

Call for Papers for a Special Issue

Organizational Practices for Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion in Institutionally Contested Times

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BACKGROUND

The current political contestation surrounding Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) represents a critical turning point for organization and management research because it challenges established assumptions about how EDI ideas are translated, stabilized, and institutionalized within organizations. Importantly, contemporary contestation extends beyond generalized disagreement over norms and institutions (Deitelhoff, 2020). In many settings, it has taken the form of organized backlash directed at the language, programs, and governance arrangements associated with EDI (Prasad and Śliwa, 2024). This backlash seeks not only to question the legitimacy and scope of EDI initiatives but also to reshape the institutional conditions under which they can be articulated, justified, and governed. Accordingly, EDI should be examined as a politically contested organizational domain in which ideas, labels, and practices are actively renegotiated across legal, institutional, and cultural contexts (Alter and Zürn, 2020a, 2020b; Deitelhoff, 2020).

Historically, organizations in the United States have often championed the business case for diversity, leadership, and managerial strategies framing diversity as integral to organizational performance and diffusing EDI ideas across their global subsidiaries (Bader, et al., 2025; Ferner, et al., 2005; Leone, et al., 2025). By contrast, European organizations have more often approached EDI through moral and regulatory imperatives that emphasize social justice, equality, and non-discrimination (Özbilgin, 2024). When EDI is tied to the business case, it is commonly framed in relation to profitability, innovation, or shareholder value. Yet, as Pratt, et al.

(2025) suggest, organizational engagement with social issues can also generate moralized opinion-based intergroup conflict when employees interpret EDI not merely as an organizational issue but as a question of right and wrong. This is particularly relevant for EDI because its moral foundations invoke fairness, justice, dignity, and the redress of inequality. Moral framing is therefore not merely an alternative to business-case rhetoric (Preston, 2025); it may simultaneously legitimate majority-group leaders' involvement in EDI and provoke resistance when it is interpreted as coercive. This moral dimension helps explain why EDI-related goals remain under consolidation (Fortwengel and Gupta, 2025) and may continue to be contested even after formal organizational adoption.

The political contestation is further amplified by the inherent plurality of meanings attached to EDI itself, with actors selectively emphasizing or rejecting certain dimensions to serve specific political agendas. Equality may refer to fairness in pay and promotion, broader redistributive justice, or dismantling structural barriers (Köllen, et al., 2018), encompassing the notion of equity as fairness in the distribution of opportunities and outcomes (Özbilgin, 2024). Cook and Hegtvæd (1983) argue that equality encompasses multiple dimensions, including objective equality in the distribution of resources, subjective perceptions of equality, and relative equality (i.e., equity). Diversity may denote demographic differences, cognitive differences, or multiple dimensions of social differences (Fitzsimmons et al., 2023; Zanoni et al., 2010). Inclusion is variously understood as formal participation or as fostering a sense of belonging (Fitzsimmons et al., 2023; Mor-Barak and Cherin, 1998). This plurality makes EDI especially vulnerable to political contestation and partially mirrors the distinction between two foundations of workforce diversity management across countries (Özbilgin, 2024): one grounded in principles of human rights and non-discrimination, supported by social and moral rationales, and another increasingly driven by instrumental and strategic considerations. The terminology commonly adopted across contexts is also different. In the United States, organizations frequently employ the label "DEI" (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion), which places particular emphasis on diversity and conceptualizes the "E" primarily as equity (Özbilgin, 2024). In Europe, where the institutional context is rooted in French revolutionary ideals, the label "EDI" is more prevalent, reflecting a stronger emphasis on equality as a guiding principle (Özbilgin, 2024).

Recent developments in the United States underscore the need to analyze EDI through a more precise institutional lens. Since 2025, executive orders, agency guidance, and contracting requirements have shifted contestation from public discourse into the domains of compliance, procurement, and organizational governance, while state-level initiatives in higher education and the public sector have targeted offices, training, diversity statements, and related practices. At the same time, many corporations have publicly reduced, relabeled, or de-emphasized EDI commitments, suggesting that symbolic retreat and substantive retrenchment should not be treated as equivalent phenomena. These developments extend beyond the United States and affect global organizations as well (Ng et al., 2025). Many United States-based organizations, such as Meta, McDonald's, and Amazon, are major employers in Europe, leaving leaders and professionals with pressing questions about how to sustain coherent EDI commitments amid diverging regional expectations. In parallel, the European context continues to institutionalize equality-related obligations through measures such as pay-transparency regulation, thereby revealing that contemporary EDI contestation is better understood as cross-national regulatory divergence rather than a singular, linear backlash. This divergence raises important questions for organization and management theory. What happens to the translation process when the

originating headquarters falls silent, retreats symbolically, or becomes hostile to EDI? The present moment suggests that EDI ideas are not simply diffusing across borders but are being selectively reframed, constrained, and re-legitimated under contradictory institutional conditions.

While much existing work assumes a unidirectional transfer of practices from contexts where such practices are more institutionalized to contexts where they are less institutionalized, we instead emphasize that EDI diffusion is increasingly multi-directional and, at times, decremental. In this regard, a form of reverse translation is emerging, with subsidiaries, especially those operating in more supportive regulatory contexts, developing EDI narratives, governance arrangements, and practices that headquarters can no longer publicly endorse. This process may extend beyond human resource policies to procurement, subcontracting, and supply-chain governance, where EDI-related practices are relocated, concealed, or reformulated in response to conflicting legal and political demands. Attending to such processes can illuminate how multinational enterprises redistribute responsibility for inclusion across organizational units when institutional environments diverge sharply.

Recent sociopolitical developments suggest that EDI trajectories may not only vary across contexts but also stall, fragment, or reverse over time. Importantly, such developments also reveal increasing regulatory divergence across regions, with rollback pressures in some jurisdictions coexisting alongside the formalization of equality-related obligations in others. Crucially, the diffusion and translation of EDI ideas are not merely organizational processes but inherently political ones within organizations (DiTomaso, 2021). Organizations thereby become arenas of contestation in which external pressures and internal power dynamics intersect to reshape what counts as legitimate and effective management practice. Such contestation also unfolds at the level of perception, as individuals differ in how they experience and interpret inequity depending on their identities, including gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, profession, and others (Basuil, et al., 2025), complicating how EDI ideas are embedded in organizations. Taken together, the different historical foundations of EDI, its uneven exposure to political backlash, its still-ongoing process of consolidation, and the plurality of meanings attached to EDI suggest that EDI should be studied not only as a set of organizational practices but also as a contested domain whose meanings, legitimacy, and direction of travel are actively renegotiated among workers and managers, across organizational levels, and across national contexts. As researchers, we have a responsibility to examine not only whether EDI persists or recedes, but also what exactly is being contested, e.g., terminology, formal programs, decision rules, resource allocations, or underlying commitments to employees' perceived fairness, dignity, and belonging. Research on gendered and racialized micro-practices in academia reveals that even seemingly routine actions reproduce structures of privilege and disadvantage, highlighting how silence, symbolic compliance, or complicity can perpetuate inequality (Amis, et al., 2021; Post, et al., 2021; Śliwa, et al., 2022). The research and teaching of EDI can no longer be separated from the wider political struggles that shape its meaning and legitimacy.

AIMS AND SCOPE OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

Organizations operate in an increasingly global landscape in which political, legal, and institutional pressures directly shape EDI ideas and practices. While prior research has predominantly examined how EDI ideas travel, evolve, and become embedded across organizational contexts (e.g., Ciuk, et al., 2022; Dhir, et al., 2024), it has generally treated these

processes as adaptive and context-sensitive, yet implicitly oriented toward evolution rather than reversal. Recent developments instead point to institutional bifurcation. In some jurisdictions, anti-EDI legislation, executive action, and enforcement shifts have intensified scrutiny of organizational initiatives, whereas in others equality-related obligations are becoming more formalized through disclosure, transparency, and reporting requirements.

These dynamics position organizations as critical sites where broader sociopolitical struggles (e.g., anti-ESG movements, culture-war conflicts, and competing civil-rights interpretations) intersect with everyday organizational practices, forcing organizations to reconcile divergent regulatory frameworks and stakeholder expectations (Aguinis and Glavas, 2019). As a result, top executives and global leadership, diversity officers, legal and compliance professionals, and line managers must manage contested legitimacy and conflicting institutional demands across regions. This special issue aims to promote a debate on how organizations balance tensions between global and local EDI commitments, examining strategies, roles, and practices that link macro-political dynamics with organizational responses.

We call for papers investigating how organizations manage EDI when the wider political and legal environment becomes overtly contested, including instances of retrenchment, reversal, symbolic relabeling, compliance-driven redesign, and “reverse translation” across multinational networks. We seek papers that leverage and extend organization theory across levels to explain when and how EDI practices are reframed, decoupled, suppressed, relocated, or sustained. The issue connects micro-level perceptions (e.g., fairness judgments, identity work) with meso- and macro-institutional pressures, and illuminates managerial choices under multiple, conflicting stakeholder expectations. We are especially interested in work that clarifies the difference between symbolic retreat and substantive change, and that examines how organizations navigate the legal ambiguity surrounding the boundary between lawful equal-opportunity practice and allegedly unlawful preferential treatment. Furthermore, this special issue aims to provide actionable insights for practitioners seeking to design, defend, and sustain inclusive workplaces under adverse conditions.

Theorizing EDI in Institutionally Contested Times

This special issue aims to advance the debate about how organizations manage EDI practices in institutionally contested times. We believe that a multidisciplinary perspective is crucial, as EDI practices are shaped not only by organizational dynamics but also by broader political, legal, and social processes embedded in institutional environments. Accordingly, the special issue seeks to bring together scholars across multiple disciplines to enrich organization and management research with new perspectives on how firms mediate wider political and societal conflicts. By fostering dialogues between organization and management-related fields (e.g., international business, political science, sociology, etc.), it offers a more comprehensive understanding of organizations as arenas of political contestation on EDI.

These interdisciplinary dialogues can build on theoretical frameworks that capture organizational responses to contested pressures. One useful theoretical lens is Oliver’s (1991) framework of strategic responses to institutional pressures, from acquiescence to defiance, which can shed light on how leaders and managers mediate tensions between global EDI commitments and localized resistance. Contributions may address topics such as the decoupling of EDI rhetoric from practice, the role of chief diversity officers as institutional entrepreneurs, or the impact of

anti-EDI legislation on talent management strategies. Alongside institutional theory, other theoretical perspectives can enrich organization and management research on EDI. Translation theory highlights how EDI ideas are reshaped as they travel across borders, generating hybrid practices that blend global templates with local contestations (e.g., Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996). Social role theory illuminates how societal role beliefs influence organizational members' perceptions and behaviors, leading to interpretations of EDI ideas and related organizational practices (e.g., Baker et al., 2025; Basuil, et al., 2025). Critical perspectives on power emphasize that EDI may be influenced by discursive struggles and micro-practices of privilege and disadvantage (e.g., Konrad, et al., 2021; Śliwa, et al., 2022). More broadly, the present context invites theory development on legal uncertainty, strategic ambiguity, and organizational self-censorship, as organizations increasingly respond not only to normative disagreement but also to uncertain enforcement signals and reputational risk.

Potential themes and guiding questions

This special issue targets JMS's mission to advance conceptual and empirical knowledge about organizations in their environments, welcoming plural methods and theoretical lenses. By linking institutional, organizational, and behavioral mechanisms behind contested EDI practices, we call for contributions that develop generalizable theory beyond Human Resource Management – Organizational Behavior silos, speaking to Organizational Theory, Strategy, International Business, and Critical Management Studies audiences within JMS's "big tent" ethos. We particularly welcome comparative, longitudinal, discourse-analytic, processual, and multi-level designs that can illuminate how EDI initiatives are translated, relabeled, defended, or dismantled over time and across jurisdictions. An illustrative, non-exhaustive list of research questions is provided below.

Business Implications of Politically Pressured Organizational Practices for EDI

(institutional and organizational level)

- How do organizations manage conflicting institutional demands for EDI across cultures or regions?
- How do organizations respond to conflicting normative demands between macro- and micro-level contexts regarding EDI?
- How do organizations address tensions between internal and external normative expectations around EDI, for instance, when managing a diverse internal workforce while operating in an external political context that opposes EDI?
- What are the implications of politically influenced organizational practices for EDI on organizational performance, including both financial and non-financial outcomes?
- How might politically influenced organizational practices for EDI affect the organization's public image, and in turn, shape its ability to attract talent and customers?
- What are the managerial consequences of politically influenced organizational practices for EDI, including employee fairness perceptions and intergroup conflict?
- How do organizations distinguish between symbolic relabeling and substantive rollback in EDI, and with what consequences for legitimacy, talent outcomes, and stakeholder trust?

EDI Translation and "Reverse Translation" on Behalf of Multinational Enterprises

(multinational enterprises and cross-national level)

- How do top executives and global leadership translate EDI ideas and practices in multinational enterprises operating in contexts of political backlash?
- Do multinational enterprise subsidiaries in different institutional environments sustain or resist EDI ideas and practices when headquarters withdraws support?
- What forms of “reverse translation” emerge when EDI ideas and practices flow from subsidiaries back to headquarters?
- How do procurement mandates and subcontracting obligations reshape the translation, concealment, or relocation of EDI practices across multinational supply chains?

Leadership, HRM, and Organizational Responses to EDI Contestation (managerial level)

- How do leaders’ psychological attributes (such as hubris, greed, or humility) affect organizational responses to controversial social policies like EDI?
- What role do senior leaders and middle managers play in framing, defending, or undermining EDI efforts in organizations?
- How does leadership style affect the sustainability of EDI in contested political and institutional environments?
- How might leaders and middle managers create, sustain, or subvert unofficial EDI practices to promote diversity and inclusion despite limited institutional support?
- How do political dynamics related to EDI within organizations influence human resource practices, e.g., recruitment, promotion, performance appraisal, and reward practices?
- What strategies do employees and human resource managers use to negotiate contested meanings of “good” management practice in politicized workplaces opposed to EDI?
- In what ways does political contestation on EDI reshape the professional identity, legitimacy, and mandate of human resource managers?
- How do human resource managers balance organizational compliance with their personal and professional commitments to inclusion?
- How do HR, legal, and compliance functions jointly redesign EDI-related practices under conditions of regulatory ambiguity?

Employee Fairness Judgment, Voice, and Resistance in EDI (group and individual level)

- How might reactions to politically pressured organizational practices for EDI differ between majority-group and minority-group colleagues?
- How do employees respond as third parties to organization-wide systemic biases or discrimination against minority groups, and how do these responses vary based on employees’ own social group identities?
- How might employee reactions to politically pressured organizational practices for EDI evolve (e.g., shifting between resistance to legitimization or acceptance) and to what extent does this depend on the magnitude of political normative pressure?
- How do employees at various levels influence the success or failure of EDI initiatives in politically contested environments?
- How do CEOs, middle managers, and employees evaluate the fairness of organizational practices related to EDI when these practices are shaped by macro-level political norms?
- What forms of resistance or support emerge among employees and managers toward EDI policies, and how do managers deal with employee voice and resistance?

- How might a shadow EDI program emerge as a result of employee voice and resistance in the face of political backlash or withdrawal of support?

SUBMISSION PROCESS AND DEADLINES

- Registration deadline for the online pre-submission PDW: **25 September 2026**. Registration must be via Google Form by 25 September (registration link: <https://forms.gle/ubvbN2yK2guxGrhFA>).
- Pre-submission online PDW: 12:30 (GMT) 1 October 2026.
- Submission deadline: **31 March 2027**
- October 2027: In-person PDW at the University of Palermo (Italy) will be held to support authors whose manuscripts receive a first “revise and resubmit”, offering developmental feedback aimed at improving the likelihood of acceptance.
- Submissions should be prepared using the JMS Manuscript Preparation Guidelines (<https://journalofmanagementstudies.ac.uk/publish/author-guidance/manuscript-preparation-guidelines/>)
- Manuscripts should be submitted using the JMS ScholarOne system (<https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/jmstudies>).
- Articles will be reviewed according to the JMS double-blind review process.
- We welcome informal inquiries regarding the Special Issue, proposed topics, and potential alignment with the special issue’s objectives. Please direct any questions about the Special Issue to the Guest Editors (primary point of contact before the submission date: Pasquale Massimo Picone, pasqualemassimo.picone@unipa.it).

SPECIAL ISSUE EVENTS

1 October 2026 – Online pre-submission PDW: The Guest Editors will organize a virtual information session for a global audience on 1 October 2026 at 12:30 GMT. This session will provide an overview of the Special Issue, clarify its objectives, and address any queries from potential contributors. It will also enable prospective authors to engage with the editorial team, ensuring a clear understanding of the submission process and expectations, and encouraging high-quality, well-aligned submissions.

October 2027 - Post-submission PDW: The Guest Editors will organize a dedicated (in-person) PDW in October 2027 at the University of Palermo, Italy (exact date, time, and format to be announced) to provide support for authors invited to revise and resubmit their manuscripts. This post-submission PDW will serve as an interactive platform to support authors in refining their research and aligning it with the Special Issue’s objectives.

Participation in the workshops does not guarantee acceptance of the paper in the Special Issue and attendance is not a prerequisite for publication.

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