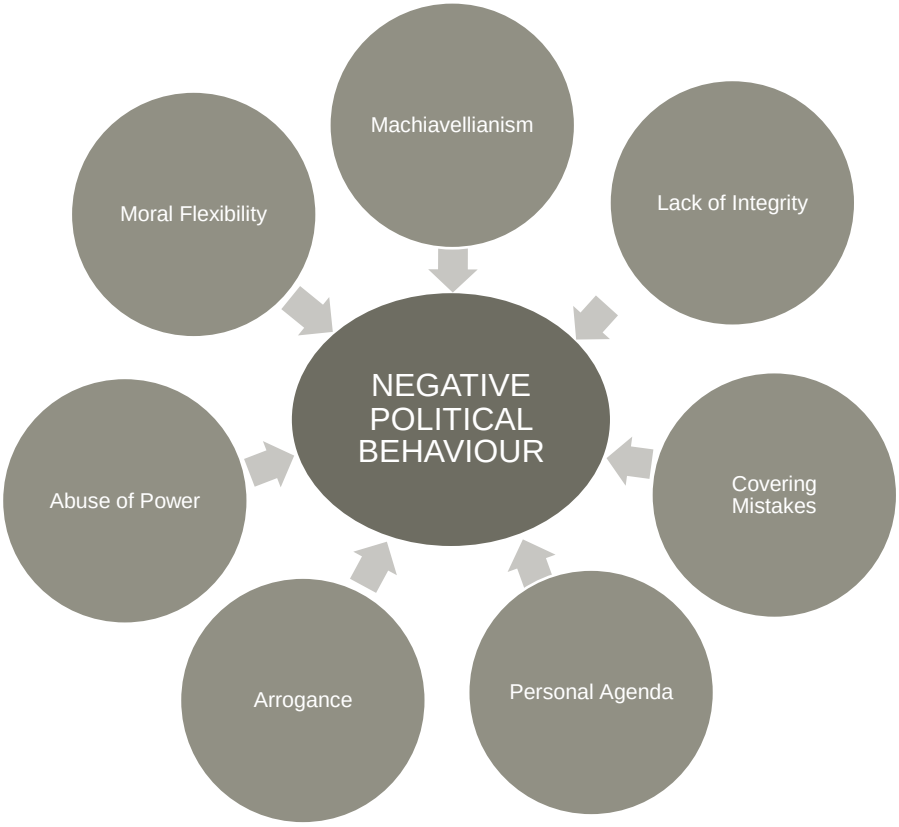

Figure 5.5: Negative political behaviour

Source: Author's own.

5.3.4 Factors influencing neutral or context-dependent political behaviour

In exploring the duality of political behaviour, the study identified six neutral or context-dependent factors that influence political behaviour among upper echelon leaders (Figure 5.7). These themes represent the dual aspects of enablers and preventers within the realm of the political behaviour of senior leaders.

One: ***diverse leadership styles*** – how different leadership approaches can either encourage or mitigate political behaviour within organisations. Two: ***interconnectedness of social, economic and political contexts*** – how the interplay between these contexts influences the political behaviour of senior leaders. Three: ***political power dynamics and competing interests*** – how power dynamics and internal competition shape political behaviour. Four: ***diversity and discrimination*** – the impact of diversity in the workforce and discriminatory practices on political behaviour.

Five: ***organisational dynamics –*** how an organisation's internal culture and structure can serve as either a catalyst or a barrier to political behaviour. Six: ***role of homophily in social networks*** – how the tendency of individuals to associate with like-minded peers within social networks affects political behaviour. Depending on the context, such factors can tilt, and thereby influence political behaviour so that it becomes either positive or negative. The following sections explore this in more detail.

5.3.4.1 Diverse leadership styles

Leadership styles were particularly scrutinised in this study. Participants shared perspectives on diverse approaches adopted by senior leaders and explored how these styles – autocratic, charismatic, servant, onion, and breadcrumbs – might influence positive and/or negative political behaviour within an organisation.

Autocratic leadership style: tilted towards negative political behaviour

Participants felt this style discouraged open debate, alternative perspectives, and diversity of thought. Thus, autocratic leaders were characterised by their stringent control over decision-making processes: frequently minimising or entirely disregarding the contributions and inputs of other top management team members. PPT18 comments:

> "Some of the most dangerous situations are where everyone falls into that trap, right? Everyone is so taken by this leader who has all the answers. But what you find is that it shuts down thought. It shuts down debate. It shuts down alternative perspectives. It shuts down any appreciation of diversity."

This reflection underscores the potentially detrimental effects of autocratic leadership on an organisation's intellectual and creative vitality. The dominance of a single perspective not only stifles collaborative problem-solving and innovation but also undermines the value of diverse viewpoints and the team's collective intelligence. As participants further pointed out, autocratic leadership saps an organisation of its dynamism and adaptability. It inhibits the fostering of a culture of engagement, inclusivity, and robust decision-making – all of which are essential for the health and progress of modern organisations.

Onion leadership style: tilted towards negative political behaviour

Participants characterised this style by its varying levels of approachability and responsiveness, mirroring the layered structure of an onion. They agreed that leaders who adopt this style tend to be more accessible and responsive to those who are in closer proximity to their inner circle. Conversely, they exhibit progressively less

engagement and attentiveness towards individuals who are positioned further away in the organisational hierarchy. PPT18 vividly describes this leadership style:

> "I can name the people as I sit here today that I think are 'in the faction' and people that are on 'the other side'. [It is] a leadership style that I call the onion style. That means the closer you are to the heart of the onion, the more comfortable it is. And [you get] further out on those concentric circles to the extent that the guys on the outside are in Siberia."

This style of leadership does not foster a sense of inclusivity and equality, and the inherent disparities in engagement and responsiveness can potentially lead to a fragmented team dynamic, where those at the periphery may feel disconnected or undervalued. Understanding and addressing the implications of this leadership style is crucial for leaders aiming to build cohesive and effective teams within their organisations.

Charismatic leadership style: tilted towards positive political behaviour

Several participants in this study shared their insights about charismatic leadership: a style distinguished by a leader's personal charm and magnetism. Charismatic leaders are particularly adept at forging strong, personal connections with team members, which in turn bolsters their ability to lead effectively – and motivate others. Charisma can be hard to define, but is easily recognised. As PPT21 comments: "It often appears within where somebody is. [It relates to] the ability to influence". In other words, charismatic leaders have the ability to captivate and engage their teams. This not only drives performance but also fosters a positive and energised work environment. However, it is important to balance charismatic leadership with other styles to ensure that decision-making remains inclusive and grounded in the organisation's collective goals.

Breadcrumb leadership style: tilted towards positive political behaviour

This study identifies an interesting variant of charismatic leadership: the "breadcrumb" style. Participants felt this approach promotes individual growth and self-discovery among team members. However, it also presents potential challenges, such as a lack of clear direction and the introduction of ambiguity into organisational processes and decision-making. Thus, while offering opportunities for personal development, the breadcrumb style may complicate the provision of structured guidance within a team. PPT18 describes the dynamics of this approach:

> "So, [this manager] for me was the kind of person with what I would call the breadcrumb leadership style. He left a trail for you, but you had to find it yourself. And he was the kind of guy that no matter what you went to him with, he created

> an environment for you of discovery. And so, he would drop the breadcrumbs for you, but it was up to you actually to navigate your way rather than someone helping you."

This description captures the essence of the breadcrumb style, where leaders encourage autonomy and self-guided learning rather than providing explicit instructions or solutions. However, as seen in the study, it is crucial to balance such autonomy with the provision of adequate support and direction. "Breadcrumb" leaders must therefore have a nuanced understanding of each team member's capabilities and must offer timely guidance to ensure that the path to discovery and growth remains productive and aligned with organisational objectives.

Authentic leadership: tilted towards positive political behaviour

As outlined in the study, authentic leadership is based on genuine and honest interactions between leaders and their followers. This style is deeply rooted in the idea that leaders should remain true to their values, beliefs, and principles, thereby fostering an organisational atmosphere rich in trust, transparency, and open communication. As PPT21 comments: "I would say authentic leaders use political behaviour for the benefit of the broader organisation, community, or board – or whatever it might be". PPT29 further explains that in authentic leadership: "gravitas is used to influence, rather than demand, command and control". This underscores the notion that such leadership relies on presence and persuasion, instead of authoritarian methods. As presented in the findings, authentic leadership balances personal integrity with organisational objectives. Such leaders are perceived as being effective not only in achieving organisational goals but also in nurturing a positive and ethical work environment. The insights from the participants emphasise the importance of authenticity in leadership for fostering a culture of trust and engagement within organisations.

Servant leadership style: tilted towards positive political behaviour

As described by participants, this style emphasises serving and supporting subordinates and the broader organisation. Leaders who adopt this style are notable for the lack of personal ego in their approach to leadership. They are not primarily driven by a desire to assert themselves or to demonstrate their capabilities. Instead, their rich experience of navigating various organisational contexts contributes to their empathetic and service-oriented approach to leadership. PPT29 offers a personal insight into this style:

> "I've made it my business to be humble [and] to serve. It's a very easy thing to say, but you've got to live in all aspects of it. Servant leadership is one of the

most underestimated qualities. When you are 60 years old, you have fought all your battles. You're not trying to prove anything. [But] for someone who's 40 years old, they [are still] in the fight."

This comment shows that servant leadership is more than a concept: it is a practice that requires genuine humility and a dedication to serving others. The participant also notes the challenges and rewards of adopting this leadership style at different stages in one's career. To summarise, servant leadership prioritises the needs and growth of others over personal achievements. It is therefore seen as integral to fostering a collaborative and supportive organisational culture, where the focus is on collective progress and the well-being of all members.

To summarise these insights, I have created a diagram called the "Leadership Continuum" (Figure 5.6) which shows how different leadership styles relate to political behaviour. This continuum categorises the various leadership styles described earlier – ranging from autocratic to servant leadership – and reveals their respective impacts on political behaviour.

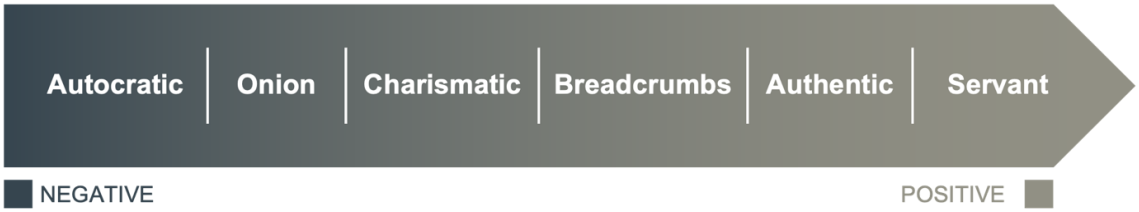

Figure 5.6: Leadership continuum

Source: Author's own.

As this continuum shows, "autocratic" leadership tends to generate *negative* political behaviour, as opposed to the "onion", "charismatic", and "breadcrumbs" styles which are seen to encourage *positive* political behaviour – together with the "servant" and "authentic" leadership styles. This classification is contextualised within the broader understanding that political behaviour involves the use of power or influence by individuals or groups to achieve specific outcomes. Thus, leadership styles are pivotal in influencing the nature and extent of political behaviour within complex organisational structures.

To conclude this summary, it is interesting to reflect on an insight from PPT24 regarding the *effectiveness* of different types of leaders – especially so-called "born leaders":

> "I tell you that if you want to achieve something, you [need to] understand how human- beings work. That's why I say it's easier for born leaders. I'm not saying those who are trained and groomed cannot do it. I'm saying I've more often seen born leaders influence outcomes [even though their] name is not attached to a strategy, [and they do not work] within a specific team. Maybe [they] are not even aware of how much authority, power, and influence [they] had to shape that ultimate outcome."

This insight shows how "born leaders" influence organisational outcomes, because of their natural aptitude for understanding and navigating human dynamics. It further contributes to the broader discourse on leadership styles and their implications for political behaviour within complex organisational environments.

5.3.4.2 Interconnectedness of social, economic, and political factors

The study's participants brought into focus the elaborate interplay between social, economic, and political factors and their influence on the political behaviour of senior leaders.

Social context

Factors such as the limited size of the middle class in South Africa (estimated to be five million out of the total population of circa 62 million) and the prevalence of a relationship-based culture were highlighted as significant influences on political behaviour. The level of familiarity and network connections among professionals can catalyse both positive and negative political behaviours. Participants noted that influential individuals are often perceived as inherently political, a perception extending beyond strategic workplace interactions to broader societal interactions. Several participants further emphasised the fundamental role of relationships in the workplace, positing that these interpersonal connections often surpass the importance of contractual obligations. A key element was the sense of belonging that these relationships cultivate, suggesting that such interpersonal dynamics can significantly influence the political behaviour of senior leaders. PPT1 encapsulates this: "Everybody knows each other. Everybody's got a connection [outside work]. And I think that reflects in things being more relationship-based than contractual". PPT6 comments on the psychological aspect of belonging: "I just think that people, psychologically, have a need to belong and be associated with their particular brand. That drives their behaviour". PPT4 adds: "Shared values [and] shared viewpoints [make] you feel you can get aligned to further a certain cause".

Such insights collectively emphasise the significance of relational dynamics in the workplace. The study further suggests that the quality of interpersonal relationships, and the sense of belonging they foster, can be more influential than formal contractual agreements in shaping organisational political behaviour and overall culture. This aspect of organisational life underscores the need for leaders to recognise and nurture positive relational dynamics as a key component of effective leadership and organisational success.

Economic context

The participants in this study identified extreme economic inequality and the competition for scarce resources as pivotal factors influencing political behaviour within organisations. They pointed out that the uneven distribution of resources, and limited opportunities for career advancement, foster a competitive environment that often precipitates such behaviour. It is important to note that this reality is further exacerbated by South Africa's socio-economic landscape, which is plagued by the "triple challenges" of unemployment, poverty, and inequality. Such conditions not only shape the organisational climate but also amplify the dynamics of political behaviour, as individuals and groups endeavour to further their specific agenda.

PPT30 describes the struggle to access power when opportunities and resources are unevenly distributed: "It [power] doesn't come from a morally bad place, but it is uniquely available to only a certain group of people. Not everyone can access it. I think the lines of power get blurred somewhere because there are points at which not everyone has free access". PPT 3 offers a vivid analogy to explain the impact of resource scarcity on behaviour:

> "If there's a dollar on the table, and there are three people fighting for it, they don't even see each other. They just see the dollar. If there's a dollar on the table and there are 40 people fighting for it, sometimes they see each other, but mostly they see the dollar. If there's a dollar on the table and there's a hundred people fighting for it, then they don't even know there's a dollar."

This metaphor effectively captures how scarcity influences individual and group behaviours within organisational settings. Collectively, these perspectives underscore the significant role of economic factors in shaping organisational political behaviour. They highlight how economic conditions, resource allocation and uneven career advancement opportunities can create environments conducive to various forms of political behaviour, impacting the overall dynamics and ethos of an organisation.

Political context

The study confirmed that South Africa's legacy of apartheid, and initiatives such as the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) policy, still profoundly influence political behaviour within organisations. Indeed, participants frequently alluded to the significant impact upon senior leaders' actions – and decision-making processes – of the country's historical and current context. This highlights how socio-political history and corrective policies intricately shape organisational dynamics and leadership behaviour.

PPT33 describes the post-apartheid, B-BBEE business environment as "incestuous", while PPT2 powerfully reflects on the moral obligations that accompany privilege in today's South Africa: "Let me take a step back. I always do this because I grew up at a time when we still had apartheid. So, I'm a big believer that [when] so much is given, so much is expected". PPT21 describes the long-term psychological impact of historical dispossession:

> "The 1913 Land Act [meant] that your great-grandfather, who had a farm with crops, and livestock, who was seen in the village as one of the wealthy, one of the respected, suddenly was dispossessed of all of that. And so, over the decades, as he [was] disposed of overnight, and told to become a mine worker or a garden boy, psychologically it created a scarcity mentality."

PPT8 provides a vivid insight into the complexities of trust and perception in a transformative, racially diverse environment:

> "I think it's [about] appreciating where people come from. So, I am Sessie. And then let's say you are a white male. [All your life you have had someone called] Martha who looks like Sessie who cleans your house. Martha says, 'Yes, Baas' to everything. So, the minute you start having Sessie in the room [as a colleague], it's about ticking the box. You are not really listening to what Sessie is saying. She's there because you need a black face [to show you are] transforming."

Collectively, these accounts emphasise the intricate ways in which historical, political, and transformational factors influence organisational behaviour and leadership in South Africa. They highlight the challenges leaders face in navigating an environment marked by deep historical wounds, ongoing transformational efforts, and the complexities of trust and intention among various stakeholders. This understanding is pivotal for comprehensively analysing and addressing the nuances of political behaviour and leadership within such a context.

In summary, this discussion on the interconnectedness of social, political and economic context, highlights the complex challenges confronting organisations, particularly in the arena of the political behaviour of senior leaders. Acknowledging that political behaviour cannot be considered in isolation is crucial. Rather, such behaviour is deeply impacted by the broader social, economic, and political contexts in which organisations function. This understanding brings to the forefront the complex interplay between internal organisational dynamics and the external environment: a dynamic which significantly shapes senior leaders' actions and decisions. Such a perspective is essential for comprehensively analysing and addressing the nuances of political behaviour within organisational settings.

5.3.4.3 Political power dynamics and competing interests

In this study, participants shared multilayered insights about the dynamic nature of leadership, the complexities of decision-making processes, the nuances of power dynamics, and the importance of ethical considerations. Their perspectives illuminate the complex interplay between these factors and show how they collectively shape the political behaviour of senior leaders of organisations. Moreover, these insights emphasise the importance of understanding how power is wielded and negotiated, and how ethical dilemmas can be navigated. Based on such understanding, it becomes possible to devise strategies can that effectively address the challenges inherent in managing political behaviour in complex organisational settings.

Decision-making processes

Participants agreed that a multitude of factors affect critical decision-making, and further emphasised the crucial role of power and influence in shaping these processes. They identified key factors in this regard: the dominance of a relationship-based culture; the centralisation of authority; personal investment in the outcomes of decisions; and the concentration of decision-making power in the hands of a select few – which often means that the broader team is relegated to merely ratifying decisions, rather than being actively involved in the decision-making process.

PPT30 reflects on the challenges of such an environment: “A network-based and relationship-based culture [gives] an unfair advantage to certain people from day one. And I think that hinders the progress of fair decision-making, inclusion, and so on”. PPT26 adds: “Centralised decision-making creates a lot of politics because there are one or two people you have to please. It is the same thing if you look at the process of

compliance. Once you centralise it to one individual, you [must give] attention to that individual". PPT18 extends this notion to various organisational types, suggesting a broader societal pattern:

> "As human beings, whether you are looking at a church, a school, a corporate organisation, a political party, or even a family, there will be certain things that are just not done until specific key individuals have arrived or have had a word."

These insights from participants illuminate the complexities inherent in decision-making processes within organisations. They highlight the crucial roles played by power dynamics, personal interests, and organisational culture in influencing how decisions are made and who is involved in making them. This understanding is essential for recognising the challenges and potential biases in organisational decision-making and for developing strategies that promote more inclusive and equitable processes.

Pulling rank as a defensive mechanism

Participants highlighted the defensive act of "pulling rank" as a significant political power tactic – often observed in leaders who feel their credibility is undermined or threatened. While serving as a tool for asserting authority, this defensive approach also highlights the underlying power imbalances within organisational structures, and the strategies individuals employ to maintain their positions and navigate challenges. PPT19 comments: "When people's credibility is threatened, chances are they will pull rank and play corporate politics. Some can say it is bad, but it has to do more with personal investment". This insight evokes the intricate interplay between personal ego, power dynamics, and decision-making processes in organisations. It also accentuates the necessity to cultivate a workplace environment based on mutual respect, open communication, and equitable power distribution. Recognising and mitigating the propensity to pull rank can lead to more collaborative and inclusive organisational cultures, where decisions are made based on collective wisdom rather than hierarchical authority.

Ability to influence

The study explored the symbiotic relationship in organisational dynamics between building connections and the capacity to influence. For the participants, influencing involves identifying key individuals and strategising how to establish relationships with them: not merely for the sake of connection, but as a means to shape outcomes and attain objectives. This approach highlights the significance of social networks and

interpersonal dynamics in sculpting organisational behaviour and decision-making processes.

PPT1 highlights the practical implications of this dynamic: “People do care who they’re talking to, and behave differently, accordingly. I think that’s adverse political behaviour”. PPT14 discusses the strategic aspect of relationship building: “You need to be able to read the script. You need to identify the players in a corporate that are decision-makers, or people that are steering the larger ship. And then you need to pick a side”. According to PPT18: “People who connect well with others are influential. That’s not always the most charming or the most boisterous individual. It’s around the connection”. Thus, the ability to navigate social hierarchies and effectively leverage interpersonal connections is a key determinant of organisational, political behaviour and influence. This understanding is essential for leaders and individuals seeking to effectively engage in and shape the dynamics of their organisational environments.

Power dynamics

Power dynamics emerged as a central theme for participants in this study. They offered detailed analyses of the origins and expressions of power within organisational hierarchies and engaged in in-depth explorations of how power imbalances impact decision-making processes, the political behaviour of senior leaders, and the overall political milieu. This facet of the study illuminates the intricate ways in which power dynamics are interwoven with organisational behaviour. Participants felt that power is not merely a static attribute but a dynamic element that affects various aspects of organisational life. The study therefore contributes valuable perspectives on understanding the multifaceted nature of power in organisations, and its implications for leadership and organisational strategy. Moreover, the study further shows that recognising and addressing the complexities of power dynamics is crucial for fostering ethical leadership, equitable decision-making processes, and a healthy organisational culture.

Competing interests

Participants highlighted the prevalence of competing interests within senior echelons, especially where leaders appeared to prioritise personal objectives over the collective goals of their organisations, thereby generating negative political behaviour. Again, this underscores the need to build strong ethical frameworks and effective strategies to mitigate the adverse impact of such behaviour.

Commenting on the influence of self-interest, PPT31 notes: “People say that frankly, in these organisations, you have to play politics to move up”, while PPT18 adds: “Primarily, you influence the organisation to go in the direction where you’re going to benefit the most”. PPT20 shares an anecdote about a former colleague: “He emigrated to Singapore before he left the organisation. So, whatever he had could be taxed for [his] advantage”. Participants emphasised the challenge of balancing individual and organisational interests within complex organisations. Their testimonies reveal a spectrum of motivations among senior leaders: ranging from earnest dedication to organisational objectives, to a focus on personal advancement. PPT22 describes this dynamic as “self-orientation versus collective orientation”; while PPT33 calls for “guard-rails” (based on shared ethical values) to check self-interested power and nurture positive behaviour.

This facet of the study draws attention to the essential role of ethical governance and oversight in managing the complexities of organisational politics. The recognition of varying motivations among leaders and the need for ethical checks and balances is crucial for understanding and addressing the intricacies of organisational dynamics and individual behaviour within top management teams.

5.3.4.4 Organisational dynamics

Participants repeatedly emphasised the influence of organisational culture in either facilitating or hindering the engagement of top-echelon leaders in political behaviour. Notably, it was observed that in organisations where a culture of openness, transparency, honesty, and collaboration prevails, leaders tend to adopt more moral and inclusive decision-making processes. Again, this highlights the crucial role of organisational culture in shaping the ethical framework and behavioural norms of senior leaders within complex organisations.

PPT1 reflects:

> “Consistency, honesty, and transparency are [now the basis of] my political behaviour, but nobody would frame it as such. Those traits are typically why the people in the business will listen to me and do what I want them to do”.

This comment shows how positive cultural values can be intertwined with effective political behaviour, leading to beneficial outcomes for the organisation. Interestingly, for PPT31 positive organisational culture depends on: “consistency in messaging [and] consistency in behaviour”, because “having been through 10 years of ups and downs, I can see the role that leaders play in [building] their environment”.

These responses illuminate the profound impact of organisational culture on the dynamics of political behaviour among senior leaders – and vice versa. Furthermore, a positive cultural environment, characterised by ethical values and collaborative practices, is essential for guiding the behaviour of leaders and ensuring the ethical integrity of decision-making processes within organisations. This understanding is critical for organisations aiming to cultivate a culture that supports ethical leadership and mitigates the potential for negative political behaviour.

Organisational culture

As the study shows, open communication empowers individuals to express their concerns and opinions freely, rather than retreating into isolated silos. Participants also felt this type of workplace culture prevents unresolved issues from morphing into long-term organisational problems.

PPT2 explains how open communication nourishes collaborative decision-making:

> "[If] you go and sit in a dark room by yourself, [you'll] come up with something that's not going to work. [Instead], we work with the entire ecosystem. [Other] guys have better ideas than I do, but I know I'm good at getting everyone to the same table and [encouraging] thinking and strategising. Then we deploy the best people."

Such observations show how healthy communication averts negative dynamics within complex organisational structures. This understanding is crucial for organisations striving to cultivate a conducive environment for ethical leadership and constructive political engagement.

Power imbalances and political behaviour

Participants observed that in organisations where negative political behaviour is prevalent, the workplace culture is often characterised by competitiveness, secrecy, and a dominant focus on power dynamics. As shown earlier, this type of environment creates conditions conducive to negative behaviours driven by personal gain, or the hunger for individual influence. When this is exacerbated by uneven power structures, the collective well-being of the organisation is jeopardised.

PPT19 explains:

> "I think organisationally, where you have a clearer and much stronger distribution of power in different areas, you have a chance [that] bad political behaviour on the side of leaders [will dominate]. [But evenly] distributed power means that

> people will have avenues to point out [when they see] improper politics emerging."

Thus, a more equitable distribution of power within an organisation can serve as a counterbalance to negative political behaviour, providing avenues for accountability and the expression of concerns regarding unethical practices.

Such observations underscore the critical role of organisational culture in shaping political behaviour. They further highlight the importance of cultivating an organisational environment that values ethical conduct and collaboration, thereby mitigating the propensity for negative political behaviour and fostering a healthy, productive workplace. This understanding is essential for organisational leaders aiming to create an atmosphere conducive to positive engagement and the organisation's collective success.

5.3.4.5 Diversity and discrimination

The study identifies age, race, and gender as other determinants of political behaviour within organisations. As highlighted in the powerful personal testimonies of participants, these elements of diversity, often intertwined with inherent perceptions and biases, substantially shape leaders' actions and interactions in the workplace. Participants described how age-related biases, racial perceptions, and gender-based discrimination influence decision-making processes, power dynamics, and the fabric of organisational relationships. Their insights vividly revealed the intricate relationship between diversity and political behaviour, underscoring the importance of awareness and proactive intervention to address these biases in organisational contexts.

PPT33 feels that in the context of South Africa, "the racial dynamic can't be ignored". However, PPT31 suggests that gender dynamics transcend geographical or cultural boundaries: "I think [gender is] a global issue, because you find the same challenges everywhere you go in the world". PPT24 further explores gender bias: "Gender does play a role. I find that men, in general, walk with a chip on the shoulder. The approaches are different. It seems that attention to detail is more with us – the women – than with men". PPT22 reflects on the impact of homogeneity:

> "I have often sat in meetings with very powerful leaders who want to hear voices that reinforce their own [and] are very attuned to people who are just like them. So, if you're not just like them in whatever form – race, gender, or perspective – you do not fit."

Such insights reveal the challenges posed by the exclusion of diverse voices – and expose the critical need to address diversity and discrimination in organisational politics. Recognising and actively managing the impact of these factors is vital for fostering inclusive leadership practices and creating a workplace environment where diverse perspectives are valued and integrated into the decision-making process.

5.3.4.6 Role of homophily in social networks

The study delves into the profound influence of social networks on interpersonal interactions and the formation of relationships within organisations. A pivotal factor in these networks is homophily: the propensity of individuals to associate with others who share similar characteristics or traits. Homophily significantly influences the formation and structure of social networks in organisational contexts. It governs the flow of information, aligns interests, and fosters the formation of alliances, all of which are integral to the dynamics of political behaviour within organisations. PPT30 describes what such interactions entail: “We drink together, golf together, [do] sports together and we socialise. There must be reasonable similarities between us to like each other, to want to spend time together”.

Survival of ecosystems shaped by discrimination

Interviews with participants also revealed that discrimination, in some form, is an inherent part of survival within social ecosystems. PPT9 poignantly states: “Remember, survival exists on the premise that something will be discriminated [against]. The system cannot function without it.” This comment implies that while homophily facilitates connections based on similarities, a certain level of differentiation is crucial to maintaining a balanced and functional ecosystem within these networks. It further illuminates the intricate nature of social interactions and the paradoxical role of discrimination in influencing the dynamics of organisational networks. In summary, participants’ insights into the role of homophily and survival mechanisms within social networks offer a window into how these factors shape organisational politics. It is essential to recognise the complexity of such social dynamics in order to comprehensively address the related challenges – and leverage potential opportunities – within organisational settings.

5.3.4.7 Contextual enhancement of political behaviour

The study showed that political behaviour within complex organisations is situational in nature and tends to escalate during significant events or times of transition. Participants specifically identified performance appraisal seasons, retrenchments, business restructuring, and leadership transitions as pivotal moments where political behaviour intensifies. These episodes are often characterised by increased uncertainty and competition, and act as catalysts to heighten political behaviour and strategic positioning among senior leaders.

PPT18 describes how to navigate such transitional moments:

> "You must exactly follow the book. [Use] your ability to influence the things that are often relevant to the change. It's most important when trying to get a shift in behaviour [to] use a lot of political capital, because you're asking everyone else to move with you."

PPT27 highlights the role of organisational culture, which involves: "change management, talent management, [and] creating a culture where if you wake up in the morning, you really want to come to work; [where] you don't only work for your boss, you work for the whole organisation". PPT31 focuses on the influence of financial factors: "When it comes to performance measurement, politics plays [an important role]. So, where financial gain is involved, I think it heightens it a lot".

These insights reveal how specific situations, especially those involving significant changes or potential gains, can act as triggers for increased political activity among senior leaders. Understanding the situational drivers of political behaviour is therefore crucial for leaders who seek to maintain ethical standards and constructive interactions during such periods.

In conclusion, my further investigation into the duality of political behaviour revealed six critical, neutral or context-sensitive factors that shape how senior leaders engage with politics within organisations. As outlined in Figure 5.7, these factors operate as both enablers and constraints, depending on situational dynamics. They include factors ranging from the influence of diverse leadership styles, which can either foster or temper political behaviours, to the role of homophily in social networks, which highlights how alignment with like-minded individuals can influence political engagement. Collectively these six interrelated factors demonstrate that political behaviour is not inherently good or bad; rather, its character is shaped by the shifting context in which it occurs.

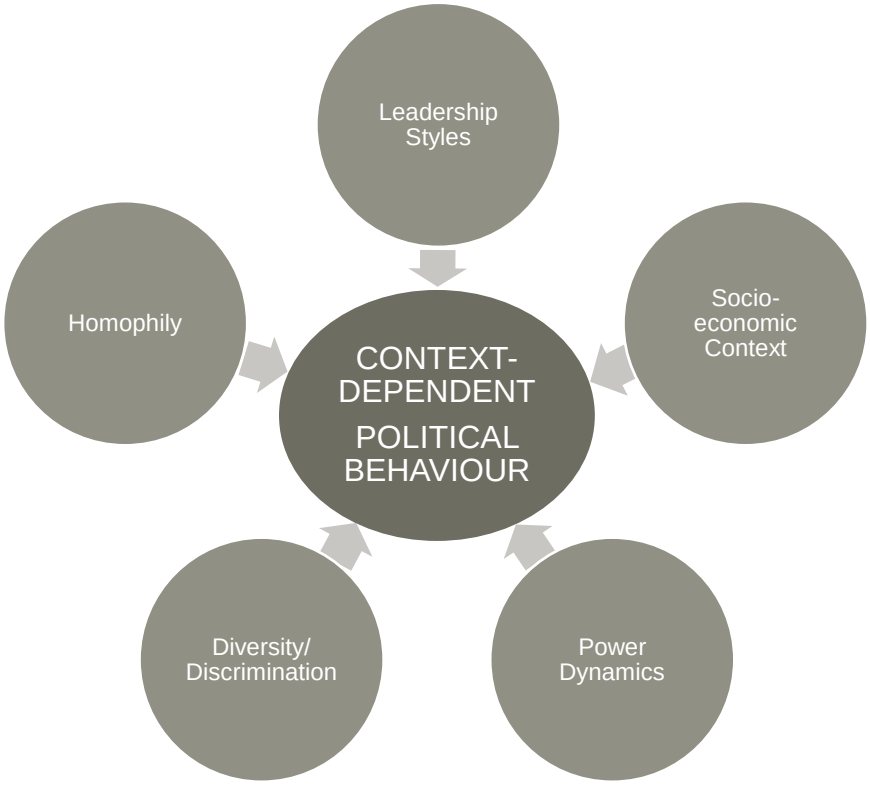

Figure 5.7: Context-dependent factors for political behaviour

Source: Author's own.

5.3.5 Variability of factors influencing political behaviour across constructive and destructive politics

Section 5.3 separately positioned the positive, neutral and negative factors that influence political behaviour of upper echelon leaders. However, this positioning generates an important question: How do such factors *vary* across constructive and destructive forms of organisational politics?

An in-depth exploration of this question is essential for understanding the duality of political behaviour, where political actions can either contribute to organisational effectiveness or undermine it. While the underlying mechanisms of political behaviour may share common features – such as influence, power, and strategic decision-making – their manifestation and impact diverge, according to intention, ethical considerations, and leadership values.

5.3.5.1 The role of values and ethical foundations

The value system underpinning political behaviour is a key differentiator between its positive and negative forms. Positive political behaviour is guided by ethical leadership principles, which promote transparency, integrity, and accountability. Leaders who engage in ethical politics align their actions with organisational values and collective goals, ensuring that political manoeuvres are used for the greater good rather than personal gain. Such leaders understand that ethical governance strengthens organisational trust and fosters a culture where decision-making is rooted in fairness, inclusivity, and long-term sustainability. Ethical leadership also enhances psychological safety within organisations, encouraging employees to engage in open discussions without fear of retribution.

Conversely, negative political behaviour arises when self-interest overrides ethical considerations. Leaders who engage in manipulative politics often exhibit moral flexibility, justifying unethical actions as necessary for survival or success. This behaviour fosters a climate where short-term gains are prioritised over long-term organisational health, leading to compromised decision-making and ethical erosion. When leaders lack a moral compass, they create environments where dishonesty, favouritism, and unethical tactics become normalised. Over time, this corrodes organisational culture and weakens trust among employees, creating a leadership model where self-interest is rewarded at the expense of collective integrity.

The experiences of participants clearly represent this moral divergence. Many, like PPT31, linked positive political behaviour to personal integrity: “I think values are very important. They separate bad political behaviour from constructive political behaviour” – a reference to the need for custodianship of organisational values. However, the same participant noted: “In a competitive environment, you tend to have some moral flexibility” – thus acknowledging the contradiction between ethical compromise (which may be necessary for advancement) and ethical values.

5.3.5.2 Influence tactics: collaboration versus manipulation

Another key distinction lies in how influence is exerted. Positive political actors employ influence through collaboration, persuasion, and coalition-building to align with organisational objectives. Their approach fosters inclusivity, ensuring that different perspectives contribute to decision-making processes. Leaders who engage in constructive influence tactics prioritise mutual respect, transparent communication, and

coalition-building, ensuring that political behaviour enhances rather than obstructs organisational effectiveness. Ethical influence tactics also promote adaptive leadership, allowing leaders to respond flexibly to organisational challenges while maintaining credibility and trust.

In contrast, negative political behaviour is marked by manipulation, coercion, and exclusionary tactics. Leaders who engage in destructive politics often control critical information, distort facts, or form exclusive power networks to advance personal agendas. Manipulative leaders tend to silence unorthodox voices, creating echo chambers where only perspectives that align with their personal interests are heard. This stifles innovation and critical thinking, as employees feel discouraged from challenging flawed strategies or proposing alternative solutions. Additionally, coercive influence tactics can erode psychological safety, leading to a toxic work environment where employees engage in self-preservation rather than constructive collaboration.

To summarise, positive influence tactics may take many different forms and are usually based on relational skills like “consistency, honesty, and transparency” (PPT1), rather than mere charm. In contrast, manipulation may be used to push hidden agendas, leading to situations where “the truth is not what's said” (PPT11). Other negative tactics include cynical attempts to “buy trust” (PPT20); and the formation of exclusionary factions or “in-groups” (PPT18) – a strategy often used by so-called “onion style” leaders.

5.3.5.3 Power and authority: stewardship versus self-preservation

The way leaders perceive and wield power significantly impacts the nature of their political behaviour. Ethical leaders view power as a responsibility; using their authority to mentor others, promote ethical governance, and drive organisational success. They engage in stewardship, ensuring that their influence is used for the long-term benefit of the organisation and its stakeholders. Leaders who embrace this mindset prioritise succession planning, knowledge transfer, and sustainable leadership practices, ensuring that their impact extends beyond their tenure. Additionally, power is exercised with humility, allowing for collective decision-making and shared leadership models.

On the contrary, leaders who engage in negative political behaviour see power as a personal asset; using it to protect their status, suppress opposition, or advance self-serving interests. Power-hoarding and resistance to accountability often characterise negative political environments, leading to organisational stagnation and leadership distrust. When power is concentrated in the hands of self-serving individuals, decision-

making becomes arbitrary, opaque, and biased. Such leaders often surround themselves with “yes-men”, thereby reinforcing groupthink and suppressing diverse perspectives. Over time, unchecked power breeds corruption, favouritism, and decision paralysis, leading to a decline in organisational agility and performance.

Leaders perceive and use power in various ways. For example, positive leaders focus on collective growth, which involves “stewarding for future generations, rather than maximising their own careers” (PPT14). Conversely, negative leaders may “pull rank and play corporate politics” (PPT19) in order to exploit power for the sake of personal gain. PPT20 further warned of leaders who “assimilate [sic] the power and person”, thus confusing their professional role with their individual identity – and increasing the risk of power abuse. Finally, ego and arrogance are cited as other factors which can render power destructive (PPT24).

5.3.5.4 Decision-making: transparency versus cover-up culture

Another major variance is the role of openness and transparency in decision-making. Leaders who engage in constructive political behaviour ensure that decision-making is participatory and informed, allowing diverse voices to be heard. They prioritise evidence-based and ethical decision-making, ensuring that political dynamics do not distort organisational objectives. Transparent leaders encourage debate, foster open communication, and create avenues for accountability, ensuring that employees feel valued and empowered. This approach also minimises the risk of misinformation, rumours, and strategic misalignment.

In contrast, negative political behaviour often manifests in cover-ups, secrecy, and selective information-sharing. Leaders driven by self-interest may conceal mistakes, distort facts, or sideline critical stakeholders to maintain control. This lack of transparency erodes trust, leading to poor decision-making, organisational inefficiencies, and a culture of fear. Cover-ups not only shield incompetence but create structural weaknesses, making organisations vulnerable to external scrutiny, regulatory penalties, and reputational damage. A culture of secrecy also discourages whistleblowing, allowing unethical practices to persist unchecked.

Participants agreed that transparency in decision-making plays a crucial role in nurturing constructive politics and preventing contentious issues from festering. They emphasised the importance of setting achievable challenges, and giving feedback (PPT14) – as well as working openly with the “entire ecosystem” rather than in isolation (PPT2).

Conversely, destructive political behaviour was widely perceived to thrive on secrecy. For example, PPT4 described situations where mistakes are deliberately suppressed, because: “It’s not for the outside world to know ... [but] between you and me, we know that you’ve messed up”. This fosters a culture where accountability is superseded by the need to protect reputations; echoing concerns about leaders who control information to advance personal interests.

5.3.5.5 Leadership motivations: altruism versus self-interest

The motivations behind political engagement further determine if political behaviour becomes positive or negative political. Constructive political actors are driven by altruistic motives, prioritising the collective well-being of their organisations. Their actions reflect a commitment to mentorship, sustainable leadership, and ethical decision-making. These leaders actively work towards building inclusive workplaces, developing future leaders, and fostering a culture of fairness and equity. Altruistic leaders also see success as a shared achievement rather than a personal milestone, ensuring that growth opportunities are equitably distributed across teams and departments.

Conversely, destructive political actors are motivated by self-preservation and personal gain, prioritising career advancement over organisational success. This misalignment of personal and organisational objectives leads to divisive leadership, internal conflicts, and a culture of distrust. Leaders driven by self-interest tend to engage in office politics that favour patronage networks, ensuring that power remains concentrated within a small inner circle. Such behaviour often alienates high-potential employees, leading to talent attrition and organisational decline. Furthermore, self-serving leaders manipulate reward and recognition systems, ensuring that loyalty and compliance are valued over merit and performance.

In summary, navigating the duality of political behaviour requires an appreciation of the underlying factors that differentiate ethical leadership from manipulative politics. While all leaders engage in political behaviour to some extent, their **values, intent, and approach** determine whether their actions contribute to organisational growth or hinder it. The challenge for organisations, therefore, is to foster environments where positive political behaviour is encouraged and rewarded, while simultaneously identifying and mitigating the risks associated with destructive political actions. Recognising the interplay between influence, power, decision-making, and ethical leadership provides a scaffolding for navigating organisational politics in a way that promotes long-term sustainability and collective success.

Ultimately, political behaviour is neither inherently good nor bad. Rather, its impact depends on *how* it is used. Organisational leaders must therefore critically and continually examine their motivations and tactics to ensure that their political engagement aligns with ethical principles and serves a purpose beyond self-interest.

5.3.6 Summary findings to Research Question 2: factors influencing the duality of political behaviour among senior leaders

The phenomenological exploration of senior leaders' lived experiences yielded profound insights into the pervasiveness, complexity, and duality of political behaviour within organisational settings. The study highlighted participants' recognition of the widespread and inescapable nature of political behaviour in the organisational milieu, reinforcing its embeddedness in leadership dynamics and decision-making processes. Importantly, participants underscored the crucial role of personal values in distinguishing between constructive and destructive political engagement. They emphasised that authenticity, humility, and stewardship-oriented leadership serve as cornerstones of positive political behaviour, ensuring that power and influence are wielded responsibly and ethically.

Conversely, the research revealed critical concerns about negative political behaviour, which is often driven by Machiavellian tendencies, moral flexibility, and self-serving motives. Such behaviour manifests in manipulative strategies, exclusionary practices, and unethical decision-making, ultimately eroding trust, collaboration, and organisational effectiveness. The bifurcation of political behaviour into positive and negative expressions highlights the inherent tension and complexity that senior leaders navigate in their roles. This underscores the duality of political behaviour, where intent, ethical grounding, and leadership values determine whether political engagement enhances or undermines organisational outcomes.

The inquiry further revealed that neutral or context-sensitive factors may operate as either enablers or constraints, depending on situational undercurrents. Such factors include the influence of diverse leadership styles, which can either foster or temper political behaviours; and the interconnected nature of social, economic, and political contexts, which collectively shape how power and influence are exercised. The presence of political power dynamics and competing interests also emerged as a defining feature, as did issues related to diversity and discrimination, which can trigger or suppress political conduct. In addition, organisational dynamics – such as culture, structure, and internal processes – were found to either promote or prevent politicised actions. Lastly,

the role of homophily in social networks showed how alignment with like-minded individuals can influence political engagement. These six interrelated factors again demonstrate that political behaviour is neither inherently good nor bad. Rather, its character is shaped by the shifting context in which it occurs.

This research therefore builds a deeper understanding of the duality of political behaviour among senior leaders. It also offers invaluable perspectives that can guide the refinement of organisational practices and the enhancement of leadership development programs, thereby fostering more ethical and effective organisational culture. Figure 5.8 summarises the neutral factors influencing the duality of political behaviour.

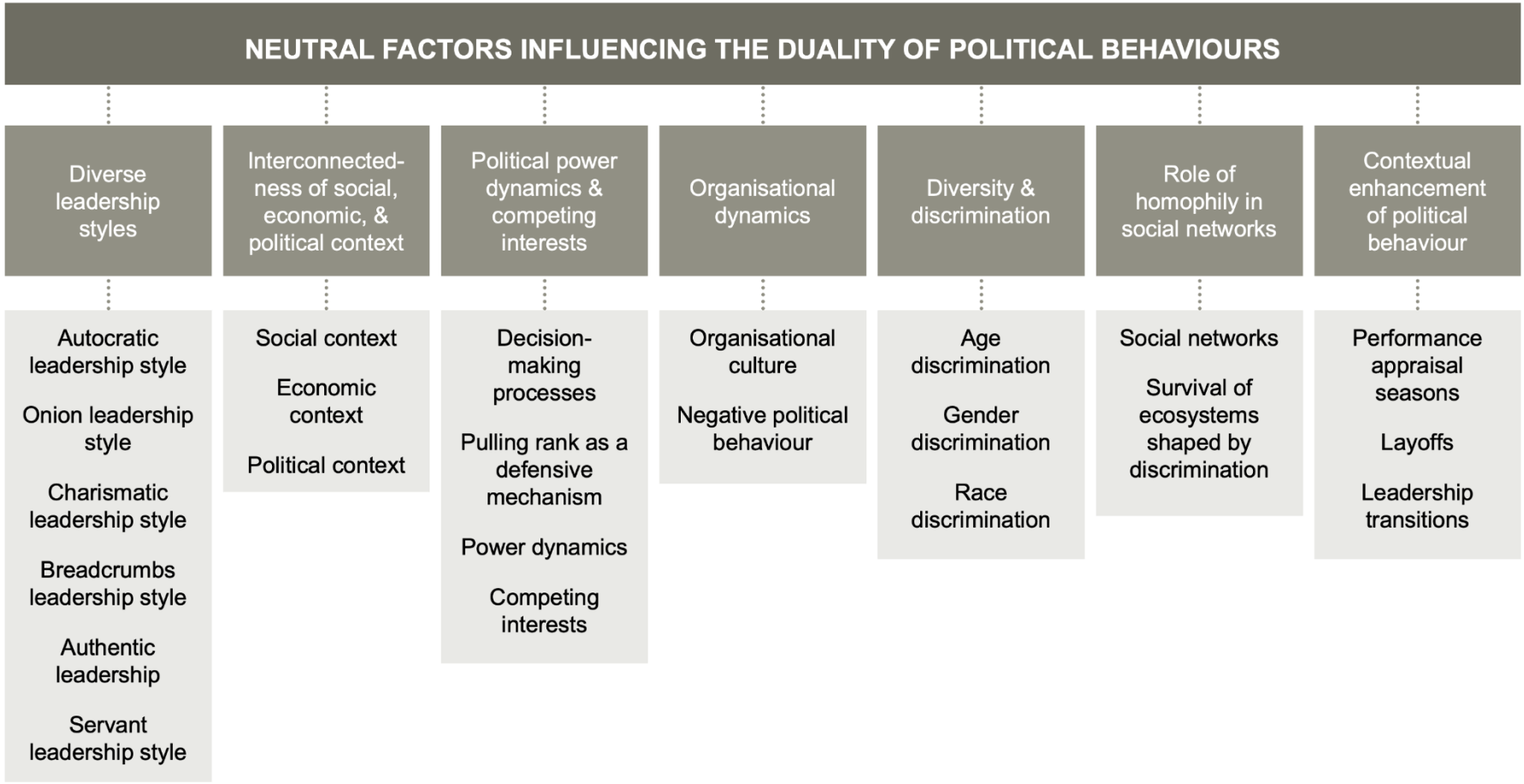

Figure 5.8: Neutral factors influencing the duality of political behaviour

Source: Author's own.

5.4 Guidelines to manage the political behaviour of senior leaders

As we have seen, the political behaviour of senior leaders shapes organisational dynamics – both negatively and positively. Such dynamics include strategic decision-making and decision quality – as well as the impact on an organisation's short-term success and long-term sustainability. It is, therefore, imperative to establish guidelines for managing such behaviour, as implied by Research Question 3 (RQ3): **W*hat are the contextual factors that regulate the political behaviour of senior leaders in an organisation?***

The following sections cover findings that relate to organisational guidelines for respectively fostering and managing positive and negative political behaviours. These guidelines are equally applicable to neutral or context-dependent factors, given that such factors tilt towards positive or negative influence. First, I present guidelines for fostering positive political behaviour (section 5.4.1). Next, I set out parameters for managing negative political behaviour (section 5.4.2). Finally, I set out guidelines for managing the neutral factors which influence the political behaviour of senior leaders (section 5.4.3).

5.4.1 Guidelines to foster positive political behaviour

Section 5.3.2 describes factors that influence positive political behaviour at the senior executive level of an organisation. These factors are underpinned by an inherent individual value system encompassing individual moral and ethical values, honesty and integrity, genuineness, humility, stewardship, and selflessness – and are supported by a solid spiritual foundation. Turning to Research Question 3, which focuses on the *contextual* factors that regulate the political behaviour of senior leaders, three themes emerged from participants' responses. One: ***providing leadership development*** – investing in comprehensive leadership development programmes that emphasise ethical conduct and political acumen. Two: ***fostering a culture of caring*** – encouraging an organisational culture that values empathy, understanding, and support among its members. Three: ***effecting fair and equitable performance evaluation and compensation*** – implementing transparent and impartial systems for performance assessment and compensation to reduce biases and favouritism.

The following sub-sections summarise participants' thoughts about these three guidelines and offer a structured approach for navigating the complexities of political behaviour in senior leadership, in which individual aspirations are balanced with

organisational objectives for the betterment of all. These guidelines are equally applicable for managing factors influencing *negative* political behaviour, as described earlier in section 5.3.3.

5.4.1.1 Provide leadership development

The study confirmed that successful leadership development is considered a cornerstone of long-term success in the ever-changing terrain of organisational dynamics. Achieving this objective involves understanding a broad spectrum of factors such as training approaches and feedback mechanisms, succession planning and cultivation of collaborative teamwork.

A profound comment from PPT16 highlights the importance of a holistic strategy in leadership development: "We should know that people will have different priorities and different views, and when they come together, you have to negotiate rather than think [of a] set of rules. Because if you don't understand that politics is just human interaction with different agendas, you will never be successful". This insight accentuates the importance of embedding compassionate and empathetic leadership practices into the broader spectrum of organisational development. Such an approach not only enhances individual leadership capabilities but also contributes significantly to the cultivation of a supportive and collaborative organisational environment. This perspective reinforces the idea that successful leadership development is not just about skill enhancement but also about fostering an environment that values empathy, understanding, and collaboration.

Provide training

Participants agreed that a comprehensive, tailored approach to professional development should involve a range of training approaches and content areas. They stressed the importance of aligning training initiatives with the immediate and future needs of the organisation, thus ensuring that senior leaders are adequately equipped with the skills and knowledge required to effectively navigate the evolving challenges of their roles. This emphasis on targeted training highlights its indispensable role in cultivating a skilled and adaptable top management team: a vital component for the organisation's ongoing success and competitive edge.

PPT9 comments:

> "If you spend one billion rands on advertising externally and 40 million on internal training, it doesn't make sense. The people that you need to spend on [are those that will] go and externalise the energy and culture and values of the organisation."

PPT18 calls for more training in the art of persuasion: "We don't actually talk about this. We skirt around it. It's very hard for people to be aware of something that we're all pretending doesn't exist".

These insights show the importance of effective training programmes in leadership development. By investing in comprehensive training that is aligned with organisational goals and the evolving landscape of business, organisations can ensure that their leaders are not only proficient in their current roles but also prepared for future challenges. This approach to training is key to fostering a culture of continuous learning and adaptability among senior leaders, contributing significantly to the overall success and sustainability of the organisation.

Invite feedback

The importance of establishing a culture that actively encourages the free flow of feedback was a key theme in this study. Participants highlighted the need to ensure that feedback is constructive and contributes positively to the work environment so that employees feel empowered to share their thoughts and opinions openly. This encompasses upward feedback to higher-level leaders, peer-to-peer feedback, and feedback from leaders to their subordinates. Cultivating such a culture of open communication is crucial for enhancing transparency, building trust, and promoting continuous improvement within the organisation.

PPT14 underscores the role of leadership in fostering such feedback: "The first thing is that the leader needs to be seen to be able to generate [and enable] pushback, questions, and challenges". Likewise, PPT27 emphasises the value of self-assessment for leaders: "There are lots of these personality and psychometric tests we do as leaders. I like those things. Any opportunity I get, I do them just to see if I'm still the same or if I'm evolving". PPT17 comments on the importance of respect in eliciting feedback:

> "I think if people feel respected, they'll provide their views. If they really think that you'll be interested, then they'll be confident enough to provide their voice, confident enough to believe that they have something to say [and] that they'll be listened to."

These insights underline the importance of fostering a culture where feedback is integral to organisational operations. Such a culture not only supports the development of a transparent and trustful work environment but also stimulates personal and organisational growth, making it a pivotal aspect of effective organisational management.

Succession planning

The study showed the importance of succession planning to effectively manage leadership transitions and nurture future leaders. Participants recommended early identification of potential leadership candidates and urged that they be provided with tailored development opportunities to ensure a seamless handover of responsibilities. They also highlighted the need for a strategic and proactive approach to succession planning: one that is seamlessly integrated into the broader organisational strategy. Such an approach is vital not only for ensuring leadership continuity but also for bolstering organisational resilience by preparing future leaders to navigate current and forthcoming challenges effectively. As PPT31 comments: "Where there's consistency in the approach to succession, you find that things are much more managed".

In short, by identifying and grooming potential leaders early and integrating succession planning into the organisation's overall strategy, organisations can ensure a steady pipeline of capable leaders ready to take on future challenges. This foresight is crucial for maintaining organisations' stability and adaptive capacity in a rapidly evolving business landscape.

Teamwork and collaboration

Throughout discussions with participants, the importance of teamwork and collaboration emerged as a central theme, underlining its crucial role in establishing trust, dismantling siloed mindsets, and nurturing positive interpersonal relationships within organisations. Participants underscored the value of collaborative efforts in fostering a more unified and integrated work environment, which is instrumental in promoting cross-functional communication and a shared sense of purpose. Emphasising teamwork and collaboration is, therefore, fundamental in cultivating an organisational culture that prioritises collective achievements over individual accolades, thereby enhancing overall organisational effectiveness and cohesion.

PPT21 speaks about the relationship between authentic political behaviour and collaboration: "I do think that when you use political behaviour in an authentic way, it engenders trust, and it engenders collaboration and willingness to be part of what you're

trying to achieve". PPT29 elaborates on the relationship between influence and receptiveness:

> "It's the gold standard because everyone wants to have influence, but no one wants to get influenced. So, if you want to be a good influencer, allow yourself to *be* influenced. [If] you want to have gravitas, allow yourself to absorb other people's gravitas."

This comment reflects the notion that being open to influence is a key component of effective leadership and collaboration. Such insights from participants reinforce the essential role of teamwork and collaboration in building a strong organisational foundation. By fostering an environment where collaboration is valued and encouraged, organisations can ensure a more harmonious and effective working atmosphere conducive to achieving shared goals and success.

5.4.1.2 Foster a culture of caring

The study showed that in the challenging landscape of today's corporate environment, there is a growing recognition of the need to transcend traditional business paradigms in favour of a culture that acknowledges and values human dynamics. Organisations often grapple with the complexities arising from diverse priorities, varied viewpoints, and the intricate nature of interpersonal relationships – while striving to fulfil individual and collective objectives. Amidst this tangled network of relationships, the ethos of caring emerges as a potent catalyst for fostering harmonious coexistence and achieving communal success.

Leadership role modelling

When fostering a culture of caring, it is paramount that senior leaders become role models. Participants felt that such leaders should embody qualities such as caring, empathy, and ethical behaviour in their daily conduct. The consistent demonstration of these traits by top-level leadership sends a powerful message to the whole organisation, affirming that these qualities are not merely desirable but are actually fundamental to the organisation's ethos. Thus, a standard is set for positive behaviour across the entire organisation, embedding a caring attitude into the very fabric of the corporate culture. As PPT31 comments: "It's the most important thing, I think. Senior leaders need to model the right behaviour".

Clear values and expectations

Participants also emphasised the need to develop and communicate a set of core values centred around ethical behaviour, collaboration, and empathy: values which should be integrated into crucial organisational processes, such as performance evaluations, promotions, and reward systems. This approach ensures that the organisation's espoused values are not only articulated but actively lived out and reflected in daily interactions, thereby reinforcing a culture that truly aligns with these principles.

As PPT33 points out: "We can have the best intentions, but until we can see leaders *living* the values and using power and influence in a way that is positive, it's easy to flip over to the darker side when there are no boundaries". This statement again highlights the critical role of leaders in setting the tone for the organisation's culture through their actions and decision-making. By solidifying these values as foundational pillars of the organisational culture, organisations can create a working environment where ethical conduct, collaborative efforts, and empathetic interactions are not only encouraged but are the norm. In turn, this fosters mutual respect, integrity, and a collective sense of purpose.

Ethical leadership training

The study found that the implementation of targeted training for leaders is a crucial element in fostering a culture of caring within organisations. Participants felt that such training should comprehensively cover multidimensional areas (ethical decision-making, emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and empathy), thus enabling leaders to approach challenging situations with a balanced perspective that gives due consideration to ethical standards and human interaction. This would develop leaders who are not only effective in their professional capacities but are also well-equipped to guide with integrity and compassion. Thus, by prioritising ethical considerations and fostering empathy, organisations can ensure that their leaders successfully achieve business objectives and contribute positively to the overall organisational culture and the well-being of all stakeholders. This approach to leadership development is essential for building resilient and ethically grounded organisations that are capable of thriving in an increasingly complex and interconnected business environment.

Inclusive leadership

Encouraging leaders to embrace inclusivity and diversity is pivotal when cultivating a nurturing organisational culture. Participants emphasised the importance of fostering an inclusive environment that respects and values diverse perspectives. Such a culture not

only enhances the richness of organisational dialogue but also significantly reduces the propensity for destructive political behaviour that results in the marginalisation of certain groups or individuals. Inclusive leadership, therefore, plays a key role in building a workplace environment where differences are celebrated and every member feels a sense of belonging and purpose.

Open communication channels

Participants identified the establishment of effective channels for open communication and feedback as a critical element in positive organisational culture. They noted that when employees are empowered to express their opinions and ideas – when they feel their voices are heard and their contributions valued – they are more likely to engage fully with the organisation. Thus, an open communication environment is crucial for mitigating instances of negative or destructive political behaviour. By promoting transparency and cultivating a culture where feedback is not only welcomed but also acted upon, it is possible to create an environment characterised by trust and mutual respect: both of which are essential for the healthy functioning of any organisation.

PPT29 shares a practical example of how open communication can be encouraged: "We're actually having a session next week on 'radical candour'. I definitely think more of it is required in our organisation and the teams that I lead". Thus, open communication not only enhances the decision-making process by incorporating a diversity of perspectives; it also contributes to a more inclusive and collaborative work environment. By embracing open communication and feedback, organisations can significantly improve employee engagement, foster innovation, and cultivate a sense of shared purpose among their workforce. This strategy is fundamental to creating an organisational culture that not only values but thrives on the active participation and contribution of all its members.

5.4.1.3 Effect fair and equitable performance evaluation and compensation

The study highlighted the importance of recognising and rewarding behaviours that align with an organisation's desired culture of caring and collaboration. Interestingly, participants urged that reward systems should acknowledge achievements not only in isolation but also for the *manner* in which these achievements are attained. In other words, reward systems should go beyond mere productivity metrics and incorporate a holistic assessment of *how* results are achieved. Thus, by incentivising behaviours that

promote caring, empathy, and teamwork, organisations can effectively communicate to their employees that these qualities are not only appreciated but are fundamental to the organisational ethos. Such recognition serves as a powerful motivator for employees to continue exhibiting these positive behaviours, thereby contributing to the cultivation of a supportive and cooperative organisational environment.

PPT14 reflects on the role of performance management in this regard:

> "I think performance management plays a bigger role than people would like to admit. How is people's performance evaluated and assessed, and how is the economic compensation aligned? It might seem too 'capitalistic', but I think at the end of the day, it is actually a very, very important driver."

This perspective underscores the importance of integrating recognition and rewards into the performance management system, illustrating that the way in which employees are evaluated and compensated significantly drives organisational values and behaviours. However, as PPT31 says, it can prove challenging to incorporate subjective elements like values into a performance evaluation system: "Putting enough weight when it comes to performance management on living those values is quite important. But when you put it in performance management, it's always wishy-washy".

To summarise, the establishment of recognition and reward systems that align with organisational values is pivotal in fostering a culture that appreciates and supports caring and collaborative behaviours. By adopting such an approach, organisations not only enhance employee morale and motivation but also strengthen the alignment between individual actions and broader organisational goals and values. This is essential for creating an environment where the principles of empathy, teamwork, and mutual support are not just espoused but actively practised and rewarded, leading to a more cohesive and effective organisational culture. Table 5.2 summarises the guidelines and practical steps required for entrenching factors influencing positive political behaviour within an organisation.

Table 5.2: Summary of fostering positive political behaviour

Factors influencing positive political behaviour	How to foster positive political behaviour	Practical steps
Moral and ethical values Honesty and integrity Authenticity Self-awareness and humility Stewardship and selflessness Spiritual grounding	**Provide leadership development** opportunities – investing in comprehensive leadership development programmes that emphasise ethical conduct and political acumen.	• Invite feedback • Establish the 360-degree feedback system
	Foster a culture of caring – encouraging an organisational culture that values empathy, understanding, and support among its members.	• Set clear organisational values and expectations • Establish ethical leadership training courses • Leadership role modelling • Set clear conflict resolution mechanisms
	Effect fair and equitable performance evaluation and compensation – implementing transparent and impartial systems for performance assessment and compensation to reduce biases and favouritism.	• Encourage performance feedback • Establish the 360-degree feedback system • Promote transparency and accountability

Source: Author's own.

5.4.2 Guidelines to manage negative political behaviour

Section 5.3.3 describes factors that influence negative political behaviour among senior leaders. Such behaviour typically involves unethical practices and manipulative tactics that prioritise personal gain or influence at the expense of the collective well-being of both the organisation and its members. Negative political behaviour includes Machiavellianism, moral flexibility and a departure from principled conduct. Related practices include the abuse of power, prioritisation of personal agendas and self-

interests, and the perpetuation of inequality and discriminatory actions within organisational settings.

In the interviews with participants on contextual factors that regulate the political efficiency of senior leaders and manage negative political behaviour (Research Question 3), the following three themes emerged. One: ***effective governance structures*** – the establishment and maintenance of robust governance frameworks that can guide and regulate the conduct of senior leaders. Two: ***mitigating destructive political behaviour*** – identifying and addressing forms of negative political behaviour that can undermine organisational integrity and effectiveness. Three, ***change management strategy to foster positive political behaviour*** – developing strategies to manage organisational change that promote positive political behaviour and discourage manipulative tactics. The following sub-sections summarise participants' thoughts about these three guidelines and offer a structured approach for navigating the complexities of political behaviour in senior leadership, in which individual aspirations are balanced with organisational objectives for the betterment of all.

5.4.2.1 Effective governance structures

Participants agreed that a proficient and effective corporate governance structure is crucial for the integrity and functionality of any organisation because it prevents the potential manipulation and misuse of power. Moreover, a board that is diverse in expertise and viewpoints is more likely to engage in thorough and balanced decision-making – thus enhancing creativity, reducing the risks of "groupthink", and bolstering the overall effectiveness of organisational decision-making processes.

PPT19 comments on the need to safeguard a board's integrity: "If [people] think the board can be manipulated …those individuals who are aspirational will abuse the environment". Meanwhile, PPT11 is highly critical of board members in general:

> "They are just incompetent people [who] have been there a long time. They're very relaxed. They don't ask hard questions. They're actually not getting the nature of the crisis. So, to be extreme, I would probably fire 80% of the boards I've encountered in this country because [they] have been there for 20 years but don't have [their] finger on the business."

PPT23 adds: "If the board is not dispassionate …you lose that corporate governance kind of environment, [and] it can get destructive". These perspectives underscore the need to establish governance structures that are both competent and diverse. Such

structures are essential for fostering a balanced and ethical decision-making environment in organisations, thereby contributing to their long-term success and sustainability.

Assigning responsibilities

Participants strongly advocated for the clear delineation of responsibilities within an organisation. They highlighted the crucial role of self-awareness among leaders, supporting a culture where peer-to-peer feedback is normalised and embraced. Furthermore, the development of boldness and assertiveness in senior leaders was identified as a key strategy in mitigating destructive political behaviour. These approaches, encompassing defined responsibilities and a culture of mutual accountability and assertiveness, were seen as vital for sustaining a healthy and productive organisational environment.

PPT21 comments:

> "The risk that we run around political behaviour and the power that it gives to leaders is that sometimes their power blunts [them] from understanding what their core responsibility is. It's not just about delivering the goal. It's often about who you take along the journey with you. And sometimes [it comes down to] self-awareness [or] the lack thereof."

PPT2 emphasises the importance of self-accountability: "It is we who must say, how do we make sure we are responsible and accountable? How do we call each other out in a manner that drives what we are trying to do?" Likewise, PPT8 points to the role of individual integrity: "At the end of the day, if we don't have real people that are pushing the good, then we are always going to be challenged".

These insights from the participants underscore the necessity of building self-awareness and mutual accountability among leaders, in order to navigate the complexities of organisational dynamics and maintain a conducive environment for achieving collective goals.

Transparency and accountability

Participants expressed a unanimous belief in the critical importance of accountability and transparency among senior leaders. Emphasising the need for open, honest dialogue within top management teams, they advocated for a proactive approach to reporting and addressing issues. This culture of forthrightness, where issues are tackled directly and transparently – even before external inquiries or demands are made – is regarded as

essential to cultivating an organisational climate where transparency is a practised standard and accountability is embedded in the leadership attitude.

PPT2 elaborates:

> "It is we who must say, how do we make sure we are responsible and accountable? How do we call each other out in a manner that drives what we are trying to do? It's like when you come together as the stokvel. It is communication. It is a coming together and an understanding of what we want to be achieved. But if the politics are stuffed, we are stuffed."

PPT23 emphasises the importance of pre-emptive communication: "Rather say it before the board has to say it, [or] before the external auditors have to say it, [or] before CRO [chief risk officer] has to say it, because if you haven't said something, that's more dangerous politically".

These insights underscore the imperative of fostering a culture where transparency and accountability are not merely formalities but integral components of daily leadership practice. This approach enhances the integrity and effectiveness of decision-making processes and strengthens trust within the organisation. By prioritising these values, leaders can create a more open, accountable, and ethical organisational environment, which is crucial for long-term success and sustainability.

Ethics and codes of conduct

Participants accentuated the importance of ethical behaviour and a steadfast commitment to integrity among senior leaders. They expressed significant concerns about situations where governance structures become ineffective or are compromised. This strong focus on ethics, and adherence to a rigorous code of conduct, was viewed as essential for ensuring that governance mechanisms function effectively, thereby upholding the organisation's ethical standards. Such perspectives underscore the necessity of a robust ethical framework that guides actions and decisions, positioning it as a fundamental aspect of effective corporate governance.

As PPT24 reflects:

> "Are we comfortable with the fact that we can actually have the lion's share all the time? Even in cases where we know we don't have the expertise to run or drive that transaction? It is not sustainable because we are in a context where it's all about integrity."

This study shows that establishing and maintaining a culture of ethics and integrity ensures governance structures are not merely formalities but effective tools for decision-making and upholding organisational values. The participants' emphasis on ethics and a strong code of conduct serves as a reminder of the importance of these elements in sustaining the integrity and long-term success of organisations.

5.4.2.2 Mitigating destructive political behaviour

Drawing on participants' responses, it is evident that leaders who embody ethical codes and adhere to moral principles aligned with the organisation's mission, are less likely to engage in destructive political practices. Indeed, ethical leadership – marked by transparency, integrity, and dedication to the collective well-being – is identified in the study as a crucial element in nurturing a culture of trust and integrity at senior leadership level. Participants also highlighted the significance of diverse perspectives and values in influencing leaders' political actions, generating innovative ideas, and enabling robust decision-making processes. However, they felt it was important to strike a balance between diversity and organisational cohesion, so as to avoid potential challenges arising from conflicting ideologies.

In short, the study garnered rich insights into how destructive political behaviour in complex organisations can be mitigated through ethical leadership and the integration of diverse values and experiences. These insights are summarised in the following sections.

Ethical and moral considerations

In the study, a recurrent theme centred around the ethical considerations influencing the political actions of senior leaders. Participants delved into the importance of adhering to moral principles and organisational values, highlighting how these factors critically guide leadership behaviour. This focus on ethics underscores its pivotal role in shaping leaders' decisions and actions, thereby influencing the political landscape within organisations. The discussion also highlighted the need for leaders not only to acknowledge ethical standards, but to actively integrate these principles into their strategic and operational activities.

PPT22 addresses the fine line between positive relationships and ethical boundaries:

> "If you've got people at work that you really get along well with, it's one of the biggest retention factors for organisations [because] you feel energised by the

> people around you. That's not the same as having relationships that are too close for comfort: where objectivity gets blurred, and where power is used in factional ways."

PPT16 further describes how decision-making can be jeopardised by self-driven agenda: "[Sometimes] it looks like the decision is pregnant with other things. There's nothing wrong with being ambitious, but not at the expense of the organisation". Meanwhile, PPT24 explains how unethical, negative political behaviour can erode confidence:

> "[They] watch you, each and every move, and they put you in a trap, which is so unethical. [Then] they create a [false] performance issue, which is also unethical. So, you say to yourself: do I want to be part of this political game? Because it is a political game. But at the same time, it is my job. So, it's very hard, and you can only do it to a certain extent. Morally, it does get to you. Those things are really hard. They're very hard to swallow."

PPT4 comments on the trickle-down effect of leadership style: "It comes down to how aligned or misaligned leadership is at the very top. I honestly think it trickles down from that kind of level". Equally, PPT27 feels collaborative efforts safeguard ethical standards: "because you can never win that war on your own".

The study shows that by embedding ethical principles into their decision-making and operations, leaders can significantly impact the organisational culture, promoting an environment where ethical conduct is not just encouraged but is a fundamental aspect of the organisational identity. This emphasis on ethics is crucial for fostering a culture of integrity, accountability, and responsible leadership within organisations.

Diversity and values

Participants extensively explored the concept of diversity, emphasising its broad scope. They agreed that diversity transcends demographic attributes, incorporating a rich tapestry of perspectives, life experiences, and innovative ideas. This broader understanding of diversity enriches the organisational decision-making process and culture, elevating it from a mere quantitative measure to a qualitative asset. Moreover, the study also noted that senior leaders' *personal* values strongly influence their political behaviour, and that alignment between individual and organisational values is crucial to ensure consistency and integrity in leadership and organisational directives.

PPT29 sums up the importance of embracing diverse perspectives and multiple voices: "You've got all these executives, but if ultimately it's [just] one person's voice that matters, why are we actually all there?" PPT8 explains the benefits of diversity in more detail:

"You get different opinions, [and] somebody suddenly comes up with unbelievable ideas. Opportunity suddenly gets created, just because people … get a small input from somebody else. Still, it opens their eyes". PPT30 notes: "Most organisations are [now] very conscious of diversity, and very focused on values. Maybe I'm biased by the organisation I work for. I feel like we take value seriously". PPT14 adds: "I think a lot of empirical, analytical studies support [the idea that] heterogeneous organisations and diversity create higher value creation than homogeneous organisations".

These insights illustrate the integral role of diversity and values in shaping the organisational environment. By embracing diversity in its broadest sense and aligning personal and organisational values, leaders can foster a culture that is not only inclusive and ethical but also dynamic and innovative. This approach is fundamental to building organisations that are adaptable, creative, and aligned with their core principles, contributing to their long-term success and sustainability.

5.4.2.3 Change management strategy to foster positive political behaviour

The research clearly shows that certain situations act as catalysts for change, and have widespread effects on the entire organisation. As previously discussed, these situations include performance appraisals, which carry implications for economic changes such as compensation adjustments, and potential employee promotions. Additionally, business restructuring and retrenchments, which have become increasingly common in today's challenging operational environments – as well as significant organisational transitions, such as the induction of new board members or senior leaders – are also pivotal.

Such scenarios contribute to a contextual enhancement of political behaviour, manifesting either positively or negatively within the organisation. In addressing these dynamics, change management was identified by the participants as a key strategy and guideline for promoting positive political behaviour. Change management involves navigating through changes in a manner that not only *acknowledges* the inherent challenges, but also *leverages* them as opportunities to reinforce positive political dynamics within the organisation. Effective change management can thus be a critical tool to ensure that political behaviour contributes constructively to an organisation's goals and culture.

Influence and change

For the participants in this study, the interplay between influence and organisational change was a significant, recurring theme. They highlighted the importance of unified

action – whether in attitudinal change, or in senior leaders' use of political capital – and recognised the need for strategic influence when aligning individual efforts with overarching organisational objectives.

PPT18 explains how the adept use of influence and political capital can facilitate a unified transition towards desired organisational goals:

> "You must exactly follow the book: your ability to influence the things that are often relevant to the change. It's most important where we're trying to get a shift either in behaviour or business. People use a lot of political capital to [enable] that shift, because you're asking everyone else to move with you."

Participants felt that change is not solely an individual endeavour but requires a harmonised approach: one in which leaders' individual capabilities are aligned with the organisation's collective aspirations. This underscores the importance of strategic planning, communication, and engagement with all levels of the organisation to ensure that change initiatives are not only conceived by the entire organisational body, but also effectively executed and embraced.

Situational leadership

The concept of situational leadership surfaced as a key insight in this study. Participants agreed that building a successful business demands a diverse range of leadership styles, each tailored to suit the unique demands of different situations. They further advocated a proactive and versatile approach to leadership, encompassing strategies such as leading from the front, supporting from behind, and actively assisting subordinates rather than solely directing them. This perspective challenges the notion of a one-size-fits-all leadership style, acknowledging instead that the complexities of modern business require a more adaptive and multifaceted approach. It also highlights the importance of flexibility and responsiveness in leadership practices: essential for navigating the dynamic landscape of contemporary organisational environments.

PPT4 articulates this concept: "I think organisations need different types of leaders at different times. You can't build a successful organisation only based on one type of model". Participants also recognised that successful leadership is not monolithic, but rather comprises a spectrum of approaches, each suitable for different situations and challenges. This requires leaders to be flexible, responsive, and versatile, adapting their style to meet the unique demands of various scenarios. By adopting such an adaptive approach, leaders can more effectively guide their organisations through the myriad

challenges and opportunities presented in the modern business world, thereby optimising chances for sustained success and resilience.

Building an inspiring culture

The study found that building an inspiring culture requires a holistic approach to organisational management, embracing facets such as change management, talent management, and the creation of a stimulating work environment. Such a culture not only motivates employees to excel daily, but also fosters a deeper understanding of their role within the organisation. In such an environment, employees are not solely accountable to their immediate superiors: they are also integral to the broader success and functionality of the organisation. This necessitates a shift from a narrow, job-focused mindset to a more expansive view that encompasses the collective objectives and well-being of the organisation.

PPT27 eloquently describes this as: "a culture where, if you wake up in the morning, you really want to come to work. You don't only work for your boss; you work for the whole organisation". By building such an environment, organisations can create a strong sense of community and shared responsibility, which is crucial for driving collective success and fostering an innovative, resilient, and adaptive organisational structure.

Table 5.3 portrays the guidelines and practical steps for managing factors influencing negative political behaviour within the organisation.

Table 5.3: Summary of managing negative political behaviour

Factors influencing negative political behaviour	How to manage negative political behaviour	Practical steps
Machiavellianism Lack of integrity Covering-up mistakes Personal agenda, interests, and self-preservation Arrogance and egotism Abuse of power Moral flexibility and abdication of principles	**Establish effective governance structures** – establishing and maintaining robust governance frameworks that can guide and regulate the conduct of senior leaders. **Callout and address destructive political behaviour** – identifying and addressing forms of negative political behaviour that can undermine organisational integrity and effectiveness. **Develop change management strategy to foster positive political behaviour** – Develop strategies to manage organisational change that promote positive political behaviour and discourage manipulative tactics.	Assign clear roles and responsibilities Promote a culture of transparency and accountability Callout unethical political behaviour and conduct *outside* the organisation Code of conduct Promote diversity and inclusion

Source: Author's own.

5.4.3 Guidelines to manage neutral factors influencing political behaviour

Section 5.3.4 describes factors that influence neutral political behaviour among senior leaders. Such factors represent the dual aspects of enablers and preventers within the realm of the political behaviour of senior leaders. They include diverse leadership styles, the interconnectedness of social, economic and political contexts, political power dynamics and competing interests, diversity and discrimination, organisational dynamics, and the role of homophily in social networks (Table 5.4).

As mentioned, these six interrelated factors operate as both enablers and constraints, depending on situational dynamics. Collectively, they demonstrate that political behaviour is neither inherently good nor bad. Rather, its character is shaped by the shifting context in which it occurs. Therefore, the guidelines used to entrench positive political behaviour (section 5.4.1) and those used to manage negative political behaviour (section 5.4.2) are equally applicable to these neutral factors, depending on the side towards which they tilt.

Table 5.4: Summary guidelines for managing nuanced factors influencing neutral political behaviour

Neutral factors influencing political behaviour	How to manage neutral political behaviour	Practical steps
Diverse leadership styles Interconnectedness of social, economic, and political context Political power dynamics and competing interests Organisational dynamics Diversity and discrimination Role of homophily in social networks Contextual enhancement of political behaviour	**Fostering positive political behaviour** ***(discussed in section 5.4.2)***	
	Provide leadership development opportunities – investing in comprehensive leadership development programmes that emphasise ethical conduct and political acumen. **Foster a culture of caring** – encouraging an organisational culture that values empathy, understanding, and support among its members. **Effect fair and equitable performance evaluation and compensation** – implementing transparent and impartial systems for performance assessment and compensation to reduce biases and favouritism.	• Invite feedback • Establish the 360-degree feedback system • Set clear organisational values and expectations • Establish ethical leadership training • Leadership role modelling • Establish the 360-degree feedback system • Promote transparency and accountability • Set clear conflict resolution mechanisms
	Managing negative political behaviour ***(discussed in section 5.4.3)***	

Neutral factors influencing political behaviour	How to manage neutral political behaviour	Practical steps
	Establish effective governance structures – establishing and maintaining robust governance frameworks that can guide and regulate the conduct of senior leaders. **Callout and address destructive political behaviour** – identifying and addressing forms of negative political behaviour that can undermine organisational integrity and effectiveness. **Develop change management strategy to foster positive political behaviour** – developing strategies to manage organisational change that promote positive political behaviour and discourage manipulative tactics.	• Assign clear roles and responsibilities • Promote a culture of transparency and accountability • Callout unethical political behaviour and conduct outside the organisation's code of conduct • Promote diversity and inclusion

Source: Author's own.

5.4.4 Summary of findings for Research Question 3: Guidelines to manage political behaviour

The study finds that leaders who demonstrate ethical conduct and align with the values and mission of their organisation are less likely to engage in destructive political behaviour. Furthermore, the study underscores the profound impact of diversity in shaping leadership behaviour. Participants agreed that organisations which embrace diverse perspectives and experiences benefit from increased creativity, innovation, and comprehensive decision-making. However, it is seen as critical to balance diversity with organisational cohesion to prevent conflicts arising from disparate ideologies.

The study also shows that to mitigate destructive political behaviour, organisations must foster a culture characterised by transparency, trust, and integrity across all levels of the hierarchy. This involves promoting ethical leadership development, articulating organisational values clearly, and ensuring diverse viewpoints are recognised and respected. Human resource departments play a pivotal role in this context, guiding leaders towards ethical decision-making and establishing policies that discourage negative political behaviour. Thus, it is clear that ethical leadership, valuing diversity, and

fostering a culture of integrity are crucial for minimising harmful political behaviour and ensuring both immediate and long-term organisational prosperity.

In addition, the study's findings on managing political behaviour among senior leaders provide valuable insights into establishing a conducive and productive organisational environment. Key elements include: competent and effective governance structures; clear responsibilities delineation; transparency; accountability; and a staunch commitment to ethical conduct and integrity. Moreover, the enforcement of a code of conduct is advocated to promote a culture that upholds ethical leadership and holds leaders accountable for their actions.

To summarise: based on the lived experiences and insights of participants, this study has illuminated the complex, dynamic relationship between ethical leadership and the propensity for engaging in political behaviour within organisations. Guidelines to manage such political behaviour are outlined in Figure 5.9.

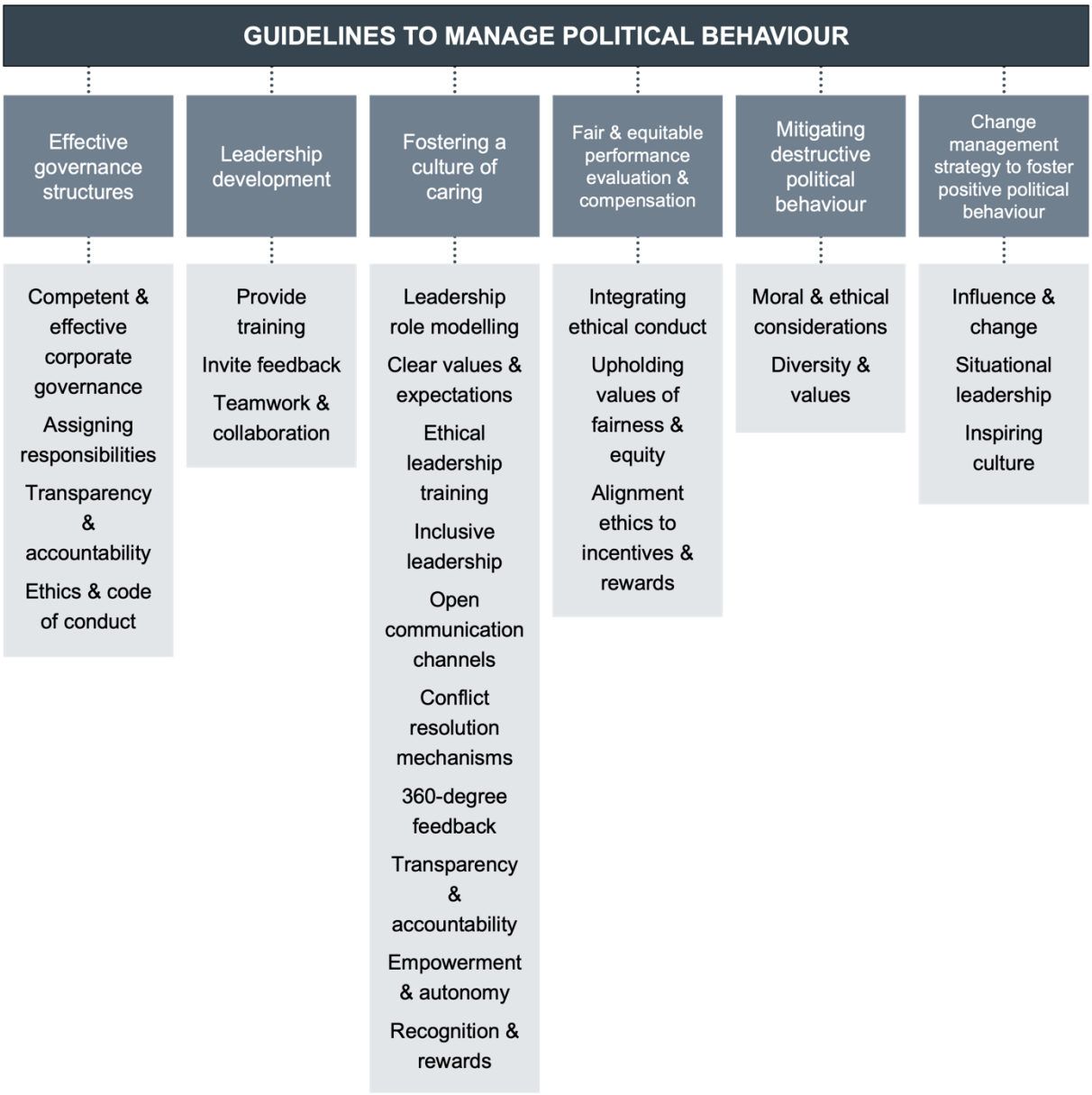

Figure 5.9: Guidelines to manage political behaviour

Source: Author's own.

5.5 Conclusion

This study was based on three key questions and used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to examine the limits of political behaviour, as experienced by senior leaders in complex organisations.

The first question asked: how do senior leaders define political behaviour and its boundaries? Empirical data revealed that such behaviour could be defined as: ***the influence that exists (is pervasive) in an organisation; is dual in nature (positive***

***or negative); and is driven by personal and contextual values/perspectives in the pursuit of desired objectives*.** These desired objectives can be positive, such as empowerment, guidance, access, or resource distribution; or they can be negative – from suppression of personal interest, to creating favours for certain groupings. The findings highlighted multiple positive and negative manifestations of this phenomenon.

The second question asked: what factors influence the duality of political behaviour of senior leaders in an organisation? The findings exposed positive, negative and a complex dichotomy of neutral factors, including: ***diverse leadership styles; interconnectedness of social, economic, and political contexts; political power dynamics and competing interests; diversity and discrimination; organisational dynamics; the role of homophily in social networks; and the contextual enhancement of political behaviour*.**

The third question, which explored guidelines for managing or regulating the political behaviour of senior executives, generated a wealth of ideas and strategies for organisations to help them: ***create an environment that fosters trust, promotes diversity and inclusion, and encourages open dialogue about political behaviour****.*

Ultimately, the study further shows that the implementation of *effective governance structures and leadership development programmes* can lead to the cultivation of ethical leadership – thereby driving organisational success and long-term sustainability. Moreover, participants' insights illuminate key aspects of leadership development, based on: *a holistic approach that hones leadership capabilities and fosters a culture of caring accountability, and ethical conduct.* Conversely, the study revealed practical strategies for *mitigating/correcting destructive political behaviour* and using *change management* to *foster positive political behaviour*. These strategies include: *effective governance structure; leadership development; building a culture of care; and creating fair and equitable performance evaluation and compensation systems.*

Chapter 6: Discussion of the study results

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the study's findings, as outlined in Chapter 5, and relate them to the research questions and the existing body of literature reviewed in Chapter 3. I explore how the empirical data supports, challenges, or extends existing knowledge of the duality of political behaviour within organisational contexts: particularly among upper echelon leaders. By drawing connections between the participants' lived experiences and the conceptual foundations of the study I highlight areas of alignment with extant literature, while also identifying novel insights and contributions that deepen our understanding of political dynamics in leadership and decision-making processes.

As previously discussed, the study focused on the boundaries of political behaviour: specifically, how this phenomenon is understood by senior leaders at the apex of South Africa's complex banking sector, where influence and collaboration are essential yet fraught with complication. Mismanaged, such behaviour can generate poor decision-making, thereby jeopardising an organisation's short-term success and long-term sustainability. By focusing on such issues, the study also contributes to the development of upper echelons theory. Neely et al. (2020) state that limited attention has been given to upper echelon leaders' interactions and/or strategic interfaces: the relational "black box". Therefore, this inquiry expands existing knowledge by providing insights into how such leaders define and interpret the boundaries of political behaviour in their respective organisations. Moreover, previous research into the boundaries of political behaviour has emanated mostly from the Global North and Asia. By focusing on South Africa and its unique context of cultural, racial, and gender dynamics, this study attempts to redress the imbalance.

In relation to the discussion of my study results, I have structured the chapter in three sections: firstly, an in-depth discussion on the research questions (sections 6.2 to 6.4); secondly, an explanation of how the study contributes to theoretical and practical knowledge (section 6.5); thirdly, a description of the proposed framework that emerged from the inquiry (section 6.6). Each section relates my research findings to the earlier review of extant literature. Moreover, I highlight points of convergence between my research and previous scholarly work, showing how the findings reinforce key aspects of current understanding. I subsequently examine where and how the findings diverge from extant literature – thereby revealing the knowledge gaps exposed during the research and offering alternative viewpoints or interpretations. Finally (section 6.7), I

show how the proposed framework, created from the unique insights and perspectives generated by my research, broadens the horizon of existing knowledge, thus setting the stage for future research in the field.

6.2 Senior leaders' conceptualisation of political behaviour and its boundaries

The study's overarching research question (RQ1) is: *how do senior leaders in complex organisations define the boundaries of political behaviour?* Figure 5.2 presents a summary of senior leaders' conceptualisation of the definition and boundaries of such behaviour, reflecting the insights from participants in relation to RQ1. The following two sub-sections discuss the research findings in relation to current knowledge, and highlight key insights that enrich our understanding of the phenomenon under inquiry. Firstly, in section 6.2.1, I show how my findings confirm that political behaviour is a pervasive phenomenon within all organisation types – whether profit or not-for-profit. Secondly, in section 6.2.2, I describe conceptual features that inform the definition of political behaviour, and carry positive, neutral and negative connotations. Finally, drawing on empirical data from participants' interviews, I explain how my inquiry makes a novel theoretical contribution to the definition of political behaviour and the boundaries thereof.

6.2.1 Political behaviour is omnipresent and influential

Political behaviour is widely acknowledged in organisational literature as a persistent and influential force. Echoing the early insights of Byrne (1917), this inquiry confirms that political behaviour is a constant feature embedded in organisational life – not merely an occasional disruption. The participants in this study consistently and promptly recognised that political processes are integral to how organisations function. This pervasiveness is not restricted to profit or not-for-profit organisations; rather, it was broadly noted across diverse industry and organisation types. Essentially, the study reinforces the notion that political behaviour is a universal and unavoidable component of workplace reality.

Consistent with Eisenhardt and Bourgeois (1988), the findings further point to a deep-rooted interplay between political behaviour and the structural and social conditions of organisational life. Participants framed political behaviour as arising naturally from the interaction of competing goals, constrained resources, and asymmetries of power. They

viewed it as a manifestation of human behaviour – intensified in situations of ambiguity and contestation – rather than as an anomaly or deviant act. Political engagement was often seen as inevitable and integral to everyday leadership practice: a logical consequence of organisational complexity, where formal authority structures coexist with informal influence systems, necessitating negotiation, alliance-building, and power plays.

Beyond its ubiquity, political behaviour was also perceived to exert significant influence on strategic decision-making, leadership effectiveness, and organisational performance. Participants acknowledged that, irrespective of personal leadership style or preference, political dynamics are consequential and must be navigated with intentionality. This recognition points to a pragmatic orientation among senior leaders, who understand that political awareness and adaptability are essential to organisational success. Political behaviour, therefore, is not merely a reality: it is impactful, shaping both formal processes and informal networks in ways that can determine the success or failure of strategic initiatives, and ultimately, organisational performance – in both financial and non-financial outcomes.

This insight is theoretically significant, as it challenges previous claims that integrity and political behaviour are diametrically opposed. Instead, it shows that integrity can strengthen political capital by stabilising influence networks and conferring legitimacy. When used as a strategic tool, integrity can also build trust and minimise destructive conflict – especially in complex, ever-changing environments.

6.2.2 Conceptual features underpinning the definition of political behaviour

6.2.2.1 Evolving definition of political behaviour

This research, based on data sourced from 30 interviews (including three follow-up conversations), confirms that the demarcation between what *is* and what is *not* political behaviour is quite hazy: a finding that underscores the inherent challenge in conceptualising the phenomenon within organisational contexts. To date, scholars have struggled to encapsulate the complexity of political behaviour in a universally accepted definition (Ferris et al., 2019) – hence the need for further inquiry. The scholarly definitions and understanding of political behaviour in organisations span a continuum; from strongly negative interpretations, to more balanced (neutral) views and, eventually, to constructive (positive) framings. This range reflects evolving perceptions of political actions in organisational contexts, highlighting the complexity of the phenomenon. Table

6.1 summarises scholarly definitions of political behaviour from the literature review, according to the following conceptual scale.

Table 6.1: Definition of political behaviour continuum

Negative	Neutral	Positive
Mintzberg (1983, 1985)	Elbanna (2018)	Ferris & Judge (1991)
Farrell & Petersen (1982)	Dayan et al. (2011)	Zanzi & O'Neill (2001)
Gandz & Murray (1980)		Ferris et al. (2002)
Schein (1977)		
Kapoutsis & Thanos (2016)		

Source: Author's own.

At the negative end of the spectrum, political behaviour is depicted as inherently detrimental: driven by self-interest and often undermining organisational coherence and formal authority. Essentially, such behaviour is seen as illegitimate, divisive, and self-serving. For example, Mintzberg (1983) famously described political behaviour as *"informal, parochial, divisive, and illegitimate,"* noting that such behaviours are not sanctioned by formal organisational structures or norms, and often disrupt unity and direction. In a similar vein, organisations have been characterised as "political arenas", where unsanctioned and self-serving actions dominate – thus reinforcing the perception of political behaviour as a source of dysfunction (Mintzberg, 1985). Farrell and Petersen (1982) and Gandz and Murray (1980) align with this perspective, portraying political behaviour as non-sanctioned and informal, operating outside the boundaries of legitimate organisational conduct. Moreover, such behaviours may reflect individual attempts to circumvent formal authority, which implies that political manoeuvring is essentially subversive (Schein, 1977). Finally, Kapoutsis and Thanos (2016) similarly view political behaviour as a series of intentional acts – such as impression management and influence tactics – employed primarily for egotistical and self-serving purposes. This interpretation highlights the manipulative nature of political behaviour, positioning it as ethically questionable and organisationally corrosive. In line with such views, participants in this study consistently associated negative political behaviour with Machiavellianism, manipulation, factionalism, moral flexibility, and the pursuit of personal agendas at the expense of collective interests. Such perspectives resonate strongly with classical

descriptions of political behaviour as a source of dysfunction and ethical erosion in organisations.

A more neutral position posits that political behaviour is not intrinsically harmful. For example, scholars like Dayan et al. (2011) and Elbanna (2018) assert that such behaviour is context-dependent and dualistic in nature, and may serve both personal and organisational ends. Elbanna (2018) significantly defines political behaviour as *"intentional actions involving the use of power and influence to serve either the self-interests of decision-makers or the interests of the organisation"*. This definition foregrounds the duality of political behaviour, highlighting its potential to be either constructive or destructive depending on intent and outcome. Dayan et al. (2011) adopt a similarly neutral stance, suggesting that political behaviour stems from conflicting organisational goals and reflects the influence of dominant coalitions. This view highlights the embeddedness of power dynamics and competing interests, without ascribing inherent moral value to political conduct. Several participants suggested that political behaviour, when exercised transparently and with integrity, is part of effective leadership – not necessarily unethical or manipulative. Thus, the findings affirm the view that political behaviour can be functional and even vital in navigating organisational complexity.

In this regard, the "Whose interests are being served?" grid created by DeLuca (1999) and reproduced in Table 3.3, is particularly interesting. The grid represents neutral political behaviour in terms of functional savvy politics, and affirms that politics may serve *both* sets of individual and organisational interests. For DeLuca (1999, p. 112), being politically savvy means "ethically building a critical mass of support for an idea you care about". Thus, politically savvy leaders recognise the *power* of politics. They do not have a "political blind spot", but work behind the scenes and make an impact by being active, ethical players – what DeLuca calls "play makers". Savvy leaders also recognise the importance of safeguarding their self-interest, to protect their credibility and thereby maintain their value to the organisation.

Turning to the positive end of the continuum, political behaviour can be redefined as a functional skillset or a strategic response to complexity, with the potential to contribute positively to individual and organisational effectiveness. Ferris and Judge (1991) argue that political behaviour can serve a protective function, especially in threatening or ambiguous environments, thus helping individuals to navigate uncertainty. Zanzi and O'Neill (2001) further suggest that self-serving behaviour is not necessarily dysfunctional, and in some cases may actually align with broader organisational

objectives. Ferris et al. (2002) position political behaviour as a constructive interpersonal skill, essential for understanding and influencing others in ways that advance both personal success and organisational performance. Such perspectives reframe political behaviour as a social competence, crucial for effective leadership and strategic influence.

In this study, some participants described positive political behaviour as a form of stewardship, whereby influence is used to foster collaboration, advance collective goals, and build organisational resilience. They highlighted how leaders can use political capital to inspire change, rally support for strategic initiatives, and protect organisational integrity during turbulent times. Such findings provide empirical reinforcement for contemporary theories that view political behaviour as an adaptive leadership competency rather than simply an ethical liability.

To summarise, this study validates the idea that political behaviour exists on a continuum. Participants' insights – grounded in real-world experience – further confirm that political behaviour evolves, according to leadership intent, organisational culture, and situational context. When driven by arrogance, self-interest, or moral compromise, political behaviour is destructive and divisive. Conversely, when guided by ethical principles, authenticity, and stewardship, political behaviour becomes a strategic lever for organisational growth and cohesion. Guided by Elbanna's (2018) neutral definition, this research therefore adopted a context-sensitive lens, recognising political behaviour as a dual-edged phenomenon: capable of advancing both personal interests and broader organisational objectives, depending on how it is enacted. Such framing enabled a more nuanced and discerning exploration of such behaviour among upper echelon leaders in complex, high-stakes environments. Thus, the findings of this study empirically transform the definition of political behaviour – from an inherently negative phenomenon to a context-sensitive leadership capability. The study also highlights the need for more sophisticated approaches to managing political behaviour in senior leadership. In this regard, the Leadership Continuum equips organisations with a diagnostic tool to assess internal leadership styles, and predict their likely impact on political dynamics. It can also enhance self-directed behavioural shifts (for example, collaboration versus top-down decision-making) in response to situational requirements and desired political outcomes.

6.2.2.2 Political behaviour is multifaceted

According to the participants in this study, political behaviour is not a "one-size-fits-all" concept. Instead, it is context-dependent: evolving in response to the interplay of

enabling and inhibiting factors such as organisational culture, power dynamics, stakeholder expectations, and individuals' ethical standards. This perspective aligns with scholars who view the phenomenon as a calculated and strategic employment of influence tactics aimed at achieving personal or organisational objectives, sometimes at the expense of others or the organisation itself (Ferris et al., 2007). The literature review further reveals the diversity of perspectives on political behaviour, encompassing individual tactics and the politics that emerge from different organisational units (Dean & Sharfman, 1996; Pfeffer & Moore, 1980). Likewise, the participants in this study offered a rich tapestry of definitions, which included personal values, context, and a recognition of the duality of the phenomenon.

6.2.2.3 Political behaviour is dualistic

In line with extant literature (Ferris et al., 2019; Mintzberg, 1983), participants in this study viewed political behaviour as essentially dualistic. Thus, positive political behaviour was seen to enhance organisational performance and individual well-being, while negative behaviour was detrimental to organisational effectiveness and individual satisfaction. Some participants emphasised the importance of ethical boundaries to help navigate this duality, as previously highlighted by scholars like Eisenhardt and Bourgeois (1988). They further noted how elements like context and individual actors could subtly shape the energy of political behaviour, a perception echoed by various scholars (Elbanna, 2018; Smit & Cronje, 1992). Finally, the research findings aligned with the literature in recognising that political behaviour encompasses diverse actions – including self-preservation, impression management, power and influence dynamics, and coalition building (Kapoutsis & Thanos, 2016).

6.2.2.4 Individuals' characteristics play an important role

Participants consistently affirmed that individual-level factors – particularly a leader's values, motivations, and ethical standards – play a crucial role in shaping the nature, tone, and outcomes of political behaviour. Their testimonies underscored the reality that political behaviour is not merely a product of organisational structures or external environments, but is significantly influenced by the internal dispositions and choices of individual leaders. This perspective aligns with broader scholarly discourse that acknowledges the ethical dimensions of political behaviour. Ferris et al. (2019) argue that individuals' moral frameworks and personal value systems act as critical filters

through which political behaviour is conceived and executed. Similarly, Hardy (1996) emphasises that political behaviour is an inherently subjective phenomenon, often reflecting an individual's broader ethical orientation, sense of responsibility, and self-concept within the organisation.

Participants further described how leaders who embody qualities such as authenticity, humility, and stewardship tend to engage in constructive political actions. Such individuals use their influence to build coalitions, foster collaboration, and drive positive organisational change. Conversely, where leaders exhibit traits like moral flexibility, ego-driven ambition, or manipulative tendencies, political behaviour is more likely to become destructive – thereby undermining trust, ethical governance, and organisational cohesion. Importantly, several participants also emphasised the interplay between internal character and external context. Whilst a values-driven leader may strive for ethical political behaviour, organisational pressures – such as intense competition for resources or leadership instability – may still test their integrity. Thus, participants highlighted the need for continuous self-awareness, ethical reflection, and commitment to core principles. They viewed these as essential practices for navigating complex organisational politics without compromising moral standards.

In short, this study reinforces the growing recognition in political behaviour literature (Ferris et al., 2019; Buchholtz et al., 2008; Hardy, 1996) that personal characteristics are not peripheral but *central* to how political behaviour manifests. In the complex ecosystem of senior leadership, individuals' ethical compasses, emotional intelligence, and motivational drivers profoundly influence whether their political actions serve personal gain at the expense of the collective, or whether they foster trust, ethical governance, and long-term organisational success. Indeed, the findings affirm that political behaviour is not only context-dependent but also character-dependent – a vital insight for both theory and practice in the fields of leadership and organisational behaviour.

6.2.2.5 Organisational culture is key

In line with extant literature, participants in this study viewed organisational culture as the essential backdrop against which political behaviour is enacted, shaping both its direction and intensity. A culture that emphasises transparency, collaboration, and ethical leadership was perceived to channel political behaviour towards constructive ends, fostering coalition-building and shared decision-making. Conversely, cultures characterised by secrecy, competition, and rigid hierarchies were seen to exacerbate destructive political behaviours, such as information hoarding, factionalism, and self-

serving manoeuvring. This perspective is consistent with previous research, which suggests that organisational culture serves as both an enabler and regulator of political activity (Ferris et al., 2019; Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010).

Participants further observed that prevailing power dynamics and shifting stakeholder expectations play critical roles in determining how political behaviour unfolds, and who is able to exercise influence. Those with access to informal networks, strategic alliances, or insider information were often better positioned to navigate political terrain, especially in environments where decision-making authority was centralised or opaque. These findings echo the insights of Eisenhardt and Bourgeois (1988) and Hardy (1996), who argue that political behaviour often reflects underlying patterns of power distribution and resource dependency within organisations.

To summarise: the study reinforces the notion that political behaviour is not exercised in a vacuum. It is profoundly embedded within, and shaped by, the broader cultural, structural, and relational contours of the organisation. Understanding these contextual forces is crucial: both for explaining political behaviour, and designing interventions to harness it for positive organisational outcomes.

6.2.2.6 Political behaviour is context-dependent and subjective

Although scholars present a fairly uniform understanding of political behaviour (Ferris et al., 2019; Kidron & Vinarski-Peretz, 2018), there was no such consensus among the participants in this study. Instead, my research findings highlight the subjective and context-dependent nature of political behaviour within organisations. The findings also challenge the veracity of singular, comprehensive definitions of the phenomenon, and reveal that individuals perceive and interpret political behaviour differently, according to their organisational experiences and roles. Therefore, the study calls for a more pluralistic approach – and increased recognition of the varied, individualised ways senior leaders navigate political behaviour in complex organisations. Such context-sensitive insights are crucial for both theoretical advancement and practical application in the field of organisational studies. They also enrich our current understanding of political behaviour in upper echelon leadership.

6.2.2.7 Insights from top leaders enrich our understanding of political behaviour

Previous research into political behaviour within organisations has often lacked direct engagement with senior leaders, largely because this cohort has been viewed as "difficult to access" (Ferris et al., 2019; Hardy, 1996). As a result, much of the existing literature relies on second-hand accounts, mid-level managerial perspectives, or conceptual frameworks developed without first-hand validation from those operating at the apex of organisational hierarchies. This study addresses that gap by directly incorporating the voices, experiences, and reflections of senior leaders in complex organisations. By so doing, it contributes a practical, experiential dimension that significantly enhances theoretical understanding.

Participants' narratives revealed the intricate ways in which political behaviour is perceived, rationalised, and enacted at strategic level. They illuminated not only the tactical and ethical subtleties involved in navigating political environments, but also the emotional, moral, and relational complexities that are often invisible in formal theoretical models.

Furthermore, this study deliberately focused on senior leaders engaged in the strategic management of large and complex organisations, rather than adopting a broader or more generalised approach as seen in previous research. This targeted focus enabled a more granular exploration of how political behaviour is navigated where it matters most: in contexts where strategic decision-making, power dynamics, and leadership legitimacy converge. The study thereby contributes to a more nuanced, contextually grounded understanding of political behaviour at the upper echelons, thus complementing and extending existing theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Shepherd et al., 2020).

In essence, the inclusion of senior leaders' insights not only bridges a critical empirical gap but also deepens the discourse on political behaviour by grounding theoretical constructs in lived organisational realities. Their reflections highlight the strategic, ethical, and contextual considerations that shape political behaviour at the highest levels of leadership, providing richer, more authentic foundations for both theory development and practical application.

6.2.2.8 Positive and negative political behaviours are not mutually exclusive

Unlike much prior research, which tends to categorise political behaviour along a binary axis of "good" versus "bad" (Mintzberg, 1983; Ferris et al., 2019), this study reveals that positive and negative political behaviours are not discrete, isolated phenomena. Rather, they are deeply interrelated and often co-exist within the same organisational and leadership dynamics. Participants' insights confirmed that political behaviour is not a monolithic construct but a multifaceted, fluid phenomenon shaped by a confluence of internal dispositions – such as personal values, ethical orientation, and personality traits – as well as external situational factors, including organisational culture, leadership structures, and broader socio-economic elements.

My study therefore advances theoretical understanding by emphasising that the positive and negative elements of political behaviour are dynamically intertwined, rather than polar opposites. In this regard, leaders often engage in actions that may serve both self-interest and organisational good, depending on the context, timing, and execution. As such, political behaviour must be understood as a continuum or spectrum rather than a dichotomy.

Ultimately, this study shows that senior leaders must engage in ongoing, critical self-reflection and ethical discernment to ensure that their political actions remain aligned with both personal integrity and organisational purpose. The complexity of political behaviour thus demands nuanced, context-sensitive navigation, rather than simplistic classification into “positive” or “negative” domains.

6.2.2.9 The dark side of political behaviour should be re-evaluated

Previously, although scholars acknowledged the dualistic nature of political behaviour, they often viewed it through a sceptical lens, framing it as inherently manipulative or self-serving. However, the holistic approach taken in this study reveals that when senior leaders anchor their political action within a framework of ethical standards, both organisational and personal goals can be creatively achieved. In this way, political behaviour can be a powerful tool for positive change and organisational advancement. Thus, by engaging directly with senior leaders and delving into their real-world experiences, the study challenges long-held stereotypes and builds a more nuanced understanding of political behaviour. It shows how political manoeuvring, often deemed

detrimental, can also be a conduit for positive change within organisations, enabling strategic networking and alliance-building and the navigation of complex organisational structures for the greater good.

This perspective aligns with a more modern and dynamic approach to organisational politics (Ferris & King, 1991; Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010), recognising the ubiquitous and potentially positive role of human behaviour and interpersonal dynamics in corporate decision-making. In so doing, the study transcends existing theoretical frameworks, offering new, in-depth insights into the perceptions and practices of senior leaders regarding organisational politics.

6.2.2.10 Summary discussion: key concepts in the definition of political behaviour

The study confirms and expands current knowledge by showing that upper echelon leaders define political behaviour as an empirically grounded, pervasive, and omnipresent element within the organisational fabric; also recognising that it is inherently dualistic, and impacts organisational and individual effectiveness in diverse ways – both constructively and destructively. Furthermore, the study recognises that ***personal and contextual*** factors significantly shape and influence political behaviour. Therefore, individuals' motivations, values, and ethical considerations, coupled with their unique organisational context, play a pivotal role in determining the boundaries of political behaviour. It also recognises that political behaviour is a ***value-based influence process***: a dynamic phenomenon intricately linked to senior leaders' personal and situational characteristics, all driven by the pursuit of desired outcomes. These outcomes may be positive, such as resource access, empowerment, and strategic alignment; or negative, involving the marginalisation of dissenting voices or the entrenchment of selective interests. In essence, the study affirms existing definitions of political behaviour as both constructive and self-serving (Elbanna, 2018; Ferris & Judge, 1991; Kapoutsis & Thanos, 2016; Zanzi & O'Neill, 2001). However, it also contributes a novel theoretical insight by highlighting the centrality of values and contextual specificity in shaping an individual's political conduct. Therefore, while participants' understandings broadly align with extant literature, the findings advance the conceptualisation of the definition of political behaviour by framing it as *a context-sensitive and ethically contingent phenomenon, mediated by personal perspectives and situational realities.*

6.3 Enablers and preventers of political behaviour among senior leaders

The analysis conducted in this study shows a clear dichotomy between the enablers and preventers of political behaviour among senior leaders, illuminating the multifaceted nature of politics within organisations. This finding is particularly relevant to Research Question 2 (RQ2), which seeks to further understand the duality of political behaviour through identifying the factors that either facilitate or inhibit such behaviour at senior leadership level. ***RQ2: What factors influence the duality of political behaviour among senior leaders?***

This research inquiry critically examines the factors that enable or prevent political behaviour among senior leaders in complex organisations, thus responding to the call by Kapoutsis and Thanos (2016) for deeper insights into the dual nature of political behaviour, embracing both its constructive and damaging aspects. The landscape of enablers and preventers – the hidden intricacies that influence senior leaders' actions and decisions – is complex, and its exploration provides rich insights into the relationship between leadership styles and political behaviour (Ferris & Hochwarter, 2011; Mintzberg, 1985; Pfeffer, 1981). Building on extant literature, this study reinforces the notion that leadership styles are pivotal in understanding and analysing political behaviours in senior management. Methodologically, the study meticulously tests empirical findings against the existing literature on political behaviour. This comparative analysis seeks not only to identify points of alignment and deviation (as discussed earlier) but also to discern the *underlying reasons* for these patterns. In this regard, key areas of focus comprise: the driving forces behind political behaviour; the contexts in which such behaviour thrives or is subdued; the personal and organisational outcomes it generates. The study also ventures into interpretative realms, with the aim of extracting practical implications from the findings: actionable insights for organisational leaders and decision-makers, which provide guidance on managing and navigating political behaviour effectively. Thus, by integrating new empirical evidence and perspectives, the study serves a dual purpose: to enhance theoretical understanding of political behaviour in senior leadership; and to offer practical guidance for organisations grappling with the implications of such behaviour in their strategic and operational realms.

In this section I start by contrasting positive and negative political behaviour, summarised in Figure 6.1 below. I then discuss the factors influencing *positive political behaviour* (section 6.3.1), and explain how such factors are characterised by their constructive

impact on both organisational performance and individual well-being. Subsequently, I discuss factors influencing *negative political behaviour* (section 6.3.2), which typically involve unethical practices and manipulative tactics to prioritise personal gain or influence at the expense of the collective well-being of both the organisation and its members. Next, (section 6.3.4) I present *neutral or contextual-dependent* factors that influence political behaviour among senior leaders. Such factors operate as both enablers and constraints, depending on situational dynamics. Lastly, I discuss the variability of positive and negative factors across constructive and disruptive politics in an organisation (section 6.3.5).

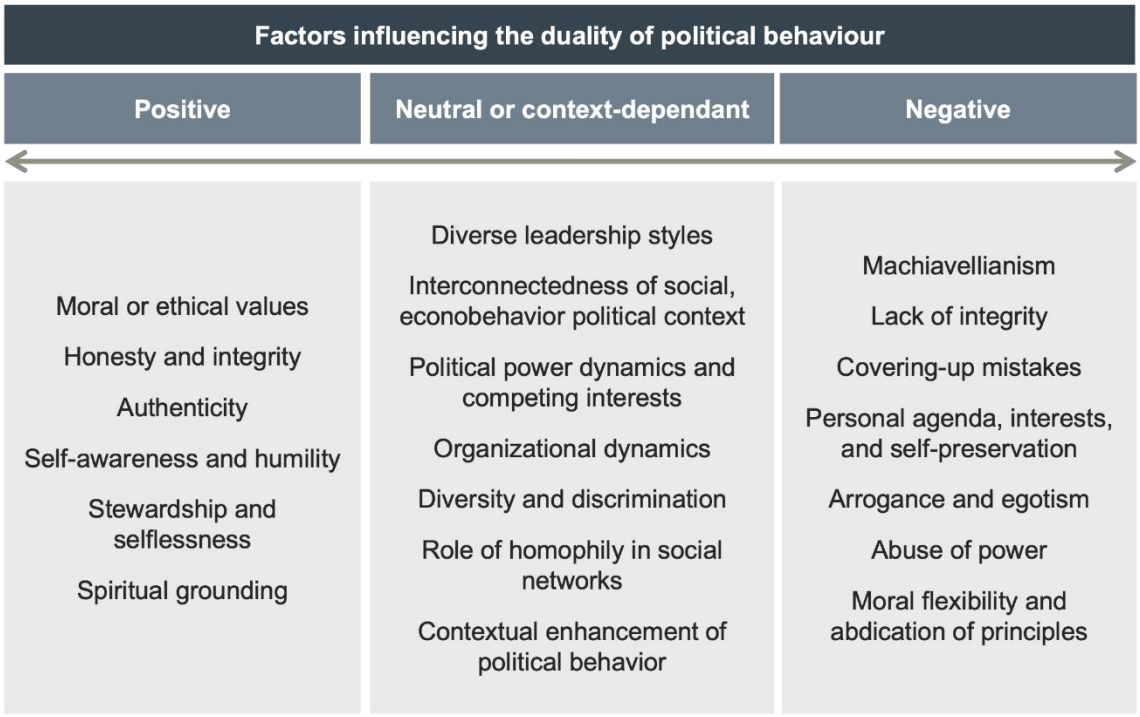

Figure 6.1: Factors influencing the duality of political behaviour

Source: Author's own.

6.3.1 Positive factors influencing senior leaders' political behaviour

In this section I discuss participants' perceptions of positive political behaviour in greater depth. As illustrated in Figure 6.1, positive political behaviour is defined by its constructive influence on both organisational performance and individual well-being. Participants described this behaviour as being anchored in a strong individual value system, comprising core moral and ethical values such as honesty, authenticity, humility, stewardship, and selflessness. In many cases, these values were also closely linked to a strong spiritual foundation, which further reinforced ethical leadership practices.

6.3.1.1 The centrality of individual moral and ethical values

The study's findings strongly align with existing literature which emphasises the central role of individual moral and ethical values in shaping political behaviour. Scholars such as Ferris and Judge (1991) and Zanzi and O'Neill (2001), acknowledged that while political behaviour is often inevitable, the intent behind such behaviour – whether self-serving or organisationally constructive – is significantly influenced by personal values. Similarly, Elbanna (2018) proposed that political behaviour can be directed towards either self-interest or organisational goals, depending on the ethical orientation of the actor. Participants in this study mirrored these views, highlighting values such as honesty, authenticity, humility, stewardship, and selflessness as critical in differentiating constructive political behaviour from detrimental conduct. The interviews further reinforced the notion that leaders are central players in organisational politics and custodians of organisational culture, bearing the responsibility to model and uphold ethical standards. This affirms growing scholarly consensus that *ethical leadership is pivotal in steering political behaviour towards positive organisational outcomes* (Ferris et al., 2002; Kapoutsis & Thanos, 2016).

While extant literature primarily focuses on organisational culture and leadership practices as key sources influencing political behaviour (Mintzberg, 1985; Farrell & Petersen, 1982), this inquiry reveals a broader spectrum of value formation, thereby *broadening the sources of values beyond organisational context*. Participants consistently referred to personal life experiences, upbringing, and religious or philosophical beliefs as foundational in shaping their moral compasses. For example, deeply internalised values – regardless of religious affiliation or political background – were seen to profoundly influence leaders' responses to organisational political dynamics. Such insights challenge traditional organisational behaviour models, by suggesting that leaders' political conduct is not solely a product of organisational culture but is also significantly rooted in pre-organisational personal histories. Thus, my inquiry offers a more nuanced understanding of political behaviour by highlighting the importance of acknowledging leaders' diverse personal backgrounds when interpreting their political strategies and ethical stances.

Another novel insight generated by this study is the mediating role of ethical leadership in translating personal values into organisational political behaviour. Participants viewed values-driven leadership not simply as a personal attribute but as an active process of cultural stewardship – where leaders intentionally embody and promote organisational values to shape political interactions constructively. This broadens earlier

conceptualisations by Ferris et al. (2002) and Gandz and Murray (1980), who identified the influence of leadership on organisational politics but did not explicitly frame leaders as custodians of culture.

In essence, my findings suggest that ethical leadership acts as a filter, influencing whether political behaviour becomes a force for positive organisational change or a mechanism for self-serving agendas. Values-driven leadership does not merely coexist with political behaviour; it actively directs and moderates its expression within organisational environments. Thus, my inquiry enriches current literature on political behaviour in leadership contexts by highlighting *ethical leadership as a mediator of political behaviour outcomes*.

6.3.1.2 Honesty and integrity: source of organisational legitimacy and political stability

While the findings of this study largely support the established view that honesty and integrity are foundational to ethical leadership (Elbanna, 2018; Ferris & Judge, 1991), my research also suggests that existing literature may *oversimplify* these concepts. Traditional accounts often position integrity as an inherent personal quality, treating it as a static attribute that reliably ensures ethical political behaviour (Kapoutsis & Thanos, 2016). However, the participants in this study presented a more nuanced understanding. They viewed integrity not as a fixed trait, but as an *active, ongoing commitment*, requiring constant self-reflection and adjustment in the face of complex political dynamics. Thus, while the findings converge with extant literature around the importance of integrity, they reveal that its *maintenance* in leadership practice is far more fragile, contingent, and dynamic than scholars have hitherto believed.

Another key divergence from existing scholarship is the conceptualisation of integrity as a relational and, at times, politically contested construct. Participants' reflections suggest that maintaining honesty and integrity is not only an internal moral exercise but also a relational act, performed within the expectations and pressures of the organisational environment. Unlike the more individualistic framing found in prior research (Gandz & Murray, 1980; Mintzberg, 1985), this study highlights how leaders' efforts to uphold integrity are shaped by the political negotiations they must constantly navigate. For example, decisions about transparency are not always straightforward but often involve the need to balance competing demands for disclosure, loyalty, and strategic positioning. This insight challenges the assumption that integrity and political behaviour are neatly

separable; instead, it suggests that honesty itself can be politically negotiated, influenced by contextual pressures and relational dynamics.

The findings further enrich existing theory by showing that integrity functions as a moral virtue and a source of organisational legitimacy and political stability. Participants portrayed leaders' personal commitment to honesty and transparency as critical when setting ethical boundaries for acceptable political behaviour across the organisation. This extends Ferris et al.'s (2002) work by suggesting that integrity serves a *stabilising function*: shaping the informal rules that govern political engagement and reducing the propensity for destructive politics to escalate.

Importantly, the findings also reveal that when senior leaders visibly model reflective, value-based decision-making, they enhance the credibility of both formal authority structures and informal influence networks. Thus, integrity emerges as a political asset – essential for maintaining legitimacy, reducing internal conflict, and fostering a sustainable political environment.

In summary, the findings of this study affirm that honesty and integrity are central to ethical leadership, yet they also challenge the tendency within existing literature to treat these qualities as static traits. Instead, *integrity emerged as a dynamic and relational practice, requiring continuous self-reflection and negotiation within complex organisational and political environments*. Unlike traditional accounts that separate ethical leadership from political behaviour, this study reveals that *integrity itself can be politically contested and shaped by context*. Moreover, the findings introduce a new insight: that integrity functions as both a personal moral standard and a *crucial organisational resource that fosters legitimacy, stabilises political processes, and sets the ethical parameters for political engagement across the organisation*. In this way, the study extends current conceptualisations of political behaviour by highlighting the active, strategic role of integrity in maintaining ethical and effective organisational leadership

6.3.1.3 Authenticity, self-awareness and humility: amplifiers political behaviour

The findings of this study align with the growing body of literature that recognises authenticity as a vital leadership trait, particularly in politically complex organisational environments. Scholars such as Ferris et al. (2002) and Elbanna (2018) have noted that authentic leaders are better equipped to navigate political landscapes ethically, using influence to benefit the organisation rather than for personal gain. The participants

reinforced this view by consistently emphasising that authenticity – rooted in clarity about personal values and a commitment to genuine relationships – enhances leaders' ability to engage constructively with political dynamics. In this regard, the findings support the broader argument that authenticity not only strengthens leadership credibility but also acts as a safeguard against the manipulative use of political behaviour (Ferris & Judge, 1991; Zanzi & O'Neill, 2001).

However, the findings challenge the traditional dichotomy in literature that tends to separate authenticity from political skill. Much of the earlier research implied that political behaviour inherently involves manipulation and therefore stands at odds with authentic leadership (Gandz & Murray, 1980; Mintzberg, 1983). In contrast, participants in this study demonstrated that authenticity and political skill can coexist and, when ethically grounded, can actually complement each other. Indeed, authentic leaders were described as using political behaviour strategically for collective benefit, rather than for self-serving ends. This insight diverges from conventional models by suggesting that political behaviour, when enacted authentically, can serve as a mechanism for fostering trust, inclusivity, and organisational resilience rather than merely advancing individual agendas.

This study makes another distinctive contribution to existing knowledge by *identifying self-awareness and humility as critical amplifiers of positive political behaviour*. While previous research has recognised the importance of emotional intelligence in leadership (Ferris et al., 2002), it often overlooked how self-awareness and humility, in particular, reframe political engagement from self-promotion to community stewardship. Participants' reflections highlighted a conscious shift from self-centric leadership models toward a commitment to creating environments where others can thrive. This suggests that leaders who understand their limitations, remain grounded, and embrace a sense of service, are better positioned to shape organisational politics in ways that promote collective success and ethical standards. Thus, self-awareness and humility emerge not as peripheral leadership traits but as essential elements that positively moderate the ethical use of political behaviour.

In this way, my findings reinforce the notion that qualities like authenticity, self-awareness, and humility transcend mere individual leadership virtues: they are also *essential drivers* of ethical political behaviour within organisations. Building on these insights, the next section explores how stewardship and selflessness further enhance the ethical dimensions of political conduct among senior leaders.

6.3.1.4 Role of stewardship and selflessness in shaping leadership conduct

The findings of this study resonate strongly with existing literature, which frames stewardship as a foundational element of ethical and transformational leadership. Prior research has recognised stewardship as a leadership orientation, whereby the focus shifts from personal gain to the long-term well-being of an organisation and its members (Block, 1993; Caldwell, Hayes & Long, 2010): a stance affirmed in this study. Participants consistently described stewardship as the responsibility to leave an organisation stronger for future generations, thereby emphasising that stewardship supports sustainable organisational outcomes. This convergence with prior scholarship strengthens the understanding that leaders who embody stewardship principles view their political influence not as a tool for personal advancement but as a mechanism to cultivate collective growth, ethical standards, and lasting value within the organisation.

While traditional stewardship theories often focus on preserving organisational resources and promoting fiduciary responsibility (Davis et. al, 1997), the senior leaders interviewed in this study framed stewardship more generously. They spoke not only of safeguarding organisational resources but also of fostering transformational change and embedding servant-leadership principles as part of their stewardship ethos. This insight is very significant, because it reframes the notion of stewardship: viewing it not merely as a tool for maintenance, but as a catalyst for active organisational improvement and cultural elevation. In this way, the findings extend classic stewardship models by *portraying stewards as proactive agents of ethical change, rather than mere custodians of the status quo*.

The inquiry also redefines another important concept: selflessness. Participants challenged the traditional view that this quality is synonymous with passivity or modesty. Instead, they saw it as a strategic leadership ethic, integral to effective political behaviour. They further emphasised that selflessness – manifested through prioritising organisational and collective needs over personal ambitions – enhances a leader's credibility and influence within political environments. This perspective suggests that leaders who operate from a place of genuine service are better positioned to build trust, foster collaboration, and drive sustainable success. Consequently, selflessness emerges as not only a moral virtue but also as a critical strategic asset in navigating organisational politics ethically and constructively: a dimension that has received limited attention in previous studies on political behaviour (Elbanna, 2018; Ferris et al., 2002). Collectively therefore, these findings reinforce the central role of stewardship and selflessness in

cultivating ethical political behaviour, and providing a leadership model focused on collective advancement rather than personal success. The next section describes how a strong spiritual foundation further strengthens leaders' ethical orientation towards political engagement.

6.3.1.5 Spiritual grounding as an anchor for ethical political behaviour

The findings align with a growing body of literature that acknowledges spirituality as an important internal resource for ethical behaviour and responsible leadership (Fry, 2003; Reave, 2005). Participants in this study consistently described spiritual grounding as a source of inner purpose and clarity, which guided their engagement in political behaviour towards constructive and collective outcomes. This reinforces existing views that spirituality strengthens self-awareness, reinforces ethical boundaries, and fosters leaders' commitment to the greater good rather than to personal ambition. Thus, the study confirms that spiritual orientation can serve as a stabilising force in political environments, enhancing leaders' ability to act authentically and ethically within complex organisational settings.

While much leadership literature discusses spirituality in terms of workplace programmes or organisational values alignment (Milliman et al, 2003), the senior leaders in this study described it as a deeply personal, internal compass that operates independently from formal organisational structures. Rather than seeing spirituality as something embedded within corporate programmes, participants highlighted its *individual* nature: a foundation for ethical political engagement and personal boundary-setting. This divergence shows that effective spiritual grounding does not necessarily stem from organisational initiatives but from personal belief systems. In other words, the internalisation of values was seen to be more powerful than externally imposed spiritual frameworks, when shaping positive political behaviour.

This leads to another new insight which emerged from the inquiry: the role of spiritual grounding as a potential moderator of both the *intention* behind political behaviour, and the *methods* used to exercise influence. Participants indicated that spirituality not only shapes *why* they engage politically (to advance the common good) but also *how* they engage (through authentic, respectful conversations and principled decision-making).

Thus, spirituality has a *dual moderating role*. This perception enriches prior definitions, which tended to focus only on the impact of spirituality on leadership values, without linking it directly to political skills or behaviour (Fry, 2003; Reave, 2005). However, the

findings in this study suggest that spiritually grounded leaders are better able to navigate organisational politics without compromising their ethical standards, thus enhancing both their legitimacy and long-term influence. The study therefore highlights the importance of personal spiritual grounding in fostering ethical and constructive political behaviour among senior leaders. Building on this awareness, I will now synthesise how the interplay of values, authenticity, self-awareness, stewardship, selflessness, and spirituality collectively shapes positive political engagement in organisational contexts.

6.3.1.6 Summary discussion: factors influencing positive political behaviour

The findings of this study converge with extant literature by affirming that positive political behaviour among senior leaders is rooted in strong ethical foundations. Consistent with previous research (Elbanna, 2018; Ferris et al., 2002; Zanzi & O'Neill, 2001), participants emphasised the central role of honesty, integrity, authenticity, humility, stewardship, and selflessness in shaping leadership responses to organisational political dynamics. These values, underpinned by spirituality and self-awareness, were viewed as essential for fostering ethical influence, promoting collective well-being, and sustaining transparent, trust-based leadership cultures. The data further reinforces the widely accepted view that leaders who are grounded in strong personal and ethical values are better equipped to navigate political complexities constructively and in ways that enhance organisational health.

However, the findings diverge from implicit assumptions in the literature that ethical political behaviour is a natural or inevitable extension of leadership roles. Rather than viewing positive political behaviour as an inherent leadership attribute, participants portrayed it as a *continuous, deliberate practice* requiring *ongoing self-reflection, vigilance, and ethical recalibration*. This thinking challenges models that overly romanticise leadership ethics (for example, transformational leadership models) and instead positions the maintenance of constructive political engagement as an intentional, active commitment. It affirms that leaders are not merely carriers of virtue, but stewards who must consciously embed ethical principles in their daily political interactions amidst changing organisational pressures and complexities.

Beyond confirming and challenging aspects of existing theory, the study offers new insights into the dynamics of positive political behaviour. In particular, it highlights the role of spirituality as a moderating force that not only shapes leaders' intentions but also

governs the methods they use to exert influence. Spiritual grounding provides leaders with a strong sense of purpose, reinforcing boundaries that guide ethical political conduct. Furthermore, the study reveals that positive political behaviour is not an incidental outcome of good leadership but a *strategic and conscious embedding* of ethical principles into everyday political practice. This reframes ethical political behaviour in terms of a dynamic, context-sensitive process that demands consistent ethical self-regulation, relational authenticity, and value-driven leadership across all levels of organisational engagement.

6.3.2 Factors influencing senior leaders' negative political behaviour

The previous section highlighted how positive political behaviour is anchored in strong ethical values, spirituality, and a commitment to collective well-being. However, participants also stressed that political behaviour is *not* inherently virtuous, and associated negative political behaviour with specific personality traits and behavioural patterns that prioritise personal gain over organisational health. The following section discusses the factors underpinning negative political behaviour, examining how unethical practices, manipulative tactics, and the abuse of power compromise organisational effectiveness and individual well-being.

6.3.2.1 Machiavellianism and the erosion of truth and organisational integrity

The findings of this study strongly align with existing literature that identifies Machiavellianism as a key driver of negative political behaviour in organisations. Scholars such as Ferris et al. (2002) and Kacmar and Carlson (1997) have emphasised that Machiavellian tendencies – characterised by manipulation, deceit, and self-interest – are detrimental to organisational integrity and trust. Participants similarly highlighted practices such as withholding information, distorting the truth, and prioritising self-preservation over organisational goals, as common manifestations of negative political conduct. This convergence reinforces the understanding that Machiavellian behaviour fundamentally undermines transparency and collaboration, creating environments in which political gamesmanship replaces ethical decision-making.

However, while the literature often frames Machiavellianism as inherently deviant or counterproductive (Christie & Geis, 1970; Mintzberg, 1983), this study also revealed a

more nuanced reality. In some high-stakes contexts, participants observed that manipulative political behaviour was not only tolerated but sometimes normalised as part of the organisational fabric. Rather than being universally condemned, the distortion of truth and information hoarding were, in certain cases, rationalised as *necessary tactics* for survival in competitive or unstable environments. This finding diverges from more traditional moralistic treatments of Machiavellianism and suggests that contextual pressures may influence the extent to which manipulative political practices are accepted or even incentivised within organisations.

Another new insight emerging from the study is the critical role of information control as a central mechanism through which Machiavellian political behaviour is enacted. Participants emphasised that the manipulation, withholding, or selective disclosure of information is not merely a by-product of negative politics but can be a deliberate strategy employed to shape decisions and outcomes in favour of personal or factional interests. This extends previous research by highlighting that information asymmetry is not only an enabler of political manoeuvring but can be actively weaponised as a tool of influence. Consequently, safeguarding truth and transparency becomes essential to counteracting the corrosive effects of Machiavellianism on organisational effectiveness and ethical standards.

In practical terms, this finding highlights the need for organisations to create multiple channels of communication to enhance transparency, protect whistle-blowers and thereby prevent the manipulation of information for destructive political ends.

6.3.2.2 Moral flexibility and the gradual departure from principled conduct

The findings of this study are consistent with the existing literature that identifies moral flexibility – the willingness to compromise ethical standards for personal or situational advantage – as a central driver of negative political behaviour. Scholars such as Ferris et al. (2002) and Valle and Perrewé (2000) suggest that when leaders display moral ambivalence or ethical inconsistency, organisational cultures become vulnerable to manipulation, favouritism, and loss of trust. Participants similarly described how leaders' gradual departure from principled conduct fosters environments where political behaviour becomes self-serving rather than organisationally beneficial. This convergence reinforces the notion that moral flexibility corrodes the ethical frameworks necessary for transparent, fair, and sustainable decision-making.

However, the findings also mark an important divergence from existing theories. While moral flexibility is widely portrayed as inherently negative, several participants implied that some ethical compromises may be justified as necessary adaptations to organisational complexity and survival pressures. In politically charged or resource-constrained environments, bending principles was at times defended as pragmatic rather than purely unethical. This adds a layer of complexity to traditional models, such as those proposed by Mintzberg (1983), which tend to present a binary view of political behaviour as either principled or manipulative. In contrast, this study suggests that moral flexibility exists on a continuum, where situational justifications blur the distinction between strategic adaptation and ethical compromise.

Another key insight emerging from this study is that the departure from principled conduct is not always sudden, but may evolve gradually through a series of small ethical concessions. Participants highlighted that once minor deviations are normalised, larger ethical breaches become increasingly tolerable. This progression aligns with theories of ethical fading (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004) and extends them by showing how such ethical erosion fuels and sustains negative political behaviour at senior leadership levels. Thus, safeguarding organisational integrity requires more than addressing individual acts of misconduct; it demands proactive cultural reinforcement of principled conduct at every stage of leadership and decision-making.

When viewed together, the findings on Machiavellianism and moral flexibility reveal that negative political behaviour is rarely the result of isolated misconduct, but rather reflects deeper patterns of ethical erosion and strategic manipulation. Machiavellian practices – such as the distortion of truth, and control of information – combined with gradual departures from principled conduct, create environments where unethical political behaviour becomes normalised and even rationalised under organisational pressures.

This finding broadens existing theories by highlighting that negative political behaviour is not merely the product of individual flaws but is often sustained by *systemic failures* to uphold transparency, integrity, and ethical vigilance at leadership levels.

Building on this understanding, the next section explores how the abuse of power further compounds these dynamics, reinforcing patterns of inequality, self-interest, and organisational dysfunction.

6.3.2.3 Lack of integrity and normalisation of unethical behaviour

The findings in this study align strongly with existing literature that associates a lack of integrity with the emergence of negative political behaviour in organisations. Scholars such as Kapoutsis and Thanos (2016) and Ferris et al. (2002) have long argued that when leaders prioritise personal gain over authenticity and ethical consistency, political behaviour becomes manipulative and corrosive. Participants in this study similarly described how negative political conduct arises when leaders abandon their core values, engaging in behaviours that feel insincere or transactional in pursuit of influence or advancement. This finding reaffirms that when integrity is compromised, leadership authenticity erodes: leading to the deterioration of trust, transparency, and the ethical fabric of organisational life.

However, the study diverges from traditional ethical leadership models in a subtle but important way. Participants noted that, in practice, ethical compromise is sometimes normalised as a *necessary tactic* for career survival, especially in politically charged environments. While literature often frames ethical breaches as clear violations of professional norms (Mintzberg, 1985; Gandz & Murray, 1980), participants shared experiences where practices such as forming strategic alliances at the expense of personal authenticity were perceived as necessary adaptations, rather than deliberate ethical failures. This suggests that negative political behaviour linked to lack of integrity may not always stem from overt self-interest, but from systemic pressures that encourage leaders to conform to political realities that conflict with their core values.

Another critical new insight generated by the study lies in its portrayal of the relationship between negative political behaviour and the practice of covering up mistakes, which participants described as a way to protect personal reputations at the expense of organisational learning. While previous research has acknowledged that political behaviour can involve information management (Ferris & Judge, 1991), the findings of this study go further and reveal how the deliberate concealment of errors fosters cultures of fear, erodes accountability, and inhibits organisational resilience. Rather than viewing mistakes as opportunities for growth and transparency, negative political climates encourage secrecy and self-preservation, ultimately weakening the organisation's ethical infrastructure and collective problem-solving capacity.

The findings on lack of integrity and the covering-up of mistakes further illuminate how negative political behaviour erodes the ethical foundations of organisations. They reveal that when leaders prioritise personal preservation over authenticity and transparency, political behaviour shifts from strategic engagement to unethical manipulation. Moreover,

the normalisation of concealing errors reflects a deeper systemic failure, where the protection of individual reputations overrides the pursuit of organisational learning and accountability. These insights broaden existing theories by showing that negative political behaviour does not only spring from individual ethical failure, but is also symptomatic of an organisational culture that tolerates – or even encourages – ethical compromise. Building on this understanding, the next section examines how the abuse of power reinforces these patterns, amplifying inequality, distrust, and organisational dysfunction.

6.3.2.4 Adverse effects of arrogance and abuse of power in leadership

The findings of this study align with extant literature that links arrogance and egotism to dysfunctional leadership behaviour, particularly in political contexts. Prior research suggests that when leaders develop inflated self-perceptions and discount the contributions of others, the collective intelligence of top management teams is weakened, and organisational adaptability is reduced (Conger, 1990; Hogan & Hogan, 2001). Participants' reflections mirror these insights, and suggest that leaders who succumb to arrogance after attaining formal authority create environments marked by distrust, resentment, and diminished collaboration. This convergence reinforces the view that unchecked ego is a significant driver of negative political behaviour, often leading to organisational silos and a deterioration of shared leadership culture.

However, the findings diverge from traditional leadership models by suggesting that arrogance and egotism are not always pre-existing traits but can be *induced* by the experience of power itself. Participants observed that individuals who were previously perceived as grounded and collaborative sometimes adopted arrogant behaviours after gaining hierarchical authority. This reflects theories of power assimilation (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003), suggesting that power can psychologically transform individuals, thereby altering self-perceptions and social behaviours. This nuanced reframing shows that arrogance may be a dynamic consequence of political and organisational positioning: a view that challenges earlier leadership models which depict arrogance as a fixed personality flaw.

The study further reveals how the abuse of power represents one of the most damaging expressions of negative political behaviour. Participants described scenarios where leaders conflated their personal identity with their positional authority, leading to a blurring of professional boundaries and unethical decision-making. This finding is consistent with concerns raised by scholars such as Mintzberg (1983) and Ferris et al.

(2002), who warned that unchecked power leads to organisational dysfunction and self-serving leadership practices. However, the study deepens current knowledge by illustrating how the internalisation of power as personal entitlement undermines objective decision-making and corrodes the stewardship ethos that should characterise responsible leadership. Such findings further accentuate the urgent need for organisational systems that reinforce role accountability and protect against the personalisation of power.

Together, the emergence of arrogance, egotism, and the abuse of power illustrates how personal transformations under the influence of authority can escalate negative political behaviour, fundamentally threatening organisational cohesion, ethical standards, and sustainable leadership practices.

6.3.2.5 Personal interests and erosion of collective organisational goals

The findings strongly align with existing literature which highlights the prioritisation of self-interest as a core driver of negative political behaviour. Prior studies have shown that when leaders place personal agendas above organisational interests, it weakens collective cohesion and fosters political climates dominated by distrust and competition (Ferris & Judge, 1991; Gandz & Murray, 1980). The senior leaders interviewed in this study similarly described how personal ambitions and self-preservation instincts disrupt organisational synergy, encourage factionalism, and diminish the broader leadership ethos of service and collaboration. Thus, the findings reaffirm the understanding that self-serving leadership motivations critically undermine organisational well-being and decision-making effectiveness.

Traditional literature tends to view personal agenda-driven behaviour as purely egocentric, but the study subtly diverges from this stance. Participants noted that self-preservation behaviours can sometimes be a reaction to organisational instability, leadership uncertainty, or perceived threats to personal career security. Thus, the moral framing of self-interest should embrace hidden complexities, and should recognise that – in certain contexts – leaders' pursuit of personal agendas may be a defensive response to unpredictable or politically charged organisational environments. Such insights broaden the scope of previous models (Mintzberg, 1983) by showing that negative political behaviour can arise not only from arrogance or ambition, but also from structural vulnerabilities within an organisation that heighten leaders' instinct for self-protection.

Another distinctive insight emerging from the study is the recognition of the *collective cost* associated with leadership driven by personal agendas and self-preservation. Participants consistently linked such behaviours to a breakdown in collaboration, an erosion of shared goals, and the stalling of organisational progress. Unlike earlier studies that focused primarily on individual career outcomes, this study demonstrates that when self-interest overrides collective leadership, the damage is systemic: it fragments organisational alignment, weakens institutional trust, and ultimately diminishes the organisation's long-term resilience. This insight suggests that safeguarding organisational health requires not only identifying self-serving behaviours but actively promoting leadership practices that *elevate collective success* over personal advancement.

While personal agendas and self-preservation instincts may be understandable responses to complex environments, the findings of this study reveal that they fundamentally undermine organisational cohesion and must be carefully addressed in order to promote sustainable, collective leadership practices.

6.3.2.6 Summary discussion: factors influencing negative political behaviour

The findings of this study largely converge with existing literature in affirming that negative political behaviour is characterised by actions rooted in self-interest, manipulation, and the unethical use of power. Consistent with the work of Ferris et al. (2002), Mintzberg (1983), and Gandz and Murray (1980), participants described behaviours such as Machiavellian tactics, the erosion of integrity, the abuse of authority, arrogance, and self-preserving leadership as key contributors to organisational dysfunction. These behaviours undermine collaboration, transparency, and accountability, reinforcing long-standing academic concerns about the destructive impact of unethical political behaviour on organisational effectiveness and individual well-being. Thus, the study corroborates the central thesis that when political behaviour is motivated by personal gain rather than collective good, it becomes a destabilising force within organisations.

However, the study also diverges from traditional conceptions of negative political behaviour in significant ways. While much of the literature portrays unethical political conduct as rooted solely in personal character flaws, the participants in this study highlighted that certain negative behaviours – such as self-preservation tactics or ethical

compromises – are sometimes adaptive responses to organisational instability, leadership uncertainty, or cultural pressures. This stance challenges the more static moral binaries posited by existing theories (Mintzberg, 1983) and suggests that organisational context and structural vulnerabilities can significantly shape and even normalise behaviours traditionally viewed as deviant. Consequently, this study calls for a more nuanced understanding of how environmental factors interact with individual motivations to produce political behaviours that are not always clear-cut in their ethical implications.

Beyond these areas of convergence and divergence, the study also provides several new insights into the dynamics of negative political behaviour. Notably, it identifies the *gradual erosion* of principled conduct – rather than sudden ethical collapse – as a key enabler of negative politicking. It also highlights the role of information control, arrogance induced by positional power, and the blending of personal identity with professional authority as critical accelerants of destructive political behaviour. Moreover, the findings further demonstrate that personal agendas and self-preservation instincts, if left unchecked, have profound collective costs: fragmenting organisational cohesion and weakening long-term resilience. These insights extend the scope of existing models by illustrating that negative political behaviour is not only a matter of individual misconduct but often reflects deeper systemic failures in leadership culture, organisational accountability, and ethical reinforcement.

6.3.3 Factors influencing senior leaders' neutral political behaviour

As described earlier, this study explored political behaviour primarily through the lenses of positive and negative manifestations. However, the findings also reveal that political behaviour does not always fit neatly into these categories. Instead, several factors emerged as *neutral or context-dependent*, with their influence on political behaviour varying according to situational dynamics, leadership approaches, and organisational environments. These factors, as depicted in Figure 5.8, illustrate the dual potential of certain conditions to either enable constructive political engagement or exacerbate negative political tendencies.

The following section critically examines *six key contextual influences*: diverse leadership styles; the interconnectedness of social, economic, and political contexts; political power dynamics and competing interests; diversity and discrimination; organisational dynamics; and the role of homophily in social networks. Such contextual

influences encapsulate the fluid and situational nature of political behaviour among senior leaders.

6.3.3.1 The influence of diverse leadership styles on political behaviour

The findings of this study align with extant literature on leadership and organisational behaviour by reaffirming that leadership style plays a critical role in shaping political behaviour within organisations. Consistent with previous research (Ferris et al., 2002; Gandz & Murray, 1980), participants emphasised that leadership approaches – autocratic, charismatic, servant, or authentic – significantly influence whether political behaviour tilts towards positive or negative outcomes. Leadership styles rooted in authenticity, service, and collaboration were found to foster environments characterised by trust, ethical conduct, and constructive political engagement. Conversely, autocratic and factional ("onion") leadership approaches were seen to suppress diverse thought, restrict debate, and foster divisive political behaviour. These findings reinforce the established understanding that leadership is a central, active force in either enabling or constraining ethical political dynamics within organisations.

However, the study diverges from traditional leadership models that often portray leadership styles as fixed, predictable, and uniformly applied. Instead, participants suggested that leadership influence on political behaviour is highly context-dependent, shaped by organisational culture, external pressures, and internal team dynamics. Most significantly, charismatic and breadcrumb leadership styles, while largely positive, were shown to carry potential risks – such as over-centralisation of influence or ambiguity in decision-making – if not carefully balanced. Furthermore, the findings challenge Mintzberg's (1985) earlier assertion that autocratic leadership may promote positive political outcomes, showing instead that it often *stifles* openness and organisational adaptability. Leadership influence thus emerges not as a linear force but as a dynamic, situation-responsive continuum: evolving with the needs of the organisation and the ethical commitments of the leader.

In addition, this study makes several new theoretical contributions to existing knowledge. Firstly, it introduces the **Leadership Continuum**: a dynamic model illustrating how different leadership styles influence political behaviour along a spectrum, from negative (autocratic, onion) to positive (authentic, servant) expressions. This continuum challenges static leadership typologies and provides organisations with a practical framework for leadership development tailored to their unique cultural and strategic contexts. Secondly, the identification of **born leaders** – individuals who naturally exert

influence without relying on formal authority – expands current leadership knowledge by highlighting relational and emotional intelligence as key political resources. Finally, the inclusion of the **"Onion"** and **"Breadcrumb"** leadership styles enriches the discourse on leadership and political behaviour. These models illustrate how subtle variations in leader accessibility and guidance strategies significantly shape political dynamics, thus offering fresh perspectives for both academic inquiry and organisational practice. Together, these insights position leadership style not as a background factor, but as an adaptable, strategic lever for managing political behaviour ethically and effectively within organisations. Ultimately, political behaviour cannot be disentangled from the historical, relational, and economic forces that shape leaders' motivations and actions: an insight that should encourage a more holistic and context-sensitive analysis of organisational dynamics.

6.3.3.2 Navigating political behaviour in a complex socio-economic landscape

The findings of this study converge with established literature on organisational behaviour and leadership by reaffirming that political behaviour among senior leaders cannot be understood solely through internal organisational dynamics. Consistent with the work of scholars such as Ferris et al. (2002) and Mintzberg (1985), participants highlighted that social structures, economic conditions, and political history exert a profound influence on organisational political behaviours. Factors such as South Africa's relationship-based culture, extreme economic inequality, and the lingering effects of apartheid and B-BBEE initiatives were identified as critical contextual forces. These external conditions shape leaders' behaviours, perceptions of power, and interactions within organisations, confirming that political behaviour is deeply embedded within, and reactive to, broader societal systems.

However, this study challenges existing theories – which often frame social, economic, and political contexts as external backdrops to organisational life – by emphasising the **active psychological impact** of these contextual elements on leadership behaviour. Participants described how historical dispossession, ongoing inequality, and deeply ingrained social dynamics create internalised mindsets of scarcity, alienation, and power negotiation. Rather than functioning merely as structural pressures, social and economic realities were shown to shape leaders' internal motivations, relational strategies, and ethical choices. This suggests that broader contexts do not merely surround political behaviour but are actively *internalised* by leaders, influencing their conduct in ways that

are complex, relational, and often subconscious – an important divergence from more mechanical models of context in earlier literature.

Uniquely, the study also highlights a range of hitherto unrecognised political drivers within organisations: the need **to belong, to build interpersonal networks**, and **to manage historical trauma**. Relationship-based cultures, as described by participants, were shown to amplify political behaviour by creating informal networks of trust, exclusion, or advantage. Moreover, the study identifies the psychological inheritance of collective historical trauma – caused by apartheid and dispossession – as deeply influencing leaders' political behaviour by engendering scarcity mentalities, trust dynamics, and identity negotiations. These findings extend the scope of existing models by introducing a richer, relational understanding of how historical trauma, economic competition, and social belonging simultaneously shape political behaviour at organisational level. They underscore the need for leaders and organisations to approach political behaviour not only as a functional necessity but as a phenomenon intricately connected to deep-seated socio-cultural realities.

6.3.3.3 The role of power dynamics in political behaviour

The findings of this study converge with extant literature by affirming that political behaviour within organisations is inherently linked to power dynamics, relational influence, and competing interests. Consistent with earlier research (Elbanna, 2018; Ferris et al., 2002; Mintzberg, 1983), participants described how political actions emerge naturally from the concentration of decision-making authority, the strategic cultivation of alliances, and the pursuit of personal or factional advantage. Senior leaders' political behaviour was shown to be shaped by both formal hierarchical structures and informal relational networks. Furthermore, the study reinforces the established view that political behaviour functions as a double-edged sword: while it can undermine organisational cohesion and trust (Shepherd et al., 2020), it also plays a crucial role in facilitating decision-making, resource negotiation and organisational adaptation (Kapoutsis & Thanos, 2016).

However, this study diverges from traditional scholarship that tends to frame political behaviour primarily in terms of rational influence tactics and impression management. Participants illuminated a more emotionally charged and defensive dimension of political behaviour, particularly through practices such as "pulling rank" when personal credibility is threatened. Political actions were thus not only strategic but often reactive to perceived vulnerabilities and power insecurities. Additionally, while previous studies highlighted the

existence of power imbalances (Chang et al., 2009; Lux et al., 2008), this study deepens understanding by demonstrating how these imbalances interact with personal ambitions and ethical fragilities, influencing not only outcomes but also organisational climate. This suggests that political behaviour must be understood not simply as a strategic function but as a context-sensitive, ethically volatile process shaped by both internal and external pressures.

The study contributes several new insights to the understanding of political behaviour within organisations. First, it highlights the **strategic forging of relationships** — not merely as networking but as deliberate, calculated efforts to build influence and shape outcomes. Participants revealed that identifying key actors and aligning with power centres is often essential for navigating complex environments, thereby expanding earlier notions of politicking to include more granular, real-world practices among senior leaders. Second, the study introduces the concept of **ethical guardrails** as necessary mechanisms to balance personal and organisational interests, illustrating how unchecked personal investment can lead to collective dysfunction. Finally, by focusing specifically on how upper echelon leaders operationalise influence, manage power asymmetries, and navigate decision-making arenas, the study offers a **complementary, experience-grounded perspective** that extends existing models of political behaviour beyond tactical descriptions to a richer, more strategic and relational understanding.

In summary, political behaviour among senior leaders is deeply shaped by the strategic navigation of power dynamics, competing interests, and relational influence, highlighting the critical need for ethical vigilance and systemic safeguards within complex organisations.

6.3.3.4 The impact of organisational culture on political behaviour

The findings of this study converge strongly with extant literature, confirming that organisational culture plays a decisive role in shaping the political behaviour of senior leaders. Consistent with research by Schein (2010), Ferris et al. (2002), and Ferris and King (1991), participants emphasised that cultures rooted in transparency, honesty, collaboration, and ethical values foster constructive political engagement, whereas competitive, secretive, and hierarchical cultures enable negative political behaviour. The study reaffirms that organisational culture is not merely a passive backdrop but an active force, which influences leadership conduct, decision-making, and interpersonal dynamics. Furthermore, the findings align with the view that healthy organisational

cultures can serve as powerful mitigators of unethical political behaviour, creating environments where ethical leadership and collective well-being are prioritised.

However, the findings diverge from traditional models that conceptualise organisational culture as stable or uniformly experienced. Instead, participants emphasised that organisational culture is a **dynamic, context-sensitive phenomenon**, continuously shaped and reshaped by leadership actions, relational politics, and structural conditions. Positive cultures – based on openness and distributed power – were portrayed as being deliberately cultivated over time through consistent leadership messaging and behaviour. Conversely, organisational environments marked by secrecy or sharp power imbalances were seen to evolve into political battlegrounds when unchecked. This new perspective necessitates a shift from static views of culture to a more relational and process-oriented understanding, whereby culture is seen as the *active outcome* of leadership practices, organisational structures, and political behaviour over time.

To summarise, this study offers significant new insights into the relationship between organisational culture and political behaviour. Firstly, it extends current theory by demonstrating that senior leaders do not passively experience culture but **actively interact with, reinforce, or reshape** cultural norms based on their political behaviour and leadership style. Secondly, it shows that **open communication** and **distributed power structures** serve as practical mechanisms for promoting ethical political behaviour and countering negative dynamics. Thirdly, the findings reveal that the impact of organisational culture on political behaviour is highly **context dependent** – evolving with leadership transitions, organisational crises, or external socio-economic pressures.

Thus, by providing empirical evidence of how leaders perceive and strategically engage with culture, the study moves beyond theoretical generalisations, and offers **practical, nuanced insights** into how organisational culture can be consciously shaped to foster ethical leadership, collaborative decision-making, and sustainable organisational success. Hence, organisational culture emerges as a powerful, context-dependent force that can either foster ethical political engagement or entrench negative political dynamics, depending on how leaders shape, reinforce, and interact with it.

6.3.3.5 The influence of diversity, discrimination and social factors on political behaviour

The findings of this study converge with existing scholarship in reaffirming that diversity elements – notably age, race, and gender – alongside the principle of homophily, profoundly influence political behaviour within organisations. Consistent with prior research (Ferris et al., 2002; Ibarra, 1993), participants confirmed that political influence is often mediated by relational proximity and perceived similarity, with social networks tending to reinforce homogeneity in leadership influence circles. Biases related to race, gender, and age subtly, yet powerfully, shape leaders' access to decision-making arenas, perceptions of credibility, and opportunities for advancement. Thus, homophily – the tendency of individuals to associate with those perceived as similar – serves as a hidden but potent driver of organisational politics, simultaneously facilitating the consolidation of power among dominant groups and marginalising divergent perspectives.

However, the study diverges from traditional portrayals of discrimination and exclusion which frame them solely as organisational pathologies. Instead, participants revealed that exclusionary dynamics within organisations are often justified or internalised as survival strategies within competitive ecosystems. Rather than being seen merely as manifestations of prejudice, discriminatory practices were sometimes framed as necessary adaptations to scarcity, insecurity, and the quest for influence in politically charged environments. This perspective enriches prevailing narratives in organisational studies by highlighting the complexity of addressing diversity challenges. Such a process involves more than just recognising bias; it necessitates understanding the deeply embedded psychological and structural imperatives that sustain exclusion within political networks.

Beyond affirming and refining existing theories, this study contributes important new insights into the relationship between diversity, social networks, and political behaviour. It highlights that homophily-driven network formation often operates invisibly: reinforcing barriers to diversity even in ostensibly inclusive environments. Furthermore, the findings underscore the need for interventions to go beyond policy compliance, and to focus on **disruptive inclusion**: intentionally dismantling self-reinforcing networks of similarity, and cultivating cross-cutting alliances that bridge demographic and ideological divides. This might also involve designing mentorship programmes that bridge demographic divides, and examining promotion practices through a critical social lens to balance power according to network biases. Ultimately, fostering diverse, resilient leadership

culture requires deliberate, ongoing efforts to confront relational biases, redistribute social capital, and reshape organisational norms at their core.

These insights extend organisational theory by framing diversity and inclusion as dynamic, political processes, central to the ethical management of power within complex systems. In summary, addressing diversity and discrimination in organisational politics demands more than surface-level interventions; it requires systemic cultural change that dismantles exclusionary networks and redistributes influence equitably.

6.3.3.6 Contextual triggers for political behaviour

The findings converge with existing literature by affirming that political behaviour among senior leaders is not constant, but fluctuates according to organisational context and situational pressures. Consistent with prior studies (Buchanan, 2008; Ferris et al., 2002), participants recognised that political behaviour tends to escalate during periods of heightened uncertainty – particularly during performance appraisals, leadership transitions, restructuring, and retrenchments. These findings confirm that significant organisational events act as catalysts for political behaviour: intensifying competition, strategic manoeuvring, and the exercise of influence, as individuals seek to protect or advance their positions. Thus, political behaviour should be understood as a context-sensitive phenomenon shaped by shifting organisational realities – not as a static trait.

However, the study diverges from mainstream views of political behaviour that predominantly frame it as a threat to organisational stability. Instead, participants saw such behaviour during transitional periods as not merely as opportunistic, but often as a **strategic necessity** for navigating uncertainty, influencing change, and preserving organisational cohesion. Therefore, rather than viewing political engagement during times of flux as inherently negative, participants portrayed it as a practical – sometimes indispensable – leadership competency. This nuanced view challenges traditional moralistic critiques of political behaviour and suggests that during moments of significant organisational change, political skills can serve as a critical enabler of effective leadership and adaptive organisational transformation.

This study also contributes to current discourse by highlighting the importance of **situational catalysts** in shaping political behaviour, and the role of **ethical vigilance** in managing such behaviour constructively. Participants pointed to specific high-risk moments – notably financial incentives tied to performance appraisals and organisational

restructuring – as flashpoints requiring careful ethical navigation. Furthermore, the findings introduce the idea that political capital (a leader's relational and reputational influence), must be **strategically deployed** during transitional periods to drive positive change, foster collaboration, and safeguard organisational culture. These insights extend existing models by demonstrating that political behaviour, if ethically managed and intentionally channelled, can be a vital asset for leading an organisation through times of uncertainty, rather than a liability to organisational integrity. In short: political behaviour among senior leaders intensifies during periods of organisational flux, requiring ethical vigilance and strategic navigation to maintain constructive outcomes.

6.3.3.7 Summary discussion: neutral factors influencing political behaviour

The findings of this study converge with existing literature by affirming that political behaviour is context-dependent, and shaped by a wide range of organisational, social, and relational factors. Consistent with earlier scholarship (Ferris et al., 2002; Mintzberg, 1983), participants recognised that leadership styles, organisational culture, diversity dynamics, and external socio-economic conditions significantly influence how political behaviour manifests. Moments of organisational transition, such as leadership changes, performance appraisals, and restructuring, were similarly highlighted as catalysts for heightened political engagement. These findings reinforce the widely accepted view that political behaviour cannot be understood in isolation from the broader contextual forces that define organisational life.

However, the study diverges from traditional perspectives that often conceptualise context as a passive backdrop to political action. Instead, participants portrayed context not merely as an external factor, but as a dynamic phenomenon – internalised through leaders' relational strategies, survival instincts, and ethical negotiations. Thus, political behaviour was revealed to be relationally constructed through homophily, network building, and strategic influence, rather than solely emerging from formal organisational structures. Moreover, discrimination and exclusionary practices were sometimes framed as adaptive survival mechanisms within competitive environments, thus enhancing conventional understandings of bias and inequality. These divergences challenge static or simplistic treatments of context, suggesting that political behaviour is co-produced by individuals navigating complex, fluid, and emotionally charged ecosystems.

Beyond reinforcing and refining existing models, this study introduces several important new insights. It highlights the need for leaders to exercise **ethical stewardship** and **strategic navigation** within highly contextualised political landscapes. Rather than viewing political behaviour as inherently harmful or beneficial, the findings suggest that its impact depends on how leaders deploy influence during critical moments, how they engage with diverse voices, and how they interact with shifting organisational cultures and structures. The study also extends theoretical understandings by positioning political behaviour as an **adaptive, situational capability**, requiring ongoing ethical vigilance, cultural sensitivity, and strategic relationship management. Such recognition of the contextual nature of political behaviour opens new pathways for leadership development, organisational design, and governance mechanisms – all of which foster resilient, inclusive, and ethically grounded organisations.

6.3.4 Conclusion: factors (positive, neutral and negative) influencing political behaviour

Navigating the duality of political behaviour requires a critical appreciation of the underlying factors that differentiate ethical leadership from manipulative politics. While all leaders engage in political behaviour to some extent (Elbanna, 2018; Ferris et al., 2002), the values, intentions, and strategies they employ determine whether their actions strengthen or undermine organisational culture. The organisational imperative is therefore twofold: to cultivate environments where constructive political behaviour is encouraged and rewarded, and simultaneously mitigate the risks associated with destructive political actions. Recognising the interplay between influence, power, decision-making, and leadership ethics provides a vital framework for managing political behaviour to promote long-term organisational resilience and collective success. Ultimately, political behaviour is neither inherently positive or negative; its impact is rather defined by its ethical orientation and strategic application (Kapoutsis & Thanos, 2016). Therefore, organisational leaders must engage in continuous ethical self-reflection, critically examine their motivations, and intentionally align their political engagement with broader organisational values and purposes.

Building on the understanding that political behaviour is an inherent and context-dependent feature of organisational life, the final section in this chapter explores strategies for managing political behaviour ethically and constructively. Rather than seeking to eliminate political behaviour – an unrealistic and counterproductive goal – the

emphasis is placed on recognising, guiding, and strategically channelling political actions towards outcomes that align with organisational values and collective well-being. Effective management of political behaviour requires a multifaceted approach that includes fostering ethical leadership, cultivating transparent and inclusive organisational cultures, strengthening governance structures, developing relational and political acumen among leaders, and embedding ethical guardrails into decision-making processes. By adopting a deliberate and systemic approach to political behaviour, organisations can transform a traditionally divisive dynamic into a strategic asset for collaboration, adaptability, and sustainable success.

6.4 Guidelines for managing political behaviour among senior leaders in organisations

As demonstrated throughout this study, the political behaviour of senior leaders profoundly shapes organisational dynamics – both positively and negatively. Such behaviour influences strategic decision-making, decision quality, and ultimately affects the short-term success and long-term sustainability of organisations (Elbanna, 2018; Shepherd et al., 2020). Consequently, it is crucial to develop practical guidelines for managing such behaviour – as expressed in Research Question 3 (RQ3): ***What are the contextual factors that regulate the political behaviour of senior leaders in an organisation?***

Building on my earlier literature review, this section discusses findings on organisational guidelines for fostering constructive political behaviour and mitigating destructive political behaviour among senior leaders. Given that political behaviour is also shaped by *context-dependent* factors – which may tilt towards positive or negative outcomes depending on organisational conditions – such guidelines are equally applicable when managing neutral political behaviour. Section 6.4.1 presents guidelines that foster positive political behaviour; section 6.4.2 discusses parameters for managing negative political behaviour; and section 6.4.3 provides recommendations for managing the context-dependent factors influencing political behaviour among senior leaders.

The management of political behaviour does not seek to eliminate political actions – an unrealistic and counterproductive aim – but rather attempts to channel them ethically and strategically. Building on the understanding that political behaviour is inherently tied to influence dynamics, leadership intent, and organisational context (Ferris & Judge, 1991;

Mintzberg, 1983; Kapoutsis & Thanos, 2016), the goal is to ensure that political skill serves as a force for collective effectiveness rather than organisational fragmentation. Organisations must therefore cultivate ethical leadership, reinforce transparent and inclusive cultures, develop leaders' political acumen within ethical boundaries, and sensitise leadership strategies according to the complex demands of their contextual environment (Dayan et al., 2011; Georgakakis et al., 2019; Olalekan & Nwadiuru, 2021).

6.4.1 Fostering positive political behaviour

Earlier (in section 5.3.2), I outlined the key factors that influence positive political behaviour at senior executive level. These factors are underpinned by an individual's intrinsic value system, which encompasses: *moral and ethical values, honesty and integrity, genuineness, humility, stewardship, and selflessness – often supported by a strong spiritual foundation*. Such values also *collectively shape* ethical and constructive political conduct among upper-echelon leaders.

In relation to RQ 3, interviews with participants revealed three principal themes for fostering positive political behaviour. Firstly: ***leadership development*** – investing in comprehensive leadership development programmes that prioritise ethical conduct, self-awareness, and political acumen. Secondly: ***culture of caring*** – fostering an organisational culture that values empathy, understanding, and genuine support among its members. Thirdly: ***fair and equitable performance evaluation and compensation*** – implementing transparent, impartial systems for performance management and rewards to mitigate biases and discourage favouritism.

The following sub-sections synthesise participants' insights around these three guidelines, and thereby offer a structured approach to managing the complexities of political behaviour at the senior leadership level. The guidelines not only serve to promote positive political engagement but are also critically relevant for managing the contextual factors influencing negative political behaviour (set out in section 5.3.1.2). They thus provide a holistic framework aimed at balancing individual aspirations with organisational objectives for the collective good.

6.4.1.1 Providing leadership development

The findings of this study strongly align with scholarly discourse that highlights the critical role of leadership development in fostering constructive political behaviour. Scholars

such as Brown and Treviño (2006) and Ferris et al. (2019) assert that ethical leadership, rooted in self-awareness, empathy, and integrity, is central to navigating complex political dynamics within organisations. Participants reinforced this view by consistently describing leadership development as encompassing not only skills enhancement but also the cultivation of values such as collaboration, humility, and authenticity. Moreover, emphasis was placed on the need for structured leadership training to be tailored according to current and future organisational needs. This aligns with previous research which links leadership development to strategic agility and ethical influence (Hitt et al., 2010; Samimi et al., 2019). Additionally, participants confirmed that providing systematic feedback mechanisms and building collaborative leadership cultures are crucial for promoting transparency and trust – a view echoed by McShane and Glinow (2015) and Goleman (2004), who highlight relational and feedback-rich environments as key drivers of leadership effectiveness. Succession planning was also identified as an essential part of leadership development, ensuring continuity and reinforcing long-term organisational resilience (Greer & Virick, 2008).

However, the findings of this study diverge significantly from mainstream leadership development models that predominantly focus on technical competencies and hierarchical skill acquisition (Kotter, 1988). Participants in this study expanded the frame by emphasising the importance of explicitly developing political awareness and ethical navigation skills within leadership programmes – areas often underexplored in conventional models. Unlike earlier theories that portray political behaviour as either a peripheral skill or a largely negative phenomenon, participants advocated for integrating political competence directly into leadership development, viewing it as a necessary and ethical dimension of senior leadership. Furthermore, they stressed the relational foundations of influence, suggesting that leaders must be equally willing to be influenced by others – an area not widely covered in previous political skill models (Ferris et al., 2005). This relational reciprocity perspective represents an important shift from more unilateral models of leadership influence.

To summarise, the study enriches current discourse by offering a more nuanced approach to leadership development; presenting it as a deeply relational, ethically anchored, and politically literate process. Transcending notions of technical and emotional competencies, participants viewed leadership development as a *mechanism for embedding values* of stewardship, empathy, openness to feedback, and shared power. Rather than training leaders solely to act, they urged organisations to train leaders to *listen, adapt, and ethically influence* through authenticity and collaboration.

These findings underscore the need for successful leadership development to integrate explicit political skill-building, succession planning linked to ethical governance, and teamwork frameworks that dismantle silos and build trust across organisational levels. In particular, leadership development should be reframed as both a personal transformation process and an organisational strategy for managing political behaviour – an insight that broadens the conversation generated by Ferris et al. (2019), and Kapoutsis and Thanos (2016). This comprehensive, relationally driven approach offers a vital framework for organisations aiming to foster positive political behaviour among senior leaders, thereby ensuring long-term ethical leadership capacity.

6.4.1.2 Fostering a culture of care

The study's findings converge with extant literature which asserts that a culture of caring is a pivotal enabler of positive political behaviour within organisations. Scholars have emphasised that organisational environments rooted in empathy, ethical leadership, and open communication are more resilient to destructive political behaviour and more conducive to collaborative decision-making (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Ferris & Hochwarter, 2011). Likewise, participants in this study confirmed that leadership role-modelling plays a critical role: notably, where senior leaders *visibly embody* the qualities of empathy, ethical conduct, and inclusiveness. This mirrors the perspectives of Cameron (2011) and Luthans and Avolio (2003), who argue that authentic leadership and positive organisational practices foster ethical climates and strengthen relational trust.

Furthermore, the emphasis placed by participants on establishing clear values and expectations aligns with findings by Treviño et al. (2000), who note that value-driven leadership structures significantly reinforce ethical behaviour across organisational levels. The need for ethical leadership training identified in the study is also consistent with the work of Riggio et al. (2010), who advocate for structured development programmes that build emotional intelligence, ethical decision-making, and conflict resolution skills. Additionally, participants' focus on fostering inclusive leadership and ensuring open communication echoes the stance taken by Ferdman and Deane (2014), who argue that inclusivity enhances innovation, psychological safety, and organisational health.

Interestingly however, this study diverges from traditional leadership frameworks by suggesting that fostering a caring culture requires a *multi-layered and intentional architecture of practices*: not merely leader goodwill or ethical statements. Unlike some

earlier theories that portray culture as a largely emergent phenomenon (Schein, 2010), participants in this study proposed that organisations should embed caring values directly into performance systems, succession planning, and leadership development. Additionally, while much extant literature emphasises role-modelling by senior leaders (Brown & Treviño, 2006), this study found that visible leadership behaviours must be supplemented by formal mechanisms that institutionalise ethics, inclusivity, and feedback responsiveness. Participants viewed open communication not merely as desirable, but as essential for reducing destructive political behaviour – a nuance less explicitly articulated in earlier leadership models. This represents a shift from culture as a background enabler, to culture as an active, consciously cultivated tool to manage political dynamics among senior leaders.

Thus, my study extends existing knowledge by advancing a nuanced, integrated framework for fostering a culture of caring. It reveals that the promotion of caring organisational culture demands a simultaneous focus on leadership role-modelling, codified values and expectations, ethical leadership development, inclusive practices, and open feedback systems. Notably, participants viewed leadership development not just as an individual exercise but as a collective, systemic reinforcement of organisational ethos, with clear accountability mechanisms to ensure congruence between values and behaviour. Furthermore, they emphasised that building trust – through radical candour and transparent communication – is not merely an optional extra, but an essential tool for mitigating negative political behaviours.

These insights advance earlier scholarship by offering a practical, holistic blueprint for embedding caring cultures at both strategic and operational levels. They suggest that leadership development, ethics training, diversity management, and communication infrastructure must be treated as interconnected levers in shaping political behaviour among senior leaders. By so doing, organisations can proactively transform caring into a tangible, measurable, and enduring organisational asset.

6.4.1.3 Effecting fair and equitable performance evaluation and compensation

The findings of this study align strongly with earlier literature that emphasised the critical role of performance evaluation and reward systems in shaping organisational culture and political behaviour. Scholars have long asserted that formal performance management processes act as mechanisms to embed and reinforce organisational values (Den Hartog

et al., 2004; Kuvaas, 2006a, 2006b). Participants in this study agreed that reward systems should not solely focus on outcomes, but should also consider *how* outcomes are achieved, by using criteria like collaboration, ethical conduct, and emotional intelligence (Podsakoff et al., 2009). They also agreed with theories of organisational justice (Colquitt, 2001) which reinforce the importance of fairness in performance evaluations: thereby demonstrating that perceptions of equitable recognition significantly influence trust, commitment, and positive organisational behaviour. The study further echoed the findings of Cropanzano and Wright (2001), who argue that fostering prosocial behaviour enhances both individual and organisational performance. Thus, the study's findings are broadly consistent with the existing literature which supports holistic, value-based performance and reward frameworks.

However, the study diverges from current thinking by highlighting the persistent tension between *subjective and objective elements* of performance evaluation, especially at senior leadership level. Although literature promotes the importance of integrating values into reward systems (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Treviño et al., 2006), participants in this study expressed scepticism about how effectively such elements are operationalised in practice. They noted that integrating subjective qualities like empathy, ethical behaviour, and collaboration into formal appraisal mechanisms often becomes "wishy-washy" and difficult to quantify – which foregrounds the gap between aspiration and execution. Moreover, prior research often assumes that value-based appraisals can be seamlessly embedded, but the participant narratives in this study reveal real-world challenges in translating these ideals into performance management systems that are both credible and actionable. This represents a divergence between theoretical frameworks that assume easy alignment, and the practical, sometimes messy, realities faced by organisations attempting to measure qualitative leadership behaviours.

This study offers a nuanced, practice-informed perspective that deepens existing knowledge on performance evaluation and political behaviour. It posits that the most effective performance management systems are those that not only reward results and technical skills, but also explicitly and visibly incentivise caring – as well as ethical and collaborative behaviours. In addition, participants stressed that linking economic incentives to the demonstration of organisational values, rather than treating them as peripheral "soft" skills, is essential for reinforcing positive political behaviour among senior leaders.

Moreover, the study demonstrates that credible value-based evaluation requires robust calibration mechanisms, leadership commitment, and cultural reinforcement to ensure

that subjective assessments do not become superficial. This holistic understanding suggests that managing political behaviour through performance management is not merely about designing the right metrics but about embedding ethical leadership expectations deeply into organisational DNA. As such, organisations seeking to foster constructive political behaviour must treat fair and equitable performance evaluation as a strategic lever for cultural transformation: not as a compliance exercise.

6.4.2 Mitigating destructive political behaviour

Building on the earlier analysis of factors influencing negative political behaviour (section 5.3.3), I will now set out the necessary organisational interventions to mitigate such behaviours among senior leaders, as shown in the findings. As discussed, negative political behaviour encompasses unethical practices, manipulative tactics, and prioritisation of personal agendas over organisational well-being – often manifested through Machiavellianism, moral flexibility, abuse of power, and the perpetuation of inequality and discriminatory practices.

Recognising the damaging impact of these behaviours on decision quality, trust, and long-term sustainability, the study sought participants' insights on practical mechanisms to regulate and manage political behaviour at the upper echelons. In response to Research Question 3 (RQ3), three core themes emerged. Firstly, the importance of establishing ***effective governance structures*** to regulate leadership conduct; secondly, the need to actively ***mitigate destructive political behaviour*** through vigilance and corrective measures; and thirdly, the adoption of ***change management strategies*** that embed and sustain positive political norms. The following sub-sections synthesise participant perspectives, situate them within the extant literature, and offer a structured framework for navigating the complexities of political behaviour in senior leadership, ensuring that individual aspirations remain aligned with collective organisational objectives.

6.4.2.1 Effecting robust governance structures

This study's findings affirm the consensus in governance and leadership literature that robust, competent, and ethical governance frameworks are crucial for ensuring responsible senior leadership behaviour (Aguilera & Jackson, 2003; Daily et al., 2003; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015). Participants strongly

endorsed the importance of effective boards, diverse in expertise and perspective, to avoid groupthink and enhance ethical decision-making. This echoes prior research that links board competence, diversity, and independence with stronger accountability, reduced political opportunism, and better strategic oversight (Aguilera et al., 2008; Zahra & Pearce, 1989). Participants in this study consistently described governance as the bedrock for safeguarding organisational integrity, echoing prior calls for strong, vigilant boards that exercise dispassionate oversight (Eisenhardt, 1989; Pettigrew, 1973).

Whereas classical governance models focus heavily on formal structures such as board composition, audit committees, and external regulatory compliance, participants in this study placed greater emphasis on governance as an internal, cultural dynamic. They argued that governance should be embedded in leadership role-modelling, proactive transparency, clear responsibility assignment, and peer-to-peer accountability. Unlike the more rigid and hierarchical interpretations of governance in older studies (Hickson et al., 1971; Pettigrew, 1973), the findings in this study point to governance as a living, evolving framework: one that must be continuously reinforced by self-aware, ethically-grounded leadership. Moreover, while traditional models often assume that compliance alone is sufficient, participants insisted that without a foundation of personal integrity, even the best-designed structures would falter.

This study offers several notable contributions to discourse on governance. Firstly, participants posited that self-awareness, mutual accountability, and transparent communication among leaders are as critical as formal board governance. Clear delineation of leadership responsibilities, courageous peer feedback, and early reporting of issues – even before formal triggers such as external audits – were seen as central to sustaining effective governance. Secondly, the study extended current understanding of governance by situating ethics and a strong code of conduct not just as compliance tools but as active, daily leadership disciplines. Moreover, ethics were positioned not merely as an aspirational ideal, but as a practical, indispensable foundation for credible governance and political restraint. In short, this study reframes governance as an active, relational, ethical practice that leaders must personally embody if organisations are to remain resilient, adaptive, and just.

6.4.2.2 Managing destructive political behaviour

This study's findings align closely with existing literature on leadership and organisational behaviour, which consistently identifies ethical leadership as crucial for mitigating destructive political behaviour (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Mayer et al., 2012). Participants

strongly emphasised that senior leaders who uphold ethical standards, model transparency, and demonstrate integrity are less likely to engage in manipulative or self-serving political actions. Prior research confirms that ethical leadership fosters trust, encourages psychological safety, and reduces the incidence of unethical practices and internal politicking (Neves & Story, 2015; Walumbwa et al., 2011). Similarly, participants' emphasis on diversity mirrors extant literature, which associates diverse leadership teams with broader perspectives, better decision-making, and reduced dominance of factionalism or groupthink (Miller & Triana, 2009; Richard et al., 2004).

While much mainstream scholarship treats diversity and ethical leadership as largely separate domains (Eagly & Chin, 2010; Treviño et al., 2006), this study revealed a more interconnected relationship between the two. Participants highlighted that diversity – understood not just demographically, but in terms of values, experiences, and worldviews – can actively reinforce ethical leadership when managed well. Conversely, unmanaged diversity, without a unifying ethical framework, can potentially fragment organisational cohesion, creating competing subcultures and new political tensions. This nuanced insight diverges from literature that views diversity as an inherent good, without sufficiently addressing its potential political complexities (van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007). Furthermore, participants urged senior leaders to deliberately embed ethical behaviour into daily operations – rather than viewing it as an aspirational guideline. This adds a more operational, practice-oriented perspective to the more theoretical focus often found in prior research.

Essentially, this study offers three fresh contributions to the understanding of managing destructive political behaviour. Firstly, participants emphasised that ethics should not simply be regarded as a compliance tool. Instead, it should be viewed as a strategic resource – and actively embedded into leadership behaviour, decision-making processes, and team interactions. Secondly, the findings show that managing diversity is not merely about demographic representation but about harnessing diverse cognitive competencies, while maintaining shared organisational values. In this regard, the balance between inclusivity and cohesion emerged as a vital leadership skill to prevent political fragmentation. Thirdly, participants articulated the emotional and psychological burdens that unethical political environments place on leaders and employees alike: something rarely addressed in existing literature. Building organisational resilience against destructive political behaviour therefore requires not just formal governance, but also the fostering of moral courage, emotional intelligence, and relational trust across leadership ranks.

In short, this study reframes the mitigation of destructive political behaviour as a deliberate leadership act: involving ethical governance, diversity through shared values, and the creation of an environment where collaboration, fairness, and transparency are standard organisational currencies.

6.4.2.3 Change management strategies to foster positive political behaviour

The findings of this study strongly align with established literature which views change management as a critical lever for shaping organisational behaviour and political dynamics (Armenakis & Harris, 2009; Higgs & Rowland, 2011). Participants confirmed that major organisational changes – such as restructuring, leadership transitions, and performance appraisals – significantly amplify political behaviour. This view is echoed by scholars who argue that change often triggers intensified political activity, as individuals reposition themselves within evolving power structures (Elbanna, 2018; Ferris & Hochwarter, 2011). In line with Kotter's (1996) seminal work, participants acknowledged the necessity of unified leadership action, clear communication, and strategic use of influence to guide change positively. The study also supports literature that suggests situational leadership – adapting leadership style to fit the circumstances – is vital during times of transition (Blanchard et al., 1993; Hersey & Blanchard, 1988), thereby reinforcing the call for flexibility and responsiveness among senior leaders.

While traditional change management literature often focuses on systems, processes, and structures (Burnes, 2017; Cummings & Worley, 2014), the participants in this study highlighted a more human-centric dimension: the strategic mobilisation of political capital and emotional influence to facilitate behavioural shifts during change. Indeed, rather than viewing political behaviour during change as merely problematic, participants agreed that political capital, when ethically and strategically deployed, becomes an essential tool for achieving collective movement. This diverges from more mechanistic models of change that overlook the relational and political undercurrents inherent in organisational life (Lawrence, 2015). Furthermore, while literature often identifies an inspiring organisational culture as an outcome of successful change (Kotter, 1996), this study suggests that *building* an inspiring culture is itself an active, pre-emptive strategy to enable smoother transitions, and minimise destructive political dynamics during change processes.

To summarise, this study offers three important new insights into managing political behaviour during change. Firstly, it reframes influence as a strategic, deliberate mobilisation of political capital essential for achieving change objectives ethically and collaboratively – not as a passive by-product of position. Secondly, it introduces a more dynamic understanding of leadership flexibility: suggesting that effective senior leaders must consciously adapt their style. In other words, they should lead from the front, support from behind, or empower others depending on the context, rather than rigidly adhering to one leadership model. Thirdly, it repositions the concept of "inspiring culture", viewing it not merely as an aspirational vision, but as a functional mechanism that galvanises employee engagement, shared ownership, and resilience during change. Participants identified a culture where employees feel aligned with the organisation – not just their immediate managers – as critical in managing the emotional and political turbulence often accompanying major organisational shifts.

Ultimately, this study extends the understanding of change management by integrating political dynamics, leadership agility, and cultural inspiration into a holistic model for navigating organisational transitions ethically and effectively. Having outlined guidelines for fostering positive political behaviour and mitigating destructive dynamics, I will now consolidate practical recommendations for addressing context-dependent political factors, to create a comprehensive framework for managing political behaviour among senior leaders.

6.4.3 Navigating neutral or context-dependant political behaviour

In section 5.3.4, I presented six interrelated factors which influence neutral political behaviour among senior leaders: diverse leadership styles; the interconnectedness of social, economic, and political contexts; political power dynamics and competing interests; organisational dynamics; diversity and discrimination; and the role of homophily in social networks. These factors represent the dual aspects of political behaviour, functioning as both enablers and preventers depending on the situational context. Consistent with insights from Ferris et al. (2019) and Elbanna (2018), this study confirms that political behaviour is not inherently good or bad; rather, its impact is shaped by the shifting organisational and environmental dynamics within which it unfolds. Accordingly, the guidelines established for fostering positive political behaviour (section 5.4.1) and mitigating negative political behaviour (section 5.4.2) are equally applicable here, depending on whether the neutral factors tilt toward enabling or constraining behaviour.

The study's findings resonate with broader organisational behaviour discourse which acknowledges that political behaviour emerges from the complex interplay of leadership style, social networks, power structures, and environmental forces (Ferris et al., 1994; Pfeffer, 1981; Mintzberg, 1983). Scholars such as Lawrence (2015) and Ferris and Hochwarter (2011) argue that contextual factors can either facilitate healthy political engagement (for example, coalition-building and innovation) or lead to destructive behaviours (including manipulation and factionalism). Participants' observations, particularly about the fluid nature of leadership styles (autocratic to servant leadership) and the influence of social, economic, and political contexts, affirm that political behaviour is indeed deeply context-dependent. Thus, my study reinforces the position that proactive cultural management, ethical leadership, and transparent decision-making frameworks are all critical for steering neutral factors toward positive outcomes.

Earlier scholars have often regarded contextual factors like leadership style, power dynamics, and organisational culture as background variables (Elbanna, 2018; Hambrick & Mason, 1984). However, this study positions such factors as active levers which organisations can deliberately manage to influence the quality of political behaviour. Participants demonstrated that leadership development, governance reforms, and culture-building initiatives do not simply respond to contextual variables but can *actively shape* them. This insight challenges passive interpretations of organisational context and offers a more dynamic, interventionist model, where senior leaders consciously manage the environment to tilt neutral factors toward ethical and constructive political engagement.

Three new insights emerge from the findings. Firstly, the study shows that leadership style fluidity is not merely a reflection of personality, but a strategic tool for managing political behaviour depending on organisational needs. Leaders who can move between authenticity, charisma, and collaborative approaches are better positioned to harness political behaviour positively. Secondly, interpersonal dynamics, such as the influence of homophily and the depth of social networks, require intentional cultivation and monitoring, to ensure that informal networks foster inclusion rather than exclusion. Thirdly, the study identifies political power dynamics – including pulling rank, influencing decision-making, and balancing competing interests – as unavoidable realities which, when managed with transparency, feedback mechanisms, and ethical standards, can be channelled toward organisational health rather than dysfunction. Thus, rather than treating neutral factors as static background conditions, this study highlights their plasticity: with the right interventions – rooted in ethical leadership, governance, and

cultural stewardship – organisations can meaningfully tilt neutral political behaviour towards constructive and sustainable outcomes.

The following section sets out the theoretical and practical implications of this study, and demonstrates how it deepens current understanding of the political behaviour of senior leaders in complex organisational environments.

6.5 Theoretical and practical implications of the study

This study explores the critical yet often under-examined terrain of the boundaries of political behaviour among senior leaders in complex organisations, where influence, collaboration, and competition intertwine. Through a contextualised and nuanced analysis, it advances theoretical understanding and offers actionable insights for leaders and practitioners. The findings provide a roadmap for managing political dynamics to enhance organisational effectiveness, promote inclusive leadership, and strengthen ethical governance frameworks.

6.5.1 Theoretical implications

This study makes several important theoretical contributions to the body of knowledge on organisational political behaviour, particularly at the level of senior leadership. Firstly: ***by enhancing understanding of political behaviour dynamics***. The research deepens existing scholarship by offering a nuanced perspective on the enablers and inhibitors of political behaviour among senior leaders. It identifies the interplay between leadership styles, power dynamics, diversity, and organisational culture, demonstrating that political behaviour is neither inherently positive nor negative, but context-dependent. Secondly: ***by highlighting the importance of contextual dynamics***. The study emphasises that political behaviour must be understood within its broader socio-economic, historical, and organisational context. In this regard, the South African experience – shaped by racial inequalities, socio-economic disparities, and political transformation – provides a rich backdrop for understanding how context triggers or restrains political behaviour. This contextual focus revitalises political behaviour theory by showing that such behaviour is fluid and evolves over time and space (Elbanna, 2018; Shepherd et al., 2020). Thirdly, ***by offering a holistic and integrated perspective***. Rather than treating leadership, organisational culture, and politics as isolated

constructs, the study underscores their interconnectedness. It challenges fragmented views of organisational politics, and proposes a systems-based approach where social, economic, and political factors converge to shape leader behaviour (Ferris & Hochwarter, 2011). Fourthly, ***by incorporating diversity, discrimination, and social identities***. By highlighting the role of race, gender, and biases in political behaviour, this study opens new avenues for future research. Participants' testimonies vividly illustrate how diversity and discrimination influence political dynamics in the real world, thereby expanding traditional theories to include critical diversity and identity lenses (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010). Fifthly, ***by offering new frameworks for understanding political behaviour***. The *Leadership Continuum model* developed in this study offers a dynamic and adaptable tool for visualising leadership styles and their political effects. By positioning styles along a continuum from destructive to constructive influences, the study also provides a valuable heuristic for future theoretical exploration and organisational analysis. Table 6.2 provides a summary of the study's theoretical implications.

Table 6.2: Summary of study theoretical implications

Dimension	Key insights	Summary focus
Theoretical Contributions		
Political behaviour dynamics	Deepens understanding of enablers and inhibitors among senior leaders (leadership style, culture).	Nuanced interplay of multiple organisational factors.
Contextual dynamics	Emphasises the dynamic influence of socio-political and economic contexts, especially in South Africa.	Context is fluid and evolving, not static.
Holistic integration	Advocates for interconnected perspectives between leadership, culture, and politics.	Systems-based approach to organisational behaviour.
Diversity and discrimination	Introduces critical identity and bias lenses into political behaviour scholarship.	Real-world impact of race, gender, and perceptions.
Leadership Continuum Model	Provides a dynamic framework positioning leadership style along a continuum from destructive to constructive.	New tool for research and practical diagnosis.

Source: Author's own.

6.5.2 Practical implications

Beyond its theoretical contributions, this study provides tangible, practical recommendations for leaders, boards, human capital practitioners, and governance bodies. Firstly: ***leadership awareness and adaptability***. Senior leaders must develop self-awareness of their political behaviours and understand how different leadership styles – autocratic, charismatic, authentic, servant, onion, and breadcrumb – affect organisational dynamics. This demands adaptive leadership capabilities, in order to align personal influence with collective organisational goals (Kapoutsis & Thanos, 2016). Secondly: ***cultivation of a transparent and caring organisational culture***. The study reinforces the necessity for organisations to embed transparency, honesty, collaboration, and caring into their cultural fabric. Ethical leadership practices and value-driven decision-making are critical for mitigating negative political behaviour and fostering constructive influence (Ferris et al., 2019). Thirdly: ***proactive governance and management of political behaviour***. Organisations must anticipate and manage triggers of political behaviour – such as periods of leadership transition, performance appraisals, or restructuring – through strong governance structures, ethical codes of conduct, and open communication channels. Early identification and intervention can prevent the escalation of destructive political dynamics. Fourthly: ***engaging with contextual complexity***. Leaders must develop context sensitivity, recognising the ways in which social, economic, and political environments shape organisational politics. Strategic decisions cannot be divorced from these broader realities (Elbanna & Child, 2007). Moreover, awareness of contextual dynamics enhances decision quality, and strengthens organisational resilience. Fifthly: ***leveraging diversity and promoting inclusion***. The study demonstrates that embracing diversity in all its forms – demographic, cognitive, and experiential – enriches organisational decision-making, and reduces the risks of factionalism or groupthink. Inclusive leadership, which values different perspectives and promotes fairness, is therefore key to fostering sustainable and innovative organisational environments.

As a closing reflection, this study marries theoretical concepts with practical insights, and thereby offers a comprehensive framework for understanding, navigating, and managing political behaviour among senior leaders. It invites scholars and practitioners alike to rethink organisational politics: not as an aberration but as an inevitable – and manageable – element of organisational life. Thus, political behaviour, when ethically channelled and contextually informed, can become a powerful force for organisational

innovation, resilience, and long-term success. Table 6.3 provides a summary of the practical implications.

Table 6.3: Summary of study practical implications

Dimension	Key insights	Summary focus
Practical Contributions		
Leadership awareness	Urges self-awareness and adaptability among senior leaders regarding political behaviour.	Influence aligned to collective goals.
Cultivating organisational culture	Highlights transparency, honesty, and collaboration as cultural imperatives.	Ethical governance and value-based leadership are needed.
Managing political triggers	Recommends proactive management of political behaviour during transitions, appraisals, and restructurings.	Anticipate and mitigate destructive politics.
Context engagement	Encourages decision-making sensitive to socio-political-economic realities.	Contextual intelligence strengthens leadership effectiveness.
Embracing diversity and inclusion	Promotes inclusive leadership, valuing different perspectives to enhance decision-making and innovation.	Diversity is a strength for organisational resilience and creativity.

Source: Author's own.

6.6 Contribution to the theory of the upper echelons black box

This study was guided by the overarching research question: *How do senior leaders in complex organisations define the boundaries of political behaviour?* It was inspired by the call of Shepherd et al. (2020) for further exploration into this under-researched field, and was anchored in upper echelons theory (Bromiley & Rau, 2016; Hambrick & Mason, 1984). This theory posits that executives' personal values, experiences, and cognitive frames significantly shape their decisions and, ultimately, organisational outcomes (Bromiley & Rau, 2016; Wang et al., 2016). Recognising that senior leaders are complex, fallible human beings (Bonelli, 2014; Quigley & Hambrick, 2015), the study acknowledged that responses to political behaviour are inevitably complex and varied. In the best-case scenario, leaders mitigate harmful politics and protect decision quality

by incorporating diverse interests, through transparent information sharing (Elbanna, 2018; Elbanna et al., 2017; Shepherd et al., 2020).

Building on this theoretical foundation, the study acknowledged that strategic decision-making is not isolated or purely rational. Instead, it is shaped by a web of unpredictable internal dynamics (for example, resource constraints, cultural factors) and external pressures (for example, market shifts, socio-political changes). Furthermore, human cognitive limitations and ethical perspectives further complicate leadership actions. Political behaviour thus emerges as a natural consequence of differentiation and interdependence among actors vying to shape organisational agendas (Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1988).

In terms of theoretical contribution, this study offers several novel insights. It deepens current understanding of the dual nature of political behaviour – recognising its capacity either to enhance or undermine strategic decision-making. It also identifies a set of key moral and ethical principles – including honesty, integrity, transparency, authenticity, stewardship, and self-reflection – that help set the boundaries of political behaviour. In addition, the study shows that political capital and influence, when grounded in ethical leadership, can be positive forces for organisational goals; whereas arrogance, egotism, and moral flexibility drive harmful political practices. The study further enhances knowledge about relationship-based cultures, illustrating how interpersonal connections strongly influence senior leaders' political behaviours and perceptions of loyalty, influence, and trust. Another key contribution is the identification of contextual triggers that intensify political behaviour – notably during performance appraisals, organisational restructures, retrenchments, and leadership transitions. These periods heighten uncertainty and competition, increasing the likelihood of political manoeuvring. Moreover, the study illuminates the dichotomy of enablers and preventers of political behaviour among top management teams: revealing that while senior leaders are responsible for distinct business units, they must also collaborate across divisions – thus creating natural tensions between personal/unit interests and collective organisational goals. To navigate this complex terrain, the study has devised critical guidelines for managing political behaviour. These guidelines include: establishing effective governance structures; investing in leadership development; fostering a culture of caring; ensuring fair and equitable performance evaluations and compensation; mitigating destructive political behaviour; and leveraging change management strategies to promote positive influence. Collectively, these guidelines enable positive, strategic decision-making practices – both formal and informal – that strengthen organisational

resilience, enhance both financial and non-financial performance, and ensure long-term sustainability and growth. In conclusion, this study advanced a conceptual and practical framework that captures the enablers-preventers duality of political behaviour. It offers pathways for organisations to manage political dynamics proactively and ethically, thereby reinforcing effective strategic leadership. Figure 6.2 encapsulates the contribution to the theory of upper echelons black box.

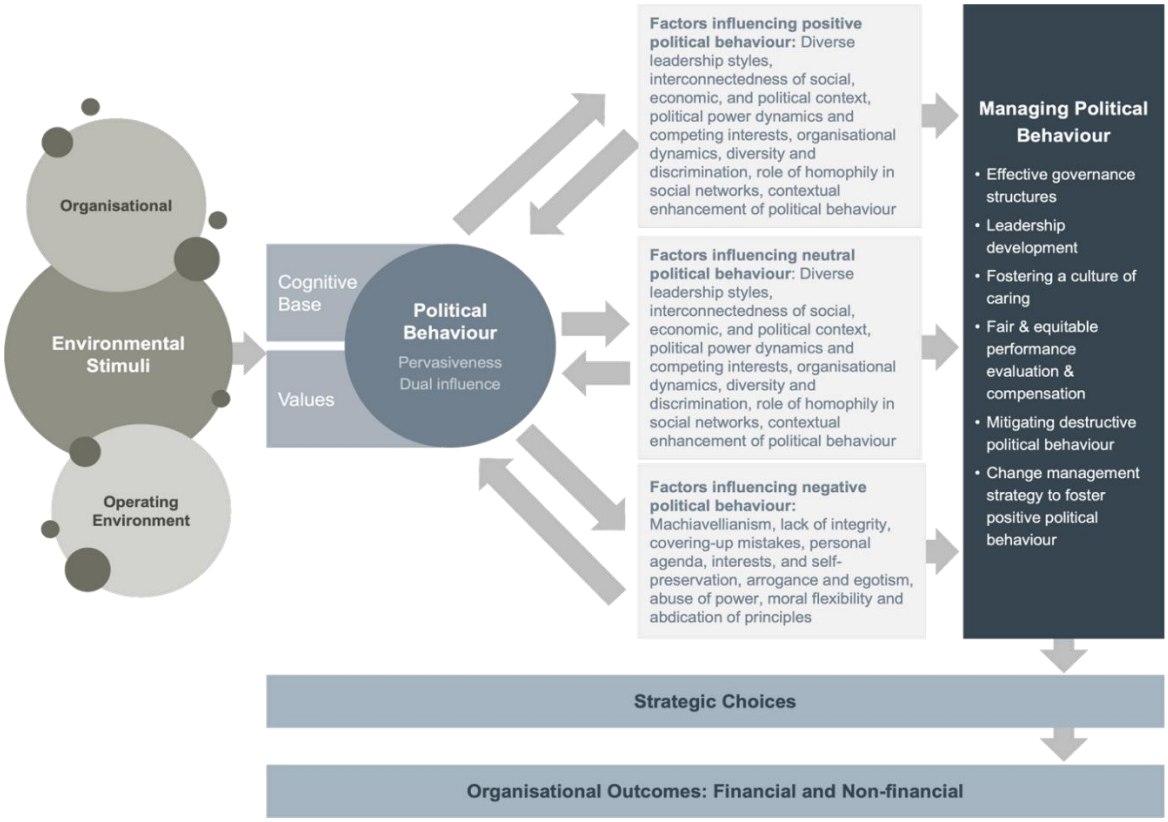

Figure 6.2: Theory of upper echelons

Source: Author's own - adapted from Hambrick and Mason (1984).

This adapted upper echelons theory model illustrates the duality of enablers and preventers of political behaviour among senior leaders in complex organisations. The framework highlights how leadership values, organisational dynamics, and contextual factors interact to shape political behaviour, and presents guidelines for managing political behaviour to strengthen strategic decision-making, organisational culture, and performance.

Moreover, the adapted framework further develops the original model in three important ways. Firstly, the "Cognitive Base and Values" element has been broadened to include personal ethical values (section 6.3.1.1) and spiritual grounding (section 6.3.1.5) as key moderators of political behaviour. Secondly, the "Black Box" now includes dichotomous

enablers and preventers of political behaviour identified in the study (section 6.3). Lastly, a newly-added component – “Managing Political Behaviour” – directly relates the findings of this study (specifically on effective governance, leadership development, and management of culture) to the development of upper echelons theory, thus enhancing current knowledge of strategic choice and organisational outcomes.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1 The purpose and significance of the research

This study aimed to explore a critical but under-examined dimension of strategic leadership: how senior leaders in complex organisations define the boundaries of political behaviour. Grounded in the South African banking sector, and anchored in upper echelons theory (Bromiley & Rau, 2016; Hambrick & Mason, 1984), the study engaged directly with the lived experiences of 27 top executives (including three follow-up conversations) to understand how political behaviour is navigated, managed, and interpreted in environments where influence and collaboration are essential yet frequently fraught with complexity.

The overarching research question was: ***how do senior leaders in complex organisations define the boundaries of political behaviour?*** This question generated two sub-questions: (1) *What factors influence the duality of political behaviour among senior leaders?* and (2) *What contextual factors regulate political behaviour of senior executives in the organisation?* All questions were framed in response to the call by scholars for a deeper understanding of the nature, contextual triggers, and regulation of political behaviour among top leaders (Ferris et al.,2019; Kapoutsis & Thanos, 2016; Maslyn et al., 2017; Shepherd et al., 2020).

This investigation explores in detail how political behaviour manifests during periods of organisational change such as restructuring, mergers and acquisitions, market entries or exits, and product line expansions. Such moments intensify internal power struggles and factional dynamics, which – in turn – strengthen the contextual enhancement of political activity (Elbanna, 2018). Importantly, the study confirmed that political behaviour is neither inherently good nor bad. Instead, it is shaped by a complex and dynamic interplay of personal ethics, leadership values, organisational culture and situational triggers, as well as the broader socio-political context.

7.2 The research context and its importance

This study was situated within the South African banking sector: a context both complex and under-represented in existing literature on political behaviour in leadership. While much extant research in this domain has emerged from the Global North, Europe, and parts of Asia (Elbanna, 2018; Liu et al., 2015), this inquiry responds to growing calls for

research that reflects the realities of *emerging* markets – especially those characterised by layered socio-political histories and institutional transformation (Shepherd et al., 2020; Kapoutsis & Thanos, 2016).

In this regard, South Africa is particularly interesting because of its dual context. On one hand, it is ranked among the most stable and innovative banking systems globally (World Economic Forum, 2020); on the other, it grapples with deep-rooted socio-economic challenges, including structural inequality, high unemployment, and the lingering effects of apartheid-era exclusion (Van der Walt & De Klerk, 2015). Moreover, ongoing transformation imperatives – including equity, diversity, and inclusion – place unique demands on senior leaders, especially in high-stakes sectors such as financial services.

Against this backdrop, the study's focus on locally controlled South African banks – particularly the "Big Four" that dominate the market – offered a critical vantage point for examining how top executives navigate political dynamics. These organisations operate under intense regulatory scrutiny and face mounting pressure to balance shareholder value, ethical governance, and national transformation objectives. The South African setting thus provided fertile ground for investigating how upper echelon leaders define and manage the boundaries of political behaviour, especially during strategic transitions such as mergers, restructures, and market repositioning. In such periods, when resource competition and factionalism often intensify, political navigation becomes a crucial aspect of executive leadership (Elbanna, 2018; Ferris et al., 2019).

Importantly, by foregrounding race, gender, and socio-political context, this study gave rise to insights that transcend traditional leadership paradigms and extend the applicability of political behaviour theory to the Global South. In so doing, it contributes not only to theoretical enrichment but also enriches current understanding of the contextualisation of leadership studies in diverse, high-stakes organisational environments.

7.3 Research methodology and its appropriateness

The qualitative research methodology employed in this inquiry was anchored in the interpretivism paradigm, which generated a profound range of insights from participants – as described in Chapter 4. I adopted this inductive, qualitative approach, framed within a hermeneutic phenomenological design, to further expand historical and contemporary perspectives on the research topic. This approach was deemed the most suitable for exploring how senior leaders within regulated and complex organisations, particularly in

South Africa, conceptualise the boundaries of political behaviour. The primary data collection method involved conducting 30 semi-structured, in-depth, one-on-one interviews with upper echelon decision-makers. These interviews were structured to allow open-ended responses, thereby facilitating a comprehensive exploration of participants' viewpoints and experiences. The subsequent process involved a careful data analysis, intricately interwoven with insights from the literature review. Finally, I methodically delineated the procedures for data collection, analysis, and final report preparation. This process is covered in Chapter 4, along with the findings.

7.4 Research findings

This study revealed that political behaviour in senior leadership is neither inherently detrimental nor beneficial; instead, it exists on a dynamic continuum ranging from destructive to neutral to constructive. Political actions such as favouritism, manipulation, and Machiavellianism were identified as negative expressions; whereas ethical influence, conflict resolution, coalition-building, and innovation advocacy emerged as positive political strategies. Crucially, this continuum is shaped by leaders' intent, values, and the organisational context in which they operate. To that end, the study proposed a framework (Figure 4.5) and a typology of enabling, preventive, and context-dependent factors influencing political behaviour.

A recurring theme was the central role of ethical and moral principles – honesty, transparency, consistency, authenticity, stewardship, humility, and spiritual grounding – in guiding political boundaries. Such findings echo assertions from Mintzberg (1983) and Ferris et al. (2019) regarding the moral fabric of political action. Moreover, participants consistently acknowledged the ubiquity of political behaviour in organisations, and recognised that values-based leadership could foster positive political influence while minimising harm. Furthermore, the study highlighted the pivotal role of organisational culture, stakeholder expectations, and governance structures in determining how political behaviour unfolds. It was also confirmed that context – including internal systems and external socio-political dynamics – acts as both a trigger and a moderator of political actions. Overall, participants' insights underscored the psychological and strategic implications of political behaviour: particularly in relation to decision-making, organisational cohesion, and employee well-being.

The phenomenological approach adopted in this study provided access to the lived experiences of top leaders, revealing their nuanced perceptions of power dynamics,

leadership styles, and ethical dilemmas. Participants shared how authenticity, humility, and a sense of stewardship influenced their decisions, and also recognised the damaging impact of unchecked ambition, moral ambivalence, and political manoeuvring driven by self-interest. Such findings highlight the need for increased self-awareness and reflective leadership practice.

Importantly, political behaviour was not framed as monolithic – but rather as a fluid, context- sensitive phenomenon. Indeed, the study demonstrates that essentially similar leadership behaviours may either be enabling or detrimental, depending on the organisational moment, stakeholder configuration, and leadership intent. Such a dichotomy requires leaders to balance personal ambition with collective goals: a skill that is particularly critical during times of strategic change such as mergers, restructures, or market entries. In terms of mitigating destructive behaviours, the study further emphasises the role of ethical leadership development, transparency, accountability, and diversity. Thus, leaders who operate with integrity and align with the organisation's values, are significantly less likely to engage in harmful political practices. However, diversity was found to be a double-edged sword. While it was shown to foster creativity and decision-quality, participants cautioned that it must also be harmonised with organisational unity to avoid fragmentation. In this regard, human resource departments and governance bodies were identified as key enablers in promoting an ethical climate. It was further recommended that these structures should provide codes of conduct, leadership development programmes, and inclusive decision-making processes that support ethical behaviour and curb toxic politics. In addition, the study gave rise to a set of practical guidelines, including effective governance structures, fair performance evaluation systems, change management strategies, and the Leadership Continuum Model (Figure 4.6), which positions political behaviour along a spectrum and enables adaptive navigation of strategic leadership contexts.

Essentially, this research offers a comprehensive and contextually rooted understanding of political behaviour in executive leadership. By capturing the duality, complexity, and situational character of political behaviour, and by providing actionable insights grounded in the lived experience of senior leaders, the study bridges theory and practice. It also reframes political behaviour, seeing it not simply as a risk but as a potential driver of innovation, cohesion, and resilience – when ethically and strategically harnessed.

7.5 Research contribution

7.5.1 Theoretical implications

This study contributes significantly to the literature on political behaviour by providing a contextualised, in-depth exploration of the factors that enable or prevent political behaviour among senior leaders. While previous research focused predominantly on middle management or general organisational dynamics (Liu et al., 2015), this study centres on the upper echelons, thus responding to longstanding calls by Elbanna (2018), Kapoutsis and Thanos (2016), and Shepherd et al. (2020) for greater attention to be paid to political dynamics at the executive level. Additionally, this research contributes to existing understanding by integrating upper echelons theory (Bromiley & Rau, 2016; Hambrick & Mason, 1984) into the exploration of political behaviour. It reinforces the theory's premise that the personal characteristics and experiences of senior leaders shape organisational outcomes, but *extends* this premise by showing how such traits influence the strategic use of political behaviour. The research also offers a conceptual expansion of Shepherd et al.'s (2020) assertion that political behaviour remains insufficiently theorised in strategic decision-making.

The study introduces several key conceptual insights on specific aspects of political behaviour. Firstly, ***the contextual duality of politicking****:* political behaviour is not fixed as either positive or negative. Instead, it operates within a dual framework, where intent, leadership values, and organisational context determine whether such behaviour is constructive or destructive. Secondly, ***the context-dependent nature of boundaries***: rather than being static, the boundaries of acceptable political behaviour are influenced by internal organisational dynamics (for example, leadership culture and performance evaluation systems) as well as external socio-political factors (for example, race, gender, and national governance). Thirdly, ***the richness of South African contextualisation***: the inclusion of race, ethnicity, and gender offers fresh insights from a Southern hemisphere perspective, where the legacies of apartheid and inequality intersect with organisational politics. These elements remain under-represented in dominant Northern and European political behaviour research (Elbanna, 2018). Fourthly, ***the importance of holistic integration***: the study argues for a shift away from reductionist views, highlighting how political behaviour is shaped by the interplay of economic, social, and political dynamics.

Finally, the inquiry contributes to theory by: enhancing understanding of political behaviour dynamics within executive leadership contexts; demonstrating the value of

integrating lived experiences into theoretical framing; repositioning political behaviour as a fluid construct shaped by context, values, and situational triggers; and introducing the Leadership Continuum model as a theoretical lens to portray this fluidity across a spectrum of behaviours.

7.5.2 Practical implications

The inquiry has strong practical implications for executive leaders, board members, human resources professionals, and corporate governance stakeholders. These implications are grounded in empirical data and are organised into a set of practical guidelines, reflected in Chapter 5 (Figure 5.6), and the Leadership Continuum model. The study offers six key practical contributions and recommendations. Firstly, ***leadership awareness and adaptability should be seen as crucial***: senior leaders are encouraged to cultivate greater self-awareness of their political behaviour. The study shows that ethical political engagement, when guided by authenticity, stewardship, and self-awareness, can positively influence organisational performance. Secondly, ***positive organisational culture should be cultivated:*** ethical and transparent political conduct thrives in cultures where trust, collaboration, and fairness are actively promoted. Leaders must prioritise these cultural values and incorporate them into leadership development, succession planning, and reward systems. Thirdly, ***proactive management of political behaviour is essential:*** the findings highlight situations – such as restructuring, leadership transitions, and performance appraisals – where political behaviour is intensified. Leaders should anticipate and manage these flashpoints through targeted interventions. Fourthly, ***it is vital to engage with contextual realities***: by understanding the unique political, economic, and historical contexts of their environment, leaders can better interpret political signals and respond appropriately. This is especially critical in developing markets like South Africa. Fifthly, ***diversity and inclusion can be strategic assets***: the legitimacy and effectiveness of political behaviour is enhanced by embracing and embedding diversity (in race, gender, and thought). This approach also reduces the likelihood of exclusionary practices and fosters innovation. Sixthly, the study presents ***guidelines for ethical practice***: a framework for managing political behaviour that encompasses effective governance structures, ethical codes of conduct, performance evaluation systems aligned with values, and a culture of openness. Together, these key insights enable the study to make a unique and meaningful contribution to both academic and professional domains. Thus, the study bridges theory and practice: situating and

grounding a range of richly diverse theoretical insights from lived executive experiences within one of Africa's most influential sectors.

7.6 Limitations of the study

As with any exploratory qualitative research, the generalisability of the results is inevitably limited. The in-depth nature of qualitative inquiry focuses on context-specific insights, which, while valuable, may not be applicable or transferable to different settings, populations, or contexts. Indeed, the inherently subjective nature of qualitative research unavoidably introduces interviewer and interviewee bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), which may impact the data and its interpretation. In this inquiry – due to its design and scope – four such limitations were observed. Firstly, bias may have arisen from the following elements: my own close proximity to the data collection process; the data's trustworthiness; my interviewing skills (lack of prior experience in conducting interviews for research purposes); and the quality of data (Sanders, 1982). Secondly, the framework for this exploratory study was a phenomenon design setting within multiple complex organisations operating in South Africa. Although data was obtained from a homogenous sample, a different selection of 27 interviewees might have given different answers to the research questions. However, the population's composition represented participants who were most relevant to the subject under investigation – and this mitigated any limitation. Thirdly, the selection and use of a non-probability sampling technique for this study may have introduced selection bias because of my pre-existing network and knowledge of the organisations under scrutiny. However, I managed this bias by setting rigorous selection criteria for the population under study (including experience, role, diversity of functions, and various executive levels). Lastly, the interview questions were crafted from the literature reviewed, so their substance and form were inevitably – but not significantly – limited.

7.7 Areas of future research

The study yielded a series of empirically grounded propositions, based on how senior leaders define the boundaries of political behaviour; the dual nature of enabling and inhibiting factors of such behaviour; and the mechanisms through which politicking can be ethically managed. These propositions provide a valuable foundation for subsequent development of both conceptual and practical frameworks in the field of organisational

behaviour and strategic leadership. However, they still require further validation to ensure broader applicability and theoretical robustness. It is therefore recommended that future studies should test these findings across larger and more diverse populations – including different organisational sectors, geographic regions, and cultural contexts – to assess their generalisability. Expanding the research beyond the South African banking sector will help to refine these insights, and uncover additional boundary conditions that may affect political behaviour at executive level.

Moreover, the study also paves the way for further methodological advancement. In this regard, quantitative research approaches – such as structural equation modelling or large-scale surveys – could be employed to operationalise key constructs and test causal relationships. This would enable scholars to develop, validate, and refine measurement instruments that assess the ethical dimensions, leadership antecedents, and organisational outcomes of political behaviour. Longitudinal studies could also explore how political behaviour evolves over time in response to shifting internal and external contexts. In particular, tracking leaders' responses during organisational change, crises, or leadership transitions could further deepen our understanding of the fluid and situational nature of political behaviour.

7.8 Study Conclusion

This exploratory study makes a significant contribution to the evolving discourse on political behaviour within senior leadership: particularly in complex, regulated organisational environments. By anchoring the analysis in upper echelons theory, the research demonstrates how the personal characteristics, ethical values, and lived experiences of top executives shape political dynamics, and influence strategic outcomes across interconnected business units. Set within the distinct context of South Africa's banking sector – a landscape marked by both institutional sophistication and persistent socio-economic inequalities – the study provides a much-needed Southern hemisphere perspective. This contextual lens not only illuminates a critical gap in global literature, but also reveals how racial, cultural, and gendered identities intersect with power and influence at the executive level.

Methodologically, the adoption of a qualitative, inductive approach, underpinned by hermeneutic phenomenology, enabled a textured exploration of how leaders perceive, rationalise, and navigate political behaviour. Importantly, the findings challenge the conventional view of political behaviour, which frames it as inherently dysfunctional.

Instead, the study reveals the dual potential of such behaviour, showing how it can be either constructive or corrosive depending on intent, context, and ethical orientation. Crucially, the study demonstrates that political behaviour is neither monolithic nor static; it unfolds along a fluid continuum shaped by organisational culture, governance structures, leadership style, and contextual pressures.

In response to these multilayered realities and challenges, the study provides a set of practical guidelines and a Leadership Continuum model to help organisations cultivate ethical, transparent, and collaborative political practices. Ultimately, this inquiry calls for a reimagining of political behaviour as a strategic capability – one that, when harnessed with integrity and inclusivity, can foster innovation, cohesion, and long-term organisational resilience. By so doing, the study opens the door for future research which can further deepen theoretical understandings and refine practical interventions in this complex yet pivotal domain of leadership.

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Appendix A: Invitation to Participate in the Study

Dear participants,

I trust that this note finds you well.

Background

- As part of the Ph.D. studies at the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS), I am completing an ethical clearance application process, before embarking on the data gathering part of the research project.
- The approved research topic for the inquiry is: ***Exploring the boundaries of political behaviour of senior leaders.***
- As part of the requirement for ethical clearance application includes permission of the organisations of the participants, I propose to interview on the research topic.

Request

- This email seeks to request the permission to interview relevant company B executives on the research inquiry.
- The study is focused on senior leaders of 13 locally controlled South African banks across retail, commercial as well as corporate and investment banking segments. Further, the study is not about participants' organisations, thus reduce potential participants' fears about harming their firms' reputations.

Confidentiality

- In the final research project submission,
- the Company's B name will not be used should there be concerns around revealing sensitive information;
- pseudonyms will be used for all respondents interviewed – no participants name will used; and to assure absolute confidentiality of both the potential participants and their organisation, the output of the study would be reviewed by legal professional (an attorney or advocate) to establish whether the data had sufficiently been

anonymised and no harm would come to any interviewee and his / her organisation because of this study;

- further, prior to interviews, all participants will be requested to sign an informed consent form (please see attached), which essentially covers the following:
- participation is voluntary, and participants can withdraw at any time without penalty;
- answers would be treated confidentially, and participants will not be asked for any information that will identify them;
- interview (using online platforms) will last for about an hour (60 minutes); and
- All data will be stored and reported without identifiers.

Your considerations and direction to the person I can engage with on the compliance details will be greatly appreciated.

Regards,

Musa Motloung

Corporate and Investment Banking, Standard Bank

Tel: +27 (0) 11 721 5180 / Mobile: +27 (0) 71 600 0300

musa.motloung@standardbank.co.za

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

My name is Musa Motloung, research student conducting research on a topic: ***"Exploring the boundaries of political behaviour of senior leaders".*** I would like to ask you few open-ended questions and have a dialogue with you to understand your perspectives and lived experiences on the topic. If you agree, I will lead this interview based on the questions I have prepared. You don't have to answer all the questions, but it would be appreciated if you can, since it would lead to better results for the study. *Your participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time without penalty.*

Your answers would be treated confidentially, and you will not be asked for any information that will identify yourself and organisation. The interview will last for about an hour (60 minutes) depending on how fast we go through the discussion. In order to analyse your answers later, will you please allow me to record our conversation. All data will be stored and reported without identifiers. If you have any concerns, please contact my supervisor or me. Our details are provided below.

Researcher name: Musa Motloung
Email : 19405899@mygibs.co.za
Phone: +27 71 600 0300

Supervisor: Prof. Johan Olivier
Email: Olivierjo@gibs.co.za
Phone: + +27 11 771 4000

Signature of participant :

_____

Date :

_____

Signature of researcher :

_____

Date :

_____

Appendix C: Company Permission Letter

Company A – as an example

Company A
Postal address

22 June 2022

To: Whom it may concern

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN COMPANY A

This letter serves to confirm that Mr. Musa Motloung has been given permission to conduct research in Company A, for him to fulfil the requirements of his Doctor of Philosophy through Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria. This permission is granted subject to the below conditions being adhered to.

The following conditions will apply:

- Company A may not be named as the research site; the organisation will be referred to as a “large South African financial services organisation”.
- A signed NDA has been completed.
- Permission has been agreed and submitted from Chief Executive of Company A
- Insert Name (Head Human Resources South Africa) will be informed accordingly.
- No names of employees or their data will be shared with the student.
- A total of 20-25 Executives may be interviewed against a set of questions that have been approved by myself and Chief Executive and Head of Human Resources.

With kind regards,

Insert name Head People and Culture: Engagement and Culture Insights

Appendix D1: Research Questionnaire – BEFORE THE PILOT STUDY

Research and interview questions	
Introduction	• Introduce myself and give the purpose of the research inquiry. • Explain the method of data collection and analysis and assure confidentiality. • Confirm the estimated completion time and obtain a signed consent form.
RQ1: How upper echelon leaders define political behaviour and its boundaries?	
Associated interview questions	• Tell me how you define the political behaviour of senior leaders. • Share your understanding of the political behaviour of senior leaders and its boundaries.
RQ2: What enables and/or prevents political behaviour of upper echelon leaders in the organisation?	
Associated interview questions	• Tell me about your experiences of what enables the political behaviour of senior leaders in the organisation. • Tell me about your experiences of what prevents the political behaviour of senior leaders in the organisation.
RQ3: What are the guidelines to manage the political behaviour of senior executives in the organisation?	
Associated interview questions	• What would you say would be the guidelines to manage the political behaviour of senior leaders?
Closure	• Thank the participant for being part of the interview process. • Indicate the ending without closing the door for continuing discussion. • Start more casual chatting.

Appendix D2: Research Questionnaire – ADAPTED AFTER THE PILOT STUDY

Research and interview questions		Allocated time
Introduction	Introduce myself – PhD candidate at GIBS with years of experience in a senior leadership role. Share the purpose of the research inquiry. Explain the method of data collection and analysis and assure confidentiality. Confirm the estimated completion time and obtain a signed consent form. Ask the participants for permission to record the interview.	2 minutes
Framing the discussion: Articulate the problem statement. Share the purpose of the research inquiry: *understand the lived experiences of the boundaries of the political behaviour of senior leaders – the phenomenon under inquiry.* Provide definitions of key constructs, namely, political behaviour, senior leaders, and boundary conditions. Invite the participant to confirm understanding or ask questions for clarity.		**3 minutes**
RQ1: How upper echelon leaders define political behaviour?		
Associated interview questions	Please tell me, in your own words, how do you describe what the political behaviour of senior leaders is. Please tell me about your experiences and/or observations of what you have described as the political behaviour of senior leaders in your organisation.	15 minutes

RQ2: How upper echelon leaders define boundaries of political behaviour?		
Associated interview questions	Please share how you describe the boundaries of the political behaviour of senior leaders. Please would you share your understanding of the scope of political behaviour of senior leaders, that is, *what is in scope or out of scope and/or where political behaviour starts and stops?* Share your experiences or observations of boundaries of the political behaviour of senior leaders in the organisation.	25 minutes
RQ3: What are the guidelines to manage political behaviour of senior executives in the organisation?		
Associated interview question	What would you say would be the guidelines to manage the political behaviour of senior leaders?	5 minutes
Closure	Thank the participant for being part of the interview process. Indicate the ending without closing the door for continuing discussion. Invite the participant to share any other thoughts on the topic that were not covered – the participant's open and final comments. Indicate a possible request for a follow-up interview. Start a more casual chat.	5 minutes

Appendix E: Pilot Study Insights Report

Please see the attached report to the thesis document.

Appendix F: Ethics Approval

Gordon Institute of Business Science
University of Pretoria

29 August 2022

Musa Motloung

Dear Musa

Please be advised that your application for Ethical Clearance has been approved.

You are therefore allowed to continue collecting your data.

Please note that approval is granted based on the methodology and research instruments provided in the application. If there is any deviation change or addition to the research method or tools, a supplementary application for approval must be obtained

We wish you everything of the best for the rest of the project.
Kind Regards

GIBS Doctoral Research Ethical Clearance Committee

Doctoral Chair Signature

Appendix G: Interpretive Frameworks and Philosophical Beliefs

Interpretative Frameworks	Ontological Beliefs (The Nature of Reality)	Epistemological Beliefs (How Reality is Known)	Axiological Beliefs (The Role of Values)	Methodological Beliefs (Approaches to Inquiry)
Post-Positivism	A single reality exists beyond ourselves, “out there.” Research may not be able to understand it or get to it because of lack of absolutes.	Reality can only be approximated. But it is constructed through research and statistics. Interaction with research subjects is kept at a minimum. Validity comes from peers and not from participants.	Research biases not to be controlled and not to be expressed in the study.	Use of scientific method and writing. Object of research is to create new knowledge. Method is important. Deductive methods are important, such as testing of theories, specifying important variables, making comparisons among groups.
Social Constructionism	Multiple realities are constructed through our lived experiences and interactions with others.	Reality is co-constructed between researchers and the researched and shaped by individual experiences.	Individual values are honoured and are negotiated among individuals.	More of a literary style of writing used. Use of an inductive method of emergent ideas (through consensus) obtained through methods such as interviewing, observing, and analysis of texts.
Transformative Postmodern	Participation between researcher and communities/ individuals being studied. Often a subjective-objective reality emerges.	Co-created findings with multiple ways of knowing.	Respect for indigenous values; values need to be problematised and interrogated.	Use of collaborative processes of research; political participation encouraged; questioning of methods; highlighting issues and concerns.

Interpretative Frameworks	Ontological Beliefs (The Nature of Reality)	Epistemological Beliefs (How Reality is Known)	Axiological Beliefs (The Role of Values)	Methodological Beliefs (Approaches to Inquiry)
Pragmatism	Reality is what is useful, practical, and “works”	Reality is known through using many tools of research that reflect both deductive (objective) evidence and inductive (subjective evidence).	Values are discussed because of the way that knowledge reflects both the researchers’ and the participants’ views.	The research process involves both quantitative and qualitative approaches to data collection and analysis.
Critical Race, Feminist, Queer, Disabilities	Reality is based on power and identity studies. Privilege or oppression based on race, ethnicity, class, gender, mental abilities, sexual preferences.	Reality is known through the study of social structures, freedom and oppression, power and control. Reality can change through research.	Diversity of values is emphasised within the standpoint of various communities.	Start with the assumptions of power and identity struggles, document them, and call for action and change.

Source: Author’s own.