Leadership in a Polarized World: The Role of Political Beliefs in Supervisor Evaluations

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Course : PSEMAT-20

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Abstract

This study explores how political beliefs shape observers' perceptions of abusive supervision. Building on social identity theory and moral foundations theory, I hypothesized that third-party observers would adjust their evaluations of supervisory abusive behaviour and punishment intention based on political alignment. Using a between-subjects experiment, participants evaluated identical instances of supervisor abusiveness under conditions where the supervisor's orientation (left-leaning or right-leaning) was experimentally manipulated. After participants evaluated the supervisors, they provided their own political beliefs. Findings revealed that observers were increasingly lenient when they were politically aligned with the supervisor and increasingly critical when they were misaligned. Independently, left-leaning observers rated abusive behavior more harshly overall, reflecting stronger priorities for individual fairness and care, while right-leaning supervisors drew stricter condemnation regardless of observers' politics. These results highlight the powerful influence of political polarization on workplace assessments, emphasizing that shared or divergent beliefs can substantially alter judgments of transgressive supervision.

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Western societies are increasingly divided along political lines, with polarization reshaping political, social, and cultural judgments. In the United States, for example, the political center has contracted dramatically—individuals holding mixed views fell from 49% to 39% between 1994 and 2014, while the proportion espousing extreme political beliefs more than doubled (Geiger, 2014). At the same time, perceptions of political opposition as a national threat have surged—rising to 38% among conservatives and 41% among liberals in the US. Consequently, political beliefs now serve as powerful lenses that shape how events are interpreted and how blame is assigned (Iyengar & Westwood, 2014; Druckman & Levy, 2021).

A striking illustration of these dynamics is the case of Roger Ailes, the former CEO of Fox News, who resigned in 2016 amid multiple allegations of sexual harassment and abusive behavior toward subordinates. Known for his influential role and right-leaning political beliefs, Ailes' conduct sparked deeply polarized reactions. Left-leaning outlets—such as The Guardian (Redden, 2016) —launched scathing condemnations, arguing that his behavior epitomized a toxic leadership culture that dehumanized individual employees and nurtured an environment of systemic abuse. In contrast, right-leaning commentators, as seen in The Washington Times (Dinan, 2017), offered a more nuanced appraisal. They acknowledged that while Ailes' behavior was regrettable, his aggressive management style should be understood within the high-pressure, competitive context of the media industry, suggesting that the incident was being politicized by his detractors. This divergence—harsh, uncompromising denunciation from the left versus a contextual, mitigated appraisal from the right—provides a compelling real-world example of how the extent alignment between an observer and transgressor political beliefs can influence evaluations of abusive behavior.

Polarization's effects are not confined to the public sphere; they also permeate the day-to-day workplace, affecting relationships, communication, and decision-making (Javidan et al., 2023). Research indicates that while polarization may foster trust among those who share similar beliefs, it simultaneously heightens conflict and disengagement among political opponents (Rosen et al., 2024). In workplace settings, supervisors' actions are rarely evaluated in a political vacuum. Instead, their behavior is often filtered through political lenses, resulting in divergent evaluations. The extent to which the same act of a supervision is deemed condemnable depends on whether an observer perceives the supervisor as politically aligned with their own beliefs (Skitka, 2010; Haidt & Graham, 2007). This bias might be particularly pronounced in instances of abusive supervision—a leadership style marked by hostility, belittlement, and mistreatment of employees (Tepper, 2000). Although definitions of abusive supervision exist, interpretations of its severity vary considerably, as evaluators inevitably bring their moral and political frameworks to bear on their evaluation (Haidt & Graham, 2007).

Central to this study are two key dependent variables — the evaluation of abusive supervision and the intention to punish the supervisor — measured by third-party observers—individuals who are not direct targets of the abusive behavior, thereby less biased from victimization (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004). The evaluation of abusive supervision captures how observers assess harm and fairness in leadership behavior (Martinko et al., 2013). Similarly, punishment intention reflects not only a measure of accountability but also the degree to which observers believe that a supervisor should be sanctioned (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004). Recent research indicates that these evaluations are far from objective, as they are significantly molded by social identity and political beliefs—a dynamic that can be understood through the framework of social identity theory and moral foundation theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Fehr &

Fischbacher, 2004; Haidt & Graham, 2007)

This study explores how political polarization influences evaluations of abusive supervision. Specifically, does the extent of third-party observer alignment with a supervisor's political beliefs influence the observer's evaluation of the supervisor's abusiveness and the intention to punish when the supervisor abuses an employee? Furthermore, do the observer's and supervisor's political beliefs independently shape these evaluations?

Theoretical Foundations

The following section delves into the first and core research question of this study: does the extent of third-party observer's alignment with a supervisor's political beliefs influence the observer's evaluation of the supervisor's abusiveness and the intention to punish when the supervisor abuses an employee? To address this question, the analysis is grounded in social identity theory, which provides a framework for understanding how group memberships, defined by political beliefs, influence evaluation and judgment. The following section will outline the theoretical framework and explore the cognitive mechanisms through which political beliefs influence evaluation of abusive supervision.

Social Identity Theory and Ingroup-Outgroup Dynamics

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) posits that individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups, shaping perceptions and evaluations of social interactions. Group membership fosters two cognitive biases: ingroup favoritism, where members of one's own group are perceived more positively, and outgroup derogation, where outsiders are perceived more critically. These biases emerge because social identity plays a fundamental role in maintaining self-concept and group cohesion. The tendency to view ingroup members as more competent, moral, and trustworthy results in lenient evaluations of their

behaviors, even when those behaviors are negative like abusive (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). Conversely, outgroup members are scrutinized more harshly, with their actions attributed to stable, intrinsic flaws rather than situational factors (Pettigrew, 1979). Research suggests that these biases shape moral and intellectual judgments in various domains, which in turn might include workplace settings where leadership behaviors are evaluated (Hogg, 2001; Huddy & Bankert, 2017).

Political Beliefs as a Social Identity and Its Role in Polarization

Among the most salient bases of social identity are political beliefs, which dictate how individuals define their social world and delineate clear ingroup-outgroup boundaries (Huddy & Bankert, 2017). Because these beliefs are central to one's self-concept, they strongly influence evaluations of others, particularly in polarized contexts. Consequently, the degree to which an observer perceives a supervisor's political beliefs as aligning with their own determines whether the supervisor is seen as part of the ingroup or outgroup—greater alignment fosters ingroup favoritism, while misalignment leads to outgroup derogation (Reicher & Platow, 2018). In the context of this paper, where both supervisor and observer political beliefs are positioned on a left–right spectrum, a left-leaning supervisor would be aligned with a left-leaning observer and misaligned with a right-leaning one. Here, the extent of political alignment serves as a lens through which the supervisor's behavior is interpreted.

Cognitive Mechanisms Underlying Political Aligned Based Biases in Evaluations

Several cognitive mechanisms contribute to political aligned based biases in evaluating abusive supervision and punishment intention. First, attribution error (Pettigrew, 1979) explains why politically misaligned supervisors face harsher judgments. Negative actions by misaligned supervisors are attributed to their inherent moral or intellectual deficiencies, whereas similar

behaviors by aligned supervisors are rationalized as responses to external pressures (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). Second, moral judgments further reinforce biases. Uhlmann et al. (2015) found that individuals prioritize moral character assessments over behavioral evaluations when judging transgressors. Aligned supervisors benefit from moral alignment, leading to more lenient assessments, while misaligned supervisors are perceived as fundamentally immoral, intensifying harsh assessments (Hartman et al., 2022). Third, cognitive strategies shape evaluations through framing effects. Observers employ advantageous comparison, where an aligned supervisor's abusive actions are contrasted with more extreme misconduct, making their behavior appear less severe. Euphemistic labeling further softens descriptions of ingroup transgressions, while moral justification reframes abuse as necessary for achieving broader organizational goals (Maass et al., 1989). Conversely, misaligned supervisors are subjected to harsh scrutiny, with their behavior abstractly framed as indicative of deep-seated flaws (Hartman et al., 2022). This leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: The observer's political beliefs will moderate the relationship between the supervisor's political beliefs (left vs. right) and evaluations of abusive supervision and punishment intentions. Specifically, as observer left-wing orientation increases, observers will evaluate a left-leaning supervisor as less abusive and will express lower punishment intentions toward them, compared to a right-leaning supervisor. Conversely, as observer right-wing orientation increases, this effect will diminish or reverse.

Independent Effect of Observers' and Supervisors Political Beliefs on Evaluation of Abusiveness and Punishment Intention.

In the following section, I examine whether observers' and supervisors' political beliefs independently influence evaluations of abusive behavior and punishment intentions. Using moral

foundations theory (Haidt & Graham, 2007) as a guide, I argue that observers' moral perspectives—shaped by their left- or right-leaning political beliefs—influence how they evaluate abusive supervision. At the same time, the supervisor's own political beliefs may affect evaluations of their behavior, depending on how well their actions align with the moral norms typically associated with their political beliefs.

Effect of Observers' Political Beliefs Evaluation of Abusiveness and Punishment Intention.

To understand how observers on the left-right spectrum evaluate the world – and why they might evaluate abusive supervision differently, moral foundations theory (Haidt & Graham, 2007) provides a useful framework. This theory identifies five moral foundations shaping political beliefs. Two foundations focus on individual welfare: care/harm and fairness/justice. Care/harm emphasizes protecting the vulnerable, reflecting values such as kindness and empathy. Fairness/justice centers on equality and reciprocity, promoting accountability and justice. The other two foundations relate to community stability: ingroup/loyalty and authority/respect. Ingroup/loyalty prioritizes group well-being, while authority/respect supports order and tradition. The fifth foundation, purity, though less relevant here, concerns aversion to perceived degradation or impurity.

Moral priorities differ across the political spectrum. Left-leaning individuals emphasize care and fairness more strongly, while right-leaning individuals distribute focus across all five foundations (Haidt & Graham, 2007). Observers condemn behaviors that violate their moral values, such as abusive supervision, to uphold the moral principles associated with their political beliefs (Miller & Cushman, 2013). While disapproval spans the political spectrum, the intensity and moral basis of condemnation vary depending on an observer's political beliefs.

For left-leaning observers, protecting individuals and ensuring fairness drive strong

disapproval of harmful actions. Empathy for subordinates subjected to abuse is heightened, as such behavior conflicts with their commitment to preventing harm and promoting fairness (Stewart & Morris, 2021). This response is amplified by distrust of hierarchies and the harm they can perpetuate (Graham et al., 2013b). Abusive behavior becomes particularly unacceptable to left-leaning observers when power imbalances are involved (Mirowska et al., 2021).

Right-leaning observers, while also concerned with individual well-being, place greater emphasis on community-oriented foundations like authority and respect. They expect leaders to act responsibly and protect subordinates (Haidt & Graham, 2007). Abusive supervision breaches these expectations, particularly those related to authority and respect. Right-leaning observers also value social norms and are less likely to attribute abusive behavior to external factors unless clear situational explanations exist (Désilets et al., 2020; Skitka et al., 2002). While left-leaning observers emphasize empathy and fairness, right-leaning observers focus on authority and norms; both ultimately condemn supervisors for moral failings.

How do political beliefs shape the intensity of evaluation of abusiveness and punishment intention? Left-leaning observers tend to extend their moral regard to a broader circle of individuals, thereby increasing the likelihood that they will feel moral concern for an abused employee (Waytz et al., 2019). In contrast, right-leaning observers often reserve their moral concern for closer connections, which can diminish empathy for those outside their immediate group. Furthermore, left-leaning observers typically exhibit stronger empathy due to differences in their moral foundations, placing a heightened emphasis on care and fairness (Haidt & Graham, 2007). As a result, they are more likely to view abusive supervision as more severe and to express higher punishment intentions. Conversely, right-leaning observers may hesitate to criticize abusive acts, prioritizing values such as authority and loyalty, which can lead to

rationalizing harmful behavior to maintain the status quo (Napier & Jost, 2008; Mirowska et al., 2021). Overall, these distinctions suggest that as political beliefs shift left, empathy and broader moral regard intensify observers' negative evaluations of abusive supervision and their intentions to punish. This leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Observers with stronger left-leaning (vs. right-leaning) political beliefs evaluate abusive supervision as more severe and assign higher punishment intentions.

Exploratory Analysis of Supervisor's Political Beliefs' Impact on Perceptions of Abusive Supervision and Punishment Intentions

In the next section, I will examine whether supervisors are evaluated more harshly based on their political beliefs. Since existing literature does not provide a definitive answer, I will outline theoretical arguments for why both left- and right-leaning supervisors might be evaluated more harshly or leniently. Evaluations differ based on how much a supervisor's actions stray from the moral norms tied to their political beliefs (Graham et al., 2012; Aquino & Reed, 2002; Hogg & Terry, 2014). I argue that supervisors with left‑ or right‑leaning political beliefs are evaluated according to the moral cues they embody, which may in turn influence evaluation of abusiveness and punishment intentions.

For instance, right‑leaning supervisors are often linked with moral foundations emphasizing authority/respect and ingroup/loyalty (Haidt & Graham, 2007), which underpin a preference for structured, hierarchical leadership styles. As such, behaviors like enforcing strict discipline, isolating subordinates, or exhibiting controlling conduct might be interpreted as congruent with an authority‑driven leadership approach (Ashforth, 1994; Jost et al., 2018). In this context, abusive behavior by right‑leaning supervisors might be viewed as a natural extension of their political stance—marginalizing employees or enforcing rigid norms could be

seen as reinforcing group cohesion and loyalty (Padilla et al., 2007).

In contrast, left-leaning supervisors are generally associated with moral foundations centered on justice/fairness and care/harm, emphasizing empathy, inclusivity, and social justice (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & Van Engen, 2003; Haidt & Graham, 2007). These morals and values tend to align with transformational leadership behaviors that focus on inspiring, motivating, and supporting personal growth among employees (Rubin, Munz, & Bommer, 2005). Consequently, when left-leaning supervisors engage in abusive behavior, such actions may be evaluated more harshly due to a perceived contradiction with the positive attributes typically linked to their political beliefs.

Given these contrasting frameworks, it is conceivable that the same abusive behavior may elicit different evaluations depending on the supervisor's political beliefs. Specifically, evaluation of right-leaning supervisors' behavior could be subject to either sensitization and desensitization effects, as it is seen as a extension rather than a deviation of their political beliefs (Haidt & Graham, 2007; Jost et al., 2018), whereas left-leaning supervisors may face amplified scrutiny due to perceived hypocrisy or be evaluated more lenient since the abusive behaviour is seen as an anomaly in their otherwise expected faire leadership style (Effron et al., 2015). This leads to the following exploratory question:

Hypothesis 3: Abusive behavior by supervisors may be evaluated differently depending on the supervisors' political beliefs.

Method

Participants

I recruited a convenient sample of Dutch adults through two primary sources: the SONA system and personal networks. The SONA system facilitated the participation of psychology students familiar with experimental research, while the researcher's social network provided additional participants, employing a snowball sampling method. The sample consisted of 332 participants with a mean age of 26.28 years (*SD* = 13.66). The majority identified as women (69.3%, 230 participants), followed by men (30.4%, 101 participants), and one participant identified as another gender (0.3%). The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of Rijksuniversiteit Groningen (**CODE ##**), ensuring adherence to ethical standards. Participants were informed about their rights, including the option to withdraw at any time, and were debriefed at the end of the survey to provide transparency about the study's aims.

Design

This study employed a between-subjects experimental design to investigate how the political alignment of participants and supervisors influence evaluations of abusive behavior and punishment intentions. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions, where the political beliefs of a fictional supervisor, Olivier, was manipulated (left-leaning vs. right-leaning). To isolate the effects of political beliefs and the extent these align between supervisor and participant, the content describing the abusive behavior remained identical across conditions. Participants accessed the study through an online survey hosted on Qualtrics. They were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions. Each condition presented a vignette describing abusive behavior by Olivier, whose political beliefs were manipulated to be either left-leaning or right-leaning. After reading the vignette, participants

proceeded to evaluate the extent to which Olivier was abusive. Next, participants gave their punishment intentions. Following these evaluations, participants provided demographic information, including age, gender, and political beliefs. Finally, participants were debriefed about the study's aims.

Materials and Procedures

The vignette used in this study consisted of three parts: (1) context description common across both studies, (2) manipulation of the supervisors political beliefs, and (3) abusive behavior description.

Context,

The first part of the vignette, identical in both experimental conditions, introduced the fictional supervisor, Olivier, and the employee, Alex:

> Alex is a junior communications manager who has worked under Olivier's supervision over the past year. Alex is new to the company and is still learning. He started working in a team of nine people, with Olivier as the manager. Olivier is a senior manager known for his strong opinions and outspoken leadership style. He has been with the company for several years and is eager to share his political views.

Manipulation

The second part of the vignette manipulated Olivier's political beliefs as either left-leaning or right-leaning. The selected topics were based on two key factors: first, fundamental political differences, where left-leaning individuals favor a larger government and prioritize education and healthcare, while right-leaning individuals advocate for a smaller government and emphasize investment in police and the military. Second, the topics had to reflect the current Dutch political landscape, particularly the political shift to the right (NOS, 2023), migration policy (Kanne & Van der Schelde, 2024), and environmental concerns (Van Heck, 2023), as these are areas where political positions are clearly identifiable as either left- or

right-leaning. In the vignette, left-leaning Olivier is dissatisfied with the recent election, sees migration as a net positive, and actively supports environmental protection. In contrast, right-leaning Olivier is satisfied with the election, views migration as a net negative, and advocates for fewer environmental restrictions on farmers. These issues frequently dominate political discourse in the Netherlands and are often framed differently by left- and right-leaning parties. For example, the Netherlands' agricultural policies and climate targets are central to debates involving farmers and environmentalists (Van Heck, 2023), while migration policies shape public opinions on cohesion and security (Kanne & Van der Schelde, 2024).

> **Right-leaning condition:**
> Olivier is a right-wing individual who is pleased with the recent national elections. He is satisfied with the political shift to the right in the Netherlands and Europe. Olivier advocates for a small government with low taxes, minimal government interference, and a strong emphasis on individual responsibility for citizens. He is against open borders and views the influx of migrants as a threat to national cohesion and security, advocating for restrictions. He regularly participates in farmers' protests against additional restrictive nitrogen measures. He is also a strong proponent of increased investments in the police and the military.
>
> **Left-leaning condition:**
> Olivier is a left-leaning progressive individual who is disappointed by the recent national elections in the Netherlands. He is dissatisfied with the political shift to the right in the Netherlands and Europe. Olivier advocates for strong government intervention, progressive taxation, and extensive social security. He supports open borders, views migration as a valuable opportunity for cultural diversity, and regularly participates in climate protests. Olivier also advocates for increased investments in education and healthcare.

Abusive behaviour description

This description of the supervisor's abusive behavior is based on the 15 items from the Abusive Supervision Scale (Tepper, 2000). ChatGPT was used to generate a story in which all the 15 items were represented. In this section, I intentionally describe the abusive behavior from Alex's subjective perspective (e.g., Alex feels abused by Olivier) rather than framing it as an objective truth (e.g., Alex is abused by Olivier). This leaves more room for interpretation, allowing the extent to which the participant's and supervisor political beliefs align to influence evaluation.

> Although Alex does not share Olivier's political views and often disagrees with his remarks, he tries to remain impartial at work. However, Alex feels that their relationship is strained and believes Olivier's behavior has made the work environment increasingly stressful. Alex feels that Olivier makes jokes at his expense and dismisses his ideas during meetings, which undermines his confidence. He believes Olivier ignores or fails to fulfill his requests for help and discusses his mistakes with other colleagues, which Alex perceives as a violation of his privacy. When Alex contributes to a project, he feels that Olivier does not give him proper recognition. Sometimes, Alex thinks Olivier takes credit for his work while downplaying Alex's role. Alex also feels that Olivier blames him for problems that arise.
>
> In Alex's view, Olivier's frustrations create a negative work environment. Alex is convinced that Olivier dislikes him because of their political differences. He believes Olivier makes negative remarks about him, which could harm his reputation. Alex feels isolated, as he perceives colleagues avoiding interactions with him. This perception, which is not shared by other colleagues, makes Alex feel even more isolated. As a result, Alex's ability to perform his work effectively has been negatively affected.

Measurements

Abusive Supervision

Participants evaluated the supervisor's abusiveness using an adapted version of Tepper's (2000) scale. The scale, translated into Dutch and modified for third-party observation, consisted of 15 items assessing various forms of abusive behavior, such as belittling employees in the presence of others, breaking promises, and making negative comments about employees to others. Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = "Not at all" to 7 = "Very much"). Missing data points were handled through listwise deletion, meaning only participants with complete responses across all 15 items were included in the calculation. Cronbach's alpha was 0.93.

Punishment Intention

Participants indicated their punishment intentions for the supervisor using a single-item measure: "The company Alex works for has a strict policy on inappropriate behavior. When this policy needs to be enforced, to what extent do you believe Olivier should be punished?" Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = "No punishment" to 7 = "Severe punishment").

Observers' Political Beliefs

Observers' political beliefs were assessed using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "Very left" to "Very right," formulated as: "How would you generally describe your overall political beliefs on the political spectrum?"

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Participants' mean rating of abusiveness was $M = 4.13$, $SD = 0.90$, indicating that, overall, the supervisor's behavior was viewed as moderately abusive. Punishment intentions had a mean of $M = 3.87$, $SD = 1.58$, suggesting moderate inclination to punish the supervisor. Observers' political beliefs averaged $M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.40$, reflecting a relatively centrist distribution. Regarding supervisor political beliefs, 45.2% of participants were exposed to a left-leaning supervisor and 54.8% to a right-leaning supervisor.

Assumption Checks

Because moderation analyses were employed, we examined normality, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity. Shapiro-Wilk tests revealed slight deviations from normality for abusiveness ($W = 0.991$, $p = .041$) and more pronounced deviations for punishment intentions ($p < .001$). Consequently, robust standard errors were used in the punishment intention model to address potential bias in standard error estimates. Breusch-Pagan tests indicated no evidence of heteroscedasticity for abusiveness ($p = .182$) but significant heteroscedasticity for punishment intentions ($p = .044$). Thus, robust standard errors were also applied to the punishment intention model. For multicollinearity, Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were all close to 1, indicating no concerns about overlapping predictor variables.

Hypothesis Testing

A simultaneous moderation analysis examined the extent of political alignment between observers and supervisors moderated evaluations of abusive behavior and punishment intentions. For evaluation of abusiveness, the model explained $R^2 = .081$, $F(3, 328) = 9.68$, $p < .001$, with an interaction-driven increase of $\Delta R^2 = .033$. The interaction effect of observer and supervisor political alignment was significant (β = 0.233, $p = .001$, 95% CI [0.09, 0.3759]), demonstrating that the extent of political alignment between observer and supervisor on evaluation abusiveness was significant (supporting Hypothesis 1). For visualization, see graph, left panel.

The independent effect of observer political beliefs was significant in predicting evaluation of abusiveness (β = -0.133, $p = .008$, 95% CI [-0.230, -0.036]), such that as observers' ratings shifted leftwards, perceived abusiveness increased (supporting Hypothesis 2). The independent effect of supervisor political beliefs was also significant (β = -1.184, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-1.67, -0.69]), indicating that right-leaning supervisors were generally perceived as more abusive than left-leaning supervisors (supporting Hypothesis 3).

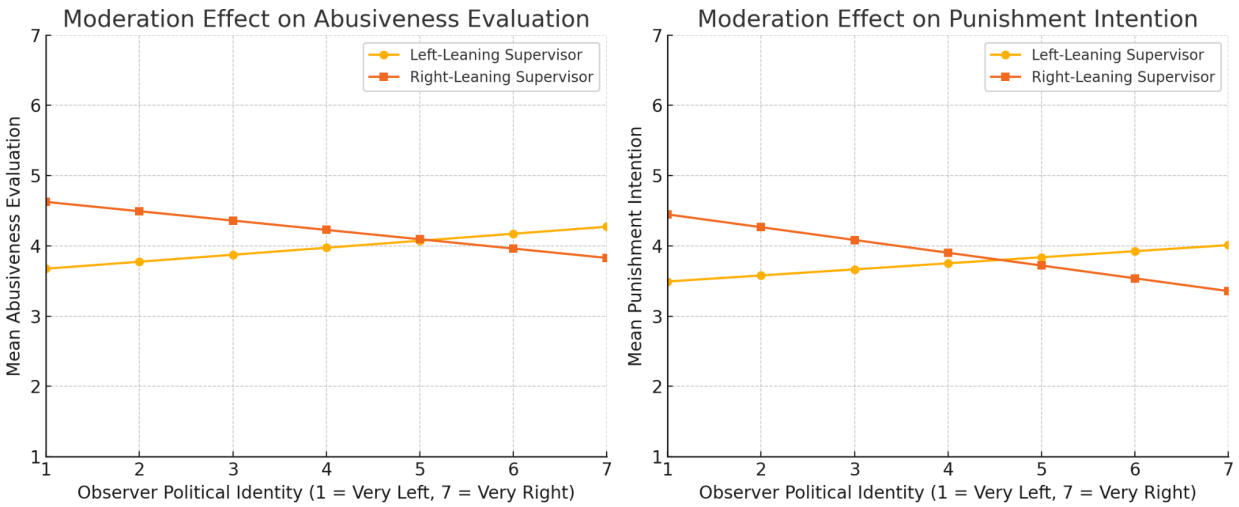
Simple slope analyses revealed that for right-leaning supervisors, increased rightward orientation in observers was associated with lower perceived abusiveness (β = -0.133, $p = .0075$, 95% CI [-0.23, -0.036]). In contrast, for left-leaning supervisors, a more right-leaning observer profile was linked to a slight increase in perceived abusiveness (β = 0.10, $p = .0340$, 95% [-0.006, 0.21]). Further probing at key values of observer political orientation showed that at -1 *SD* (relatively left-leaning), right-leaning supervisors were rated as significantly more abusive ($M = 4.50$, 95% CI [4.32, 4.70]) than left-leaning supervisors ($M = 3.77$, 95% CI [3.57, 3.96]), $p < .001$. At the mean, right-leaning supervisors ($M = 4.30$, 95% CI [4.18, 4.43]) still received higher abuse ratings than left-leaning supervisors ($M = 3.91$, 95% CI [3.76, 4.16]), $p < .05$. At +1

SD (relatively right-leaning), the difference was attenuated (M = 4.12, 95% CI [3.93, 4.31] vs. M = 4.05, 95 % [3.84, 4.26]), $p < .05$. These results indicate that political misalignment heightens evaluation abusiveness—most notably when left-leaning observers evaluate right-leaning supervisors—while right-leaning observers exhibit a leniency effect.

Punishment Intention For punishment intention, the model accounted for $R^2 = .025$, $F(3, 328) = 2.89$, $p = .035$, with an interaction contribution of $\Delta R^2 = .014$. The significant interaction effect ($\beta = 0.268$, $p = .030$, 95% [0.027, 0.51) confirmed that the impact of political alignment between observer and supervisor significantly influenced punishment intentions (supporting Hypothesis 1). For visualization, see graph, right panel. Observer political beliefs significantly predicted punishment intentions as well ($\beta = -0.182$, $p = .025$, 95% CI [-0.34, -0.022]), such that more left-leaning observers gave higher punishment intention (supporting Hypothesis 2). Supervisor political beliefs again emerged as a significant predictor ($\beta = -1.223$, $p = .006$, 95% CI [-2.11, -0.34]), with right-leaning supervisors eliciting higher punishment intentions overall (supporting Hypothesis 3).

Simple slope analyses indicated that for right-leaning supervisors, an increase in observers' rightward orientation was associated with significantly lower punishment intentions ($\beta = -0.182$, $p = .028$, 95% CI [–0.341, –0.022]). In contrast, the analyses for left-leaning supervisors were not statistically significant ($p = .371$), and thus estimated values for this group are not presented. When probing the interaction for right-leaning supervisors, punishment intentions varied such that at –1 SD, the mean rating was 4.27 (95% CI [3.97, 4.57]); at the mean, it was 4.01 (95% CI [3.80, 4.23]); and at +1 SD, it further decreased to 3.76 (95% CI [3.44, 4.08]). These results underscore that as observers become more right-oriented, their punishment intention toward right-leaning supervisors significantly diminish.

These findings illustrate that political mismatch leads to heightened punishment intention among left-leaning observers, while right-leaning observers show an ingroup leniency effect toward right-leaning supervisors. In sum, the moderation model for punishment intentions robustly supports Hypothesis 1, as well as the predictions regarding the main effects of observer (Hypothesis 2) and supervisor political beliefs (Hypothesis 3).



Discussion

Political polarization increasingly shapes perceptions in both social and professional settings (Iyengar & Westwood, 2014; Huddy et al., 2015). Political beliefs influence relationships, fairness evaluations, and leadership assessments in profound ways, often steering observers' evaluation toward selective and sometimes biased interpretations of transgressive behaviors (Jost et al., 2008). Therefore, this study explored the following two questions: (1) Does the extent of third-party observer's alignment with a supervisor's political beliefs influence the observer's evaluation of the supervisor's abusiveness and the intention to punish when the

supervisor abuses an employee? (2) Do the observer's and supervisor's political beliefs independently affect these evaluations? By manipulating a fictional supervisor's political beliefs (left-leaning vs. right-leaning) and assessing observer reactions, the study sheds light on how aligned or misaligned political beliefs guide organizational evaluation and judgment.

Findings reveal that when supervisors and observers' political beliefs increasingly align, observers evaluate them more leniently— evaluating their behavior as less abusive and expressing lower punishment intention. Conversely, increasing politically misalignment supervisors are seen in a harsher light, with observers evaluating the behaviour as more abusive and expressing higher punishment's intention. This effect persists even when accounting for the observer's political beliefs, indicating that political alignment itself acts as a powerful lens through which workplace conduct is evaluated (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The data further highlight that left-leaning observers consistently evaluate supervisors' behavior as more abusive than do right-leaning observers, regardless of the supervisor's political beliefs. Notably, right-leaning supervisors garnered significantly harsher evaluation of abusiveness and higher punishment intention, independent of observer political beliefs. Altogether, these findings underscore that supervisor evaluations in polarized contexts are not merely objective appraisals but are often filtered through political alignment or ideological bias (Huddy et al., 2015).

Beyond the immediate workplace implications, these results point to the broader societal concern that political alignment can significantly warp how harm is interpreted, potentially causing entire organizations—or communities—to disregard overtly damaging behavior if such behavior originates from the "ingroup" (Huddy & Bankert, 2017). Over time, this selective indignation may erode shared norms of civility and accountability, as each side becomes more inclined to rationalize abusive actions by its allies and demonize those of its opponents (Iyengar

& Westwood, 2014). The challenge for both researchers and practitioners is to illuminate and mitigate these hidden biases that, if left unchecked, can reinforce polarization and undermine cooperative problem-solving within diverse teams (Hogg, 2001).

Theoretical implications

Regarding the interaction effect, the study's outcomes align with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), revealing how strongly group affiliations—in this case, political beliefs —can drive evaluative biases in organizational contexts (Huddy et al., 2015). Ingroup favoritism leads observers to view politically aligned supervisors as more trustworthy and less culpable, whereas outgroup derogation fuels suspicion toward supervisors with opposing political beliefs (Pettigrew, 1979). These findings also reflect prior evidence that ideological similarity fosters leniency, and divergence heightens scrutiny (Iyengar & Westwood, 2014).

Moreover, the present study reinforces moral foundations theory (Haidt & Graham, 2007) by demonstrating that individuals with left-leaning political beliefs —who often prioritize care and fairness—are more attuned to perceived abuses of power (Graham et al., 2009). This attentiveness can amplify perceptions of harm and intensify calls for punishment when supervisors display controlling or hostile leadership behaviors, aligning with research suggesting left-leaning individuals scrutinize hierarchical dynamics more rigorously (Stewart & Morris, 2021). By contrast, right-leaning observers, who place heavier emphasis on authority and loyalty, may interpret certain leadership styles as legitimate even when they appear harsh (Jost et al., 2008).

Further, the findings on supervisor political beliefs suggest that right-leaning leadership styles, which can stress discipline and hierarchy, may be more readily framed as "naturally" austere or authoritarian. Consequently, any abusive behaviour of a right-leaning supervisor may

be assumed as deliberate and therefore warrants higher evaluation of abusiveness and punishment intention (Napier & Jost, 2008). These results dovetail with broader group-based stereotyping research, implying that even when leaders engage in similar actions, attributing a right-leaning label might intensify perceived abusiveness (Martinko et al., 2013). However, this notion conflicts with certain hypocrisy-based theories that predict harsher judgments for leaders (often left-leaning) who violate their own espoused egalitarian or inclusive values (Effron et al., 2015). While the current study found right-leaning supervisors elicited higher evaluation of abusiveness and stronger punishment intention, the exact cognitive mechanisms remain a question for future research.

Practical implications

Although this study does not measure intervention effectiveness, the pattern of results underscores the importance of organizational practices that curb political aligned based biases in supervisor evaluations. As suggested by earlier work on unconscious bias (Atewologun et al., 2018), training sessions can help employees recognize their susceptibility to aligning with supervisors who share their beliefs and penalizing those who do not. Such interventions might emphasize how moral judgments become clouded by ideological affinity, potentially hindering consistent, fact-based decision-making about workplace conflicts.

In addition, cross-ideological dialogues and structured team-building exercises (Binnquist et al., 2022) can facilitate empathy and reduce hostility between employees who might otherwise remain isolated in like-minded circles. The essential goal is to anchor evaluations of supervisor behavior in consistent standards of conduct, rather than in a supervisor's political beliefs. Organizations that proactively highlight a shared purpose—such as promoting integrity, inclusivity, or innovation—could reduce the risk of letting political beliefs dominate performance

and misconduct assessments. Coupled with explicit communication around the detrimental consequences of abusive supervision, such strategies may ensure discipline and remediation decisions reflect the severity of the behavior, rather than ingroup or outgroup considerations (Graham et al., 2012).

Limitations

This study, while methodologically robust in establishing cause-and-effect through vignette-based manipulation, may not capture the full range of real-life social dynamics inherent in sustained workplace interactions (Martinko et al., 2013). In extended employment relationships, observers might recalibrate their attitudes if they repeatedly witness or experience a supervisor's misconduct. Longitudinal or field-based designs could thus reveal whether ideological biases remain stable or dissipate when confronted with ongoing, tangible evidence of transgressive leadership.

Additionally, the reliance on a predominantly young, educated population constraints generalizability (Jost et al., 2008). Although university student samples offer practicality and demographic consistency, older employees or those with varying educational backgrounds may hold deeper political commitments or different notions of supervisor conduct. Future research could draw from broader populations to determine whether these biases manifest similarly across distinct age groups, cultures, and organizational types.

Further, while this research is grounded in social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), it captures political beliefs solely along a left-right continuum, not measuring the degree of emotional or identity-based investment of one's political beliefs (Huddy & Bankert, 2017). Observers with extreme political beliefs might exhibit stronger ingroup favoritism or outgroup derogation than moderate or apolitical observers (Iyengar & Westwood, 2014). Future work

might employ validated scales of political identity salience to discern whether casual leanings differ significantly from deeply internalized loyalties.

Finally, restricting supervisor ideology to left- versus right-leaning can oversimplify the more complex political landscape (jos et al, 2009). Independent, centrist, or ideologically mixed supervisors might evoke multifaceted observer reactions that cannot be classified neatly in a binary framework. Incorporating a richer array of political stances, along with measures of political extremity, could yield a more granular understanding of how particular cues trigger positive or negative evaluations. Despite these constraints, the present study offers insight into how political beliefs shape interpretations of supervisor misconduct and highlights the critical need for systematic strategies to minimize bias in professional settings. Addressing these conceptual and methodological challenges can deepen our understanding of ideological filters and help organizations adapt to the polarized climates increasingly found in contemporary workplaces.

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