



# Freedom or control? Liberals' versus conservatives' responses to frontline employee behavioral control policies

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## Abstract

Frontline employee behavioral control policies have traditionally been viewed solely as operational tools, hidden from public view. In today's digital and social media era, however, these policies are increasingly transparent to consumers. We investigate how consumers respond to employee control policies and propose that consumer responses are contingent on political ideology. Using different industries, employing various manipulations of behavioral control, and capturing diverse consumer responses, we test this proposition across seven studies. The results show that liberal consumers respond more positively to loose rather than strict behavioral control policies, whereas conservative consumers are largely indifferent. Social dominance orientation drives the difference in consumer responses by influencing the extent to which consumers oppose or accept dominance-based hierarchies signaled by strict behavioral control. The effect of political ideology is mitigated when the power asymmetry between the firm and employees is smaller (i.e., when the control is applied to higher-status employees or in firms with lower power). Finally, both liberal and conservative consumers prefer strict control policies when the likelihood of service failure is high. Our findings offer actionable guidance for managers on how to communicate employee behavioral control policies across different consumer segments, organizational settings, and service industry conditions.

**Keywords** Behavioral control · Frontline service · Social dominance orientation · Political ideology · Service communication

## Introduction

Frontline service employee (FSE) behavioral control has traditionally been viewed as an internal managerial tool designed to improve operational outcomes, such as enhancing performance, reducing failures, and minimizing

complaints (Schau et al., 2007; Schepers et al., 2012). Consumers could detect such control primarily through direct interactions with FSEs, shaping their immediate service experience (Victorino et al., 2012, 2013). Today, however, employee behavioral control has shifted from a purely internal operational issue to an external communication concern. Consumers increasingly learn about these policies not just during service encounters but also through company communications, media coverage, and social media platforms. A recent PwC report (2024) found that 70% of consumers research brands on social media before purchasing, with 77% considering employee management policies critical to their decisions.

In response, firms increasingly communicate their employee behavioral control policies as part of brand positioning. Netflix and Microsoft, for example, have gained positive attention by promoting loose control policies such as flexible time off and remote work (McCord, 2014; Sharma, 2024). In contrast, In-N-Out's mask ban and Uber's "quiet mode" explicitly signal stricter control policies (Constine, 2019; Valinsky, 2023). Amazon and Ryanair, because

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of their exceptionally strict control policies, have faced consumer backlash amplified through social media (Boyle et al., 2017; Guendelsberger, 2019). In general, loose (vs. strict) control may involve flexible (vs. highly prescriptive) instructions regarding employees' appearance, actions, and even exact phrases to use in service interactions (Victorino et al., 2012); the implementation of pace-setting automation and surveillance technologies (McLeay et al., 2020; Ritzer, 1983); or reward and punishment systems closely tied to behavioral compliance (Davis et al., 1997). Regulatory bodies now also mandate greater transparency in employee management (European Union, 2024; Congress, 2023; UK Parliament, 2023), intensifying public scrutiny.

Despite these changes, prior research on FSE behavioral control has yet to fully address this evolving landscape. Existing studies have primarily conceptualized behavioral control as an internal managerial tool, emphasizing its impact on operational performance and service delivery (Schau et al., 2007; Schepers et al., 2012; Victorino et al., 2013). While these insights remain valuable, they offer limited guidance on how consumers respond when such policies are made public beyond the immediate service encounter. Emerging evidence suggests that, once publicly disclosed, internal managerial policies influence consumers' perceptions of brand values, such as morality and fairness (Khan and Kalra 2021; Mohan et al., 2018). Consequently, we examine how behavioral control policies shape consumers' judgments and decisions about the firm.

This is not to say that behavioral control cannot shape quality expectations. However, in everyday settings, consumers are unlikely to treat control policies as intuitive indicators of quality. Strict policies might imply either consistency or impersonality, while loose policies might suggest either unreliability or personalization. As such, if judged solely on their perceived service-related implications, consumers could simply tolerate a wide range of control policies, viewing them as acceptable either way (Parasuraman et al., 1985; Zeithaml et al., 1993). Hence, we argue that consumers who encounter control policies through public channels, outside of direct service experiences, are more likely to interpret them as reflections of a brand's values rather than as cues about service quality.

Building on this view, we propose that consumer responses to behavioral control policies depend on their political ideology. One might predict that conservative consumers would react more negatively to strict control because they value freedom (Fernandes et al., 2022; Irmak et al., 2020) and prioritize individual agency (Everett et al., 2021). As such, strict control could be seen as an infringement on personal autonomy and competence (Bellezza et al., 2013). However, we propose that conservatives are generally indifferent to

employee control policies, whereas liberals react more negatively to firms employing strict rather than loose control. We argue that this pattern occurs because liberals typically have lower social dominance orientation (SDO), whereas conservatives tend to have higher SDO (Han et al., 2019; Kugler et al., 2014). Consequently, liberals are more likely than conservatives to oppose strict control policies that signal and reinforce hierarchical differences (Graham et al., 2009). Further building on this argumentation, we propose that the difference in responses between conservatives and liberals is reduced when power asymmetry is lower. Specifically, the ideological effect is mitigated when strict control is applied to higher-level employees (vs. FSEs) or in firms with less power (independent firm vs. chain). Finally, we also suggest that when service failure is more salient, both liberal and conservative consumers are more likely to prefer strict (vs. loose) FSE behavioral control. We test our predictions across seven studies within different industries, using varied manipulations of strict behavioral control and capturing diverse consumer responses.

This work makes a substantial contribution to theory. By examining the effect of political ideology and employee behavioral control on consumer behavior, we extend the literature on FSE behavioral control, which has predominantly treated it as an internal management tool focused on service delivery and performance (Schau et al., 2007; Schepers et al., 2012; Victorino et al., 2013). In contrast, we approach behavioral control as an external signal, specifically one that communicates dominance-based hierarchies, and demonstrate that such a signal can trigger adverse reactions among liberal consumers. Second, as consumers today are increasingly knowledgeable about firms beyond their core service and product offerings, recent studies have begun exploring consumer responses to visible management policies (Khan and Kalra 2021; Merlo et al., 2024; Mohan et al., 2018). Our study contributes to this research stream by demonstrating consumer responses to another important and prevalent managerial policy, namely employee behavioral control. Additionally, by examining the interplay and potential tensions between political ideology, belief in free will, and SDO within the consumer-firm context, our findings contribute to the broader literature on political ideology and its implications for consumer behavior (Fernandes et al., 2022; Han et al., 2019; Ordabayeva and Fernandes 2018).

Our research highlights the importance of how employee behavioral control policies are communicated externally. Managers should communicate loose control policies whenever possible, as liberals respond more favorably to them, while conservatives remain largely indifferent. When strict control is unavoidable and visible, firms can reduce negative reactions, particularly among liberals, by minimizing perceived power asymmetries (e.g., applying the same

standards to executives and FSEs). In error-prone industries, managers should highlight the likelihood of service failures while promoting stricter controls. From a societal standpoint, our research introduces the concept of freedom-washing, opening a new conversation for policymakers around corporate transparency.

## Theoretical background and hypotheses

### Behavioral control of frontline service employees

Individual agency, considered a fundamental aspect of humanness, refers to the capacity of individuals to engage in complex behaviors and intentions (Epley & Waytz, 2010). It enables people to act uniquely, thereby encompassing the potential for both good and bad (Chernyak and Kushnir 2018; Parasuraman & Mouloua, 2018). While agency can foster creativity, personal growth, and prosocial behaviors, it can also facilitate deception, unpredictability, and the pursuit of self-interest at the expense of others. In organizations, managers often focus on the downsides of employee agency, assuming that people are opportunistic and often shirk their responsibilities (Bergen et al., 1992). Consequently, ensuring that FSEs consistently meet behavioral expectations often takes priority and presents an ongoing challenge for many service firms (Bowen & Ford, 2002). Behavioral control, in this context, serves as a managerial tool that can enhance service efficiency by mitigating undesirable human traits associated with individual agency, such as unpredictability, inconsistency, and selfishness (Schepers et al., 2012).

It is important to distinguish behavioral control, as conceptualized in this study, from employee empowerment and autonomy. Empowerment is a broader construct that can reflect either a structural process of sharing authority and decision rights (e.g., Bowen & Lawler, 1992; Eccles, 1993; Hartline & Ferrell, 1996) or a psychological state in which employees experience autonomy (e.g., Conger and Kanungo 1988; Liu et al., 2011; Spreitzer, 1995). Although looser control policies may sometimes contribute to structural empowerment and foster psychological empowerment or autonomy by granting greater freedom in frontline tasks, they are neither necessary nor sufficient for empowerment. Typically, empowerment refers to employees being granted meaningful authority to influence organizational strategy, such as through formal upward communication channels, involvement in strategic decisions, or stock-based incentives (Bowen & Lawler, 1992; Eccles, 1993).

Existing research highlights the importance of behavioral control in frontline service but primarily views it through an operations management lens, focusing on how

this behind-the-scenes tool influences service performance and delivery during customer encounters. Stricter controls can enhance employee performance evaluations (Schepers et al., 2012) but may also undermine their well-being (Shin and Hur 2022). During service interactions, consumers can detect levels of control, potentially shaping their service experience (Victorino et al., 2012). Some studies associate strict control with fewer errors and improved consumers' perceived quality (Paul et al. 2015; Schau et al., 2007), while others link it to perceived inauthenticity and diminished perceived quality, particularly in customized service contexts (Victorino et al., 2013). Importantly, prior work assumes behavioral control is invisible to consumers beyond the encounter, becoming noticeable, if at all, only during the service experience. Yet in today's digital and social media era, firms actively broadcast their control policies as markers of brand identity (McCord, 2014), and consumers actively search for them well before purchase (PwC, 2024). We therefore complement existing research by examining employee behavioral control from a service communication perspective, rather than the traditional focus on service operations and delivery.

Given that behavioral control is designed to enhance performance, one might expect consumers to treat it as a cue to service quality. However, we argue that outside the immediate service encounter (e.g., when a consumer reads an article or scrolls social media), inferences about service delivery are unlikely to dominate. At that stage, a high-level managerial policy is more readily construed as a signal of what the firm values rather than of how the service interaction will unfold. Consistent with this view, recent studies show that other visible internal policies, including leadership diversity and pay ratios, shape perceptions of brand morality and fairness far more than expectations of product or service quality (Khan and Kalra 2021; Mohan et al., 2018).

Moreover, unlike established quality cues (e.g., price, star ratings), public disclosures of employee control policies are novel and may lack a shared interpretive schema. This ambiguity is mirrored in literature, with some studies tying strict control to higher perceived quality, while others link it to lower quality (Schau et al., 2007; Victorino et al., 2013). We further argue that even when such policies shape expectations, those expectations typically remain within consumers' zone of tolerance (Parasuraman et al., 1985; Zeithaml et al., 1993). In everyday settings, consumers may readily accept strict control for its promise of consistency or loose control for its promise of personalization. Only when quality becomes salient (e.g., during the service encounter itself or under a heightened failure risk) does the tolerance zone narrow substantially, and control type becomes a meaningful quality signal. Absent such pressure, consumers regard control policies less as quality cues and more as brand cues.

In the following sections, we hypothesize that behavioral control policies convey different levels of dominance-based hierarchies, and that consumer responses to them vary systematically based on ideological differences.

### Political ideology, social dominance orientation, and behavioral control

Political ideology, defined as “a set of beliefs about the proper order of society and how it can be achieved” (Erikson & Tedin, 2003 p.64), comprises cognitive, affective, and motivational components that explain why individuals behave the way they do and how they envision the functioning of the world around them (Jost, 2006). One of the key ideological distinctions lies in attitudes toward social hierarchy (Jost, 2017). Liberals advocate rejecting hierarchical structures and promoting equality, whereas conservatives support maintaining hierarchies. This contrast is primarily rooted in differences in SDO—the motivational foundation for an individual’s preference for hierarchy among social groups (Cozzolino and Snyder 2008; Pratto et al., 1994).

Social dominance theory<sup>1</sup> posits that societies are structured in hierarchies, where dominant groups hold disproportionate status and power over subordinate groups (Sidanius and Pratto 2012). Individuals with low SDO perceive these hierarchies as illegitimate and advocate for more egalitarian structures (Duckitt, 2006; Mosso et al., 2013). This perspective stems from the belief that social rankings are often the result of luck and social connections rather than merit (Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Vargas-Salfate et al., 2018). In contrast, individuals with high SDO perceive these hierarchies as legitimate and justify the system based on the belief that social rank is attained through hard work and ability (Crawford et al., 2015). The link between SDO and political ideology is well established, with liberals consistently scoring lower on SDO and conservatives scoring higher (e.g., Ho et al., 2012; Pratto et al., 1994; Vargas-Salfate et al., 2018). This association underpins a wide range of behaviors, including support for taxation (Crawford et al., 2015), concern for welfare and fairness (Kugler et al., 2014), attitudes toward science (Kerr & Wilson, 2021), climate change (Jylhä et al., 2016), and spiritual belief (Lockhart

et al., 2020). Marketing research similarly shows that SDO mediates ideological differences in consumer risk-taking (Han et al., 2019) and preferences for product differentiation (Ordabayeva and Fernandes 2018).

Social dominance theory explains the acceptance or rejection of hierarchies among individuals or groups within a society. We extend this theory by suggesting that consumers view companies as social actors and that strict FSE behavioral control by companies signals dominance-based hierarchies. Previous research supports this notion, showing that consumers perceive different social standings for various brands (Li et al., 2021) and “relate to brands in a social way” (Kervyn et al., 2012 p.170). Therefore, we propose that when a company exerts strict control over its FSEs, it is perceived as a signal of power and authority (Clegg, 1981; Galinsky et al., 2008). As a result, liberal consumers, due to their low SDO, are more likely to react negatively to strict control, as such policies reflect and reinforce social hierarchies between a more powerful social actor (company) and a less powerful one (FSE). Liberals typically oppose policies that strengthen hierarchical differences (Graham et al., 2009). Consumer research has shown that liberals and conservatives react differently to hierarchical cues due to differences in SDO. For example, Ordabayeva and Fernandes (2018) found that liberals prefer products that are unique rather than those that signify superiority over others (e.g., the best product in a category), as conservatives do. Similarly, Han et al. (2019) demonstrated that liberals are less inclined to engage in risky behaviors associated with asserting dominance, whereas conservatives with higher SDO and self-efficacy are more likely to do so. Moreover, we propose that strict behavioral control not only signals but also reinforces a superior-inferior dynamic by reducing FSEs’ autonomy and increasing their reliance on executive directives, effectively relegating them to “robot-like” roles (Bell and Houry 2016; Lammers et al., 2016; Morrison et al., 2015). This perpetuates hierarchical structures and social inequalities that hinder FSEs’ upward social mobility, ultimately facilitating the formation of a dominance-based hierarchy that liberals oppose.

In contrast, conservative consumers, though they value individual freedom and agency (Everett et al., 2021; Fernandes et al., 2022; Irmak et al., 2020), often endorse high SDO (Cozzolino and Snyder 2008; Pratto et al., 1994). We argue that when conservatives perceive authority as legitimate, they are more accepting of policies that constrain personal freedoms if those policies reinforce social order and hierarchy. For instance, although conservatives often resist government intervention (Irmak et al., 2020), they have shown stronger support for restrictive measures implemented by a trusted government to maintain societal order, such as Germany’s Network Enforcement Act (Stern, 2017). Importantly,

<sup>1</sup> Although our framework focuses on SDO, we recognize its conceptual similarity to power-distance belief (PDB)—the tendency to accept unequal power distribution (e.g., Gao et al., 2016; Han et al., 2017; Paharia and Swaminathan 2019). While both constructs capture attitudes toward hierarchy, they differ in the basis for legitimizing hierarchical systems. High-PDB individuals tend to accept hierarchy (e.g., monarchy) without requiring justification, whereas high-SDO individuals actively justify hierarchy through meritocratic principles, providing a stronger motivational basis for conservatism. Considering that SDO’s link to political ideology is more established and validated across cultures, whereas PDB varies across cultures, SDO is a more appropriate conceptual foundation for our model.

conservatives place even greater trust in free-market institutions (Pew Research Center, 2019). They believe that market actors, unlike government bodies, maintain legitimacy by offering consumers and employees the ability to “exit” if dissatisfied (Jost et al., 2003). In this view, private firms are seen not as coercive authorities but as competitive agents striving to deliver superior consumer value. The specific policies these firms adopt matter less than their ability to succeed within a merit-based system where “the strongest players” prevail. Indeed, conservatives consistently report higher satisfaction and fewer complaints about private firms (Fernandes et al., 2022; Jung et al., 2017), are less likely to challenge firm-imposed restrictions (Irmak et al., 2020), and are more likely to prefer “best-in-class” brands (Ordabayeva and Fernandes 2018). Accordingly, when a private firm enacts strict behavioral control, conservatives are more likely to accept it as a legitimate and necessary strategy for market success, despite their general preference for individual agency. Formally:

- H1** A strict (vs. loose) form of employee behavioral control leads to more negative responses from liberal than conservative consumers.
- H2** Social dominance orientation mediates the effect of political ideology on consumer negative responses to strict behavioral control.

### Moderating effects of power asymmetry

We propose that ideological effects on consumer reactions to strict behavioral control stem primarily from differences in SDO between liberals and conservatives. Prior research shows that individuals’ behaviors and policy endorsements vary based on power dynamics between dominant and subordinate groups (Aiello et al., 2013, 2018; Tesi et al., 2019). Thus, we consider power asymmetry between the company (controller) and employees (controlled) as a moderating factor, predicting that our focal effect will weaken when either the employee’s hierarchical status rises or the company’s power diminishes. First, we suggest that agency control is perceived differently depending on the employee’s hierarchical rank of those being controlled. Companies can apply strict behavioral control not only to FSEs, who occupy lower positions in the organizational hierarchy, but also to their management teams (Holden and Roberts 2004). Control over high-power individuals, such as CEOs, is sometimes necessary for organizational effectiveness and long-term success (Mintzberg, 1983, 1984). This issue has become even more critical with the rise of social media. Nowadays, many companies are increasingly aware of the social media presence of employees and managers, given that their posts can influence consumers’ perceptions of the company and,

consequently, the company’s performance (Korzynski et al., 2020; Wang & Chen, 2020). Thus, behavioral control can extend beyond formal service interactions to informal interactions between staff, including the CEO, and public audiences.

Strict control over FSEs signifies and reinforces dominance hierarchies because of the pronounced power asymmetry between low-level employees and the company. By contrast, high-level managers hold substantial authority and decision-making power, reducing the power asymmetry between them and the company. As a result, when strict control is applied to these high-power individuals, it does not signify dominance hierarchies to the same extent. This weaker association with social dominance makes liberals more willing, like conservatives, to accept strict control policies when they target higher-level employees. Thus,

- H3** The hierarchical position of employees moderates the relationship between political ideology and consumer negative reactions to strict behavioral control, such that the relationship is attenuated when applied to higher (vs. lower) hierarchical levels.

Second, we suggest that the perceived power of a service firm influences how liberals and conservatives react to strict behavioral control. As previously noted, consumers tend to view power dynamics between a company and its employees as reflecting broader interpersonal power dynamics (Li et al., 2021). Increasing a company’s power magnifies the power asymmetry between the company and its employees, accentuating the superiority-inferiority dimensions, particularly between the company and lower-level FSEs. For instance, a multinational coffee chain with substantial revenue and a widespread presence inherently is perceived to possess more power than a single-location independent coffee shop. Furthermore, larger companies are often characterized by hierarchical and bureaucratic structures (Child, 1973; Mintzberg, 1983). These organizations exhibit significant centralization and formalization, which widens the gap between FSEs and top management (Tata and Prasad 2004). FSEs in these settings typically hold lower hierarchical ranks and have limited influence over organizational decisions (Child, 1973). Conversely, smaller companies generally have flatter organizational structures and are more decentralized, enabling closer relationships between management and employees and allowing FSEs to have a more substantial role in operations (Child, 1973). Thus, when a more powerful company (e.g., a chain) imposes strict behavioral control, it likely highlights dominance hierarchies, making dominance cues more prominent. In contrast, in less powerful firms (e.g., an independent firm), where strict control can also be imposed, the dominance cues

are less pronounced due to the smaller power differential, reducing ideological differences in reactions between liberals and conservatives. Hence,

**H4** The firm's power moderates the relationship between political ideology and consumer negative responses to strict behavioral control, such that the relationship is attenuated in firms with lower (versus higher) power.

### Moderating effect of service failure salience

We now turn our attention to another boundary condition, the salience of service failure. We propose that when service failure is more salient, the ideological differences between liberals and conservatives diminish. Specifically, both groups may prefer strict FSE behavioral control over loose control under this condition. Research indicates that SDO is not entirely dispositional and can shift depending on contextual factors (Fischer et al., 2012; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001). For example, when high-status group membership is made salient, members tend to score higher on SDO than when group membership is not emphasized (Huang & Liu, 2005; Schmitt et al., 2003). Importantly, threat has been identified as a significant trigger for increases in SDO (Morrison & Ybarra 2008). When the status of an ingroup is threatened, individuals often exhibit higher SDO levels, especially if they strongly identify with the group (Morrison et al., 2009). This response may have evolutionary roots, as humans have historically shifted toward group-based hierarchies when resources are limited, exploiting outgroups to enhance ingroup survival and reproductive success (Fischer et al., 2012). Supporting this notion, Cohrs and Stelzl (2010) found in a meta-analysis that people tend to have higher SDO in countries where resource threats are salient, such as high unemployment levels. Building on this insight, we argue that although liberals and conservatives may differ in baseline SDO levels, the salience of service failure acts as a threat cue that elevates SDO across the board. In turn, threatened consumers become more accepting of policies that reinforce hierarchical structures and orders. The literature offers support for these arguments. Cutright (2011) demonstrated that individuals experiencing a low sense of control (e.g., facing a high risk of service failure) tend to seek consumption experiences with more structure and boundaries to restore order. Similarly, Han et al. (2015) found that heightened threats lead consumers to prefer problem-focused coping strategies, endorsing measures that reduce the likelihood of negative outcomes.

Additionally, when service failure is salient, service concerns move to the forefront of consumers' minds, making service-level interpretations of behavioral control more cognitively accessible. Consumers actively

seek consistency and reliability to avoid potential failures. As a result, their zone of tolerance narrows significantly (Zeithaml et al., 1993), and even subtle cues related to service consistency can meaningfully influence their decisions. Strict behavioral control serves as such a cue (Schau et al., 2007). In this context, strict behavioral control appeals not only for its symbolic association with order and hierarchy but also for its functional association with consistency. Together, these associations lead to a broader preference for strict control among consumers. Hence,

**H5** Service failure salience reduces the ideological differences in consumer responses to strict behavioral control, such that liberal and conservative consumers are more likely to react positively to strict employee behavioral control.

### Overview of studies

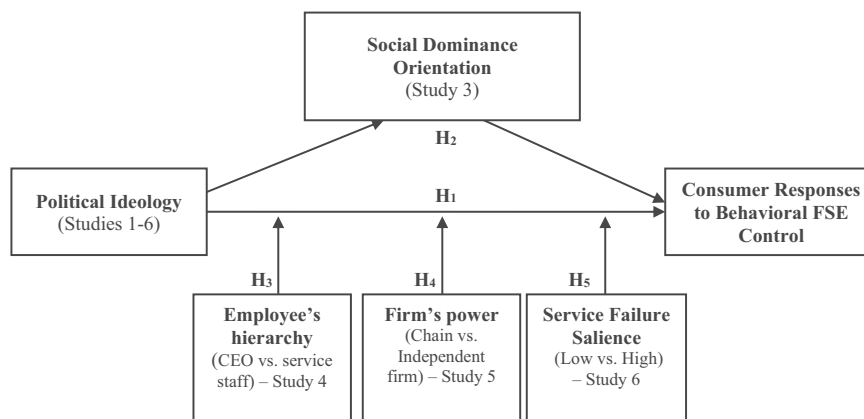
Across seven studies and two follow-ups, we examine how political ideology influences consumer responses to strict FSE behavioral control. In Study 1, participants were exposed to behavioral control by reading a firm's Code of Conduct. In Studies 2a and 2b, participants viewed images of different coffee shops and inferred behavioral control. In Studies 3–6, participants were directly shown public disclosures of control policies via firm policy descriptions (Studies 3 and 6), news articles (Study 4), and company websites (Study 5). Web appendix A details all behavioral control manipulations used across the studies.

Studies 1 and 2, along with two follow-ups in web appendices C and D (including a field study), test H1 by examining ideological differences in consumer reactions to FSE behavioral control. Study 3 investigates the mediating role of SDO (H2) and rules out alternative mechanisms. Studies 4–6 explore boundary conditions of our focal effect (H3–H5). Table 1 summarizes our empirical plan, and Fig. 1 outlines our theoretical model.

In all studies, we aimed to exceed the standard cell size recommendation of 50 participants (Simmons et al., 2011), doubling it to at least 100 participants wherever feasible. For studies examining interactions, we conducted a priori power analyses using G\*Power to establish sample sizes based on anticipated effect sizes and sensitivity analyses to assess the robustness of our findings, aligning with prior research (Gupta et al., 2024; Htohöwer & van Doorn, 2023). For the study examining the mediation, we conducted a Monte Carlo simulation for power analysis on indirect effects (Briers et al., 2023; Schoemann et al., 2017).

**Table 1** Overview of studies

Study	Strict employee control cues	Political ideology measure	Consumer response	Context	Purpose
Study 1	Code of conduct with customers (verbal cues)	Single-item measure	Purchase Intention; Enjoyment	Coffee Shop	Test the effect of ideology (H1)
Study 2a	Store pictures (visual cues)	Single-item measure	Purchase Intention	Coffee Shop	Test the effect of ideology (H1)
Study 2b	Store pictures (visual cues)	Single-item measure; Fair Market Ideology	Choice of a service	Coffee Shop	Test the effect of ideology (H1)
Study 3	Firm policy description	Single-item measure	Preference for strict vs. loose control service	Hotel	Test the mediating effect of SDO (H2); rule out alternatives
Study 4	News article	Party affiliation; Preferred broadcasting station	Purchase Intention	Hotel	Test the moderating effect of employees' hierarchy (H3)
Study 5	Company's website	Single-item measure	Preference for strict vs. loose control service	Fitness Centre	Test the moderating effect of the firm's power (H4)
Study 6	Firm policy description	Public policies endorsement	Purchase Intention	Hotel	Test the moderating effect of service failure salience (H5)
Follow-up A	Code of conduct with customers (verbal cues)	Single-item measure	Purchase Intention	Coffee Shop	Replication of the effect of ideology (H1)
Follow-up B	News article	Political-oriented online comments	Online comments	Airline	Real-world (Field) evidence (H1)

**Fig. 1** Conceptual model and empirical plan

## Study 1: Verbal cues of behavioral control

In Study 1, we aim to explore how political ideology shapes consumer responses to the verbal cues associated with strict versus loose behavioral control. Particularly, we manipulate different levels of behavioral control using the code of conduct with Customers (see an example at <https://www.hospitality-school.com/code-conduct-restaurant-staffs>). These codes specify how the FSEs of a coffee shop should behave, interact with, and appear to customers, consistent with previous research (Paul et al. 2015). This study is pre-registered ([https://osf.io/73kb9/?view\\_only=52f7c7bbec0e4b379697faed633e1db1](https://osf.io/73kb9/?view_only=52f7c7bbec0e4b379697faed633e1db1)).

## Participants, stimuli, and procedure

The study employed a between-subjects design with two conditions of FSE behavioral control (strict vs. loose) and measured political ideology. A pretest (reported below) revealed an effect size of  $f^2 = 0.043$ . A prior power analysis using G\*Power, with  $\alpha = 0.05$  and power = 0.80, indicated a required sample size of 186 participants to detect this effect, with three predictors. Therefore, we recruited 200 participants ( $M_{age} = 37.4$ ; 54.5% male, 44.5% female, and 0.5% non-binary) from Connect to complete an online survey. As pre-registered, five participants were excluded for failing the attention check.

In the strict behavioral control condition, participants read a version of the code of conduct that provided cues of strict behavioral control for FSEs (e.g., sticking to a step-by-step guideline, not allowed to show personal feelings and preferences). In the loose behavioral control condition, participants read a version that provided cues of loose agency control for FSEs (e.g., showing their professional self, allowed to show personal feelings and preferences) (for more details, see web appendix A).

### Pretest of experimental stimuli: Code of conduct

To ensure the effectiveness of our behavioral control manipulation, we conducted a pretest with 100 participants. Participants read either a strict or a loose code of conduct. The findings confirmed that those in the strict control condition perceived higher behavioral control than those in the loose control condition ( $M_{\text{strict}} = 5.92$  vs.  $M_{\text{loose}} = 1.95$ ;  $t(98) = -15.860$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Importantly, the manipulation did not affect perceived overall service quality ( $p > .2$ ). Furthermore, the interaction effect of the manipulation and political ideology was non-significant for perceived service quality ( $b = 0.10$ ,  $p = .35$ ) but remained significant for purchase intention ( $b = 0.24$ ,  $p = .03$ ).

### Measures

Participants responded to a three-item measure of purchase intention (Burton et al., 1999; Wilson et al., 2017): “Given the information shown, would you be more likely or less likely to visit this coffee shop?” (1 = Much less Likely, 7 = Much more likely), “Given the information shown, how likely are you to buy coffee from this coffee shop?” (1 = Very unlikely, 7 = Very likely), “Given the information shown, how probable is it that you will consider the purchase of the products and services from this coffee shop?” (1 = very improbable, 7 = extremely probable;  $\alpha = 0.96$ ).

They also completed a four-item measure of anticipated enjoyment of the service (Nysveen et al., 2005) ( $\alpha = 0.95$ ). For the manipulation check, participants completed a three-item measure of perceived employee behavioral control (“The employees of this coffee shop are instructed not to express emotions,” “The employees of this coffee shop are instructed not to express feelings,” and “The employees of this coffee shop are instructed not to act on their own intentions”; 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree;  $\alpha = 0.96$ ). Participants responded to a well-established single-item measure of political ideology (1 = extremely Liberal, 9 = extremely conservative) (Lisjak and Ordabayeva 2022; Ordabayeva and Fernandes 2018).

## Results

**Manipulation check** The manipulation was successful. Participants in the strict behavioral control condition perceived higher behavioral control on FSEs ( $M = 6.00$ ) than those in the loose agency control condition ( $M = 2.36$ ;  $t(192) = -18.537$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

**Purchase intention** As political ideology was captured on an interval scale, we tested its interaction with behavioral control on purchase intention using PROCESS Model 1 (Hayes, 2017; 5,000 bootstraps; 95% confidence intervals [CIs]). The main effect of political ideology ( $b = -0.37$ ,  $t = -2.70$ ,  $p = .008$ ) and behavioral control ( $b = -2.57$ ,  $t = -6.13$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were significant. Importantly, the interaction was also significant ( $b = 0.25$ ,  $t = 2.81$ ,  $p = .006$ ). Simple slope analyses revealed that among liberals ( $-1SD$ ), participants in the loose behavioral control condition reported higher purchase intention than those in the strict behavioral control condition ( $M_{\text{loose}} = 5.66$  vs.  $M_{\text{strict}} = 3.57$ ;  $b = -2.09$ ,  $t = -7.46$ ,  $p < .001$ ), this effect was attenuated among conservatives ( $+1SD$ ;  $M_{\text{loose}} = 5.09$  vs.  $M_{\text{strict}} = 4.12$ ;  $b = -0.98$ ,  $t = -3.48$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Further analysis using the Johnson-Neyman technique indicated that the effect of behavioral control on purchase intention became non-significant among highly conservative participants, i.e., those who scored 8.20 and above ( $b = -0.57$ ,  $t = -1.44$ ,  $p = .15$ ) on the 9-point scale. The results featuring the anticipated enjoyment as the dependent variable were similar and were reported in web appendix B.

## Discussion

Study 1 offers initial evidence for the interactive effect of behavioral control and political ideology. Specifically, the findings show that after reading the code of conduct depicting strict (vs. loose) FSE behavioral control measures, liberals are less likely to buy a coffee and find the service less enjoyable than conservatives (H1). This finding is also replicated in a pre-registered study with a larger sample of 350 participants and a field study (details are also provided in web appendices C and D). In the following study, to simulate a more realistic consumption choice, participants are not directly informed about the employee control policy; instead, they infer strict versus loose employee control.

### Study 2a: Visual cues of behavioral control

The purpose of Study 2a is to examine the hypothesized effect with a different manipulation of FSE behavioral control (i.e., visual cues). Previous studies have shown

that consumers are highly responsive to non-verbal cues exhibited by employees (Lim et al., 2017), enabling them to recognize different levels of behavioral control measures through employee appearances and service interactions (Victorino et al., 2012). Thus, we manipulate strict versus loose FSE behavioral control in this study, utilizing different visual cues.

### Participants, stimuli, and procedure

Four hundred and four participants ( $M_{\text{age}} = 36.8$ ; 34.7% female) recruited from MTurk completed an online survey. Participants were randomly assigned to either strict or loose behavioral control conditions. Sensitivity power analysis using G\*Power indicated that our sample size could detect a small effect size of  $f^2 = 0.02$  at the  $\alpha = 0.05$  and power = 0.80 levels, with three predictors. Specifically, participants read that they planned to visit a coffee shop and then came across one shown in a picture. In the loose behavioral control condition, the image showed a coffee shop with two baristas in casual attire, without headsets or nametags, appearing relaxed and engaged in natural behavior. In the strict behavioral control condition, the image portrayed two baristas in uniforms with headsets and nametags, appearing robotic and engaging in strictly formal behavior (for more details, see web appendix A).

### Pretest of experimental stimuli: Visual cues

We conducted a pretest to ensure that the visual cues used to manipulate behavioral control were effective (for more details, see web appendix E). The pretest findings confirmed that behavioral control manipulation worked as intended. In the strict FSE behavioral control condition, manipulation resulted in a higher perception of control compared to the condition with loose FSE behavioral control ( $M_{\text{strict}} = 4.96$  vs.  $M_{\text{loose}} = 4.36$ ;  $t(117) = -2.741$ ,  $p = .007$ ). Importantly, this manipulation did not impact employee and shop-related attributes linked to service quality dimensions (Parasuraman et al., 1985), such as employee professionalism, capability, friendliness, employees being hardworking, and shop cleanliness ( $ps > 0.1$ ), and picture-related attributes ( $ps > 0.1$ ).

### Measures

Participants indicated their purchase intention with two 7-point items: “How likely are you to visit this coffee shop?” and “How likely are you to buy coffee from this coffee shop?” (1 = very unlikely, 7 = very likely; inter-item correlation:  $r = .80$ ,  $p < .001$ ) adapted from Burton et al. (1999) and Wilson et al. (2017). Participants then completed the

three-item measure of perceived behavioral control for the manipulation check from Study 1 ( $\alpha = 0.90$ ). Finally, participants responded to a single-item measure of political ideology (1 = extremely Liberal, 7 = extremely conservative) (Han et al., 2019).

## Results

**Manipulation check** The manipulation was successful. Participants in the strict FSE behavioral control condition perceived higher behavioral control than those in the loose FSE behavioral control condition ( $M_{\text{strict}} = 5.63$  vs.  $M_{\text{loose}} = 4.09$ ;  $t(402) = -9.85$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

**Purchase intention** As political ideology was captured on an interval scale, we tested its interaction with behavioral control on purchase intention using PROCESS Model 1 (5,000 bootstraps, 95% CIs). The main effect of political ideology was not significant ( $b = 0.015$ ,  $t = 0.33$ ,  $p = .74$ ), but the main effect of behavioral control was significant ( $b = -1.45$ ,  $t = -4.89$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Importantly, the interaction was also significant ( $b = 0.21$ ,  $t = 3.26$ ,  $p = .001$ ). In particular, among liberals ( $-1\text{SD}$ ), participants in the loose behavioral control condition scored higher on purchase intention than participants in the strict behavioral control condition ( $M_{\text{loose}} = 5.71$  vs.  $M_{\text{strict}} = 4.71$ ;  $b = -1.00$ ,  $t = -5.48$ ,  $p < .001$ ), while the effect was non-significant among conservatives ( $+1\text{SD}$ ;  $M_{\text{loose}} = 5.77$  vs.  $M_{\text{strict}} = 5.61$ ;  $b = -0.16$ ,  $t = -0.87$ ,  $p = .39$ ). Figure 2 illustrates the interaction.

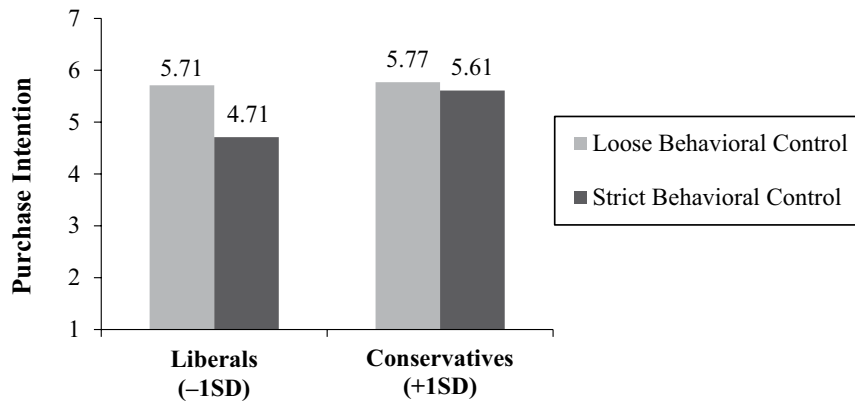
### Study 2b: Choice task

Study 2b, utilizing a choice task paradigm, investigates the association between political ideology and the preference for FSE behavioral control options.

### Participants, procedure, and measures

Two hundred and two U.S. participants ( $M_{\text{age}} = 37.9$ ; 43% female, 57% male) recruited from MTurk completed an online survey. First, participants read a scenario in which they decide to visit a coffee shop. They then read that there were two nearby options, both presented in random order through pictures. Sensitivity power analysis using G\*Power indicated that our sample size could detect an effect size with an odds ratio = 0.65 at the  $\alpha = 0.05$  and power = 0.80 levels.

Participants then indicated which coffee shop they wanted to visit (0 = coffee shop A, 1 = coffee shop B). Overall, 130 participants (64%) selected the coffee shop with the loose behavioral control option, while 72 participants (36%) selected the coffee shop with the strict behavioral



**Fig. 2** The interaction effect of FSE behavioral control and political ideology on purchase intention in Study 2a

control option. Next, participants responded to two measures of political ideology, including a single-item measure from Study 2a and a three-item scale of fair market ideology from Jost et al. (2003): “The free market economic system is a fair system,” “The free market economic system is an efficient system,” and “The free market economic system is the best system” (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree;  $\alpha = 0.81$ , where lower numbers represent a liberal ideology and higher numbers represent a conservative ideology).

## Results

**Choice preference** As the dependent variable was binary, we used logistic regression with choice (0 = loose FSE control, 1 = strict FSE control) as the outcome and a single-item measure of political ideology as the predictor. The full model was statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 9.904$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .002$ ; Cox and Snell  $R^2 = 0.048$ , Nagelkerke  $R^2 = 0.066$ ). Importantly, political ideology was positively correlated with choice preference, indicating that liberals were less likely to select the strict (vs. loose) behavioral control option than conservatives ( $\beta = 0.257$ ,  $\text{Exp}(\beta) = 1.294$ ,  $\text{Wald} = 8.97$ ,  $p = .003$ ). (The results featuring the fair market ideology measure were similar and were reported in web appendix F).

To decompose the relationship, we performed a median split on political ideology, categorizing participants as liberals ( $n = 107$ ) and conservatives ( $n = 94$ ). A chi-square test confirmed a significant association between political ideology and choice preference ( $\chi^2 = 7.564$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .006$ ). Among liberals, a significantly higher number selected the loose behavioral control option over the strict one (78 vs. 29 participants;  $\chi^2 = 22.44$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In contrast, conservatives showed no significant difference in their choice between the loose and strict options (51 vs. 43 participants;  $\chi^2 = 0.68$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .41$ ).

## Discussion

Studies 2a and 2b confirm the effect of political ideology on consumer responses to strict FSE behavioral control by employing a stimulus in which participants infer employee control through visual cues, such as FSE’s appearance (uniforms, nametags, headsets) and posture (natural vs. robotic behavior). Findings show that liberals are less likely than conservatives to purchase from a service firm that enforces strict control measures.

## Study 3: Underlying process

Study 3 aims to examine SDO’s role in driving the effect of political ideology on consumer responses to strict FSE behavioral control. We expect that liberals have lower SDO than conservatives, which, in turn, reduces their preference for a service firm with strict (vs. loose) FSE behavioral control. Additionally, we examine alternative mechanisms that might underlie the ideological effects. This study is pre-registered ([https://osf.io/jux2q/?view\\_only=6a08872894214b3fb2c0756a06ccc35b](https://osf.io/jux2q/?view_only=6a08872894214b3fb2c0756a06ccc35b)).

## Participants, procedure, and measures

We conducted a Monte Carlo power analysis for indirect effects (Briers et al., 2023; Schoemann et al., 2017). With a power setting of 0.80, we estimated medium-sized effects for the  $a$  path and small-sized effects for the  $b$  and  $c'$  paths. This analysis indicated a required sample size of 225 participants to detect the primary mediating effect with 95% confidence. To also accommodate alternative mediator tests, we recruited 452 U.S. participants ( $M_{\text{age}} = 40.1$ ; 51.3% female, 47.3% male, 1.3% non-binary) from Connect to complete an online survey. As pre-registered, 28 participants were excluded for failing the attention check.

Participants first responded to a single-item measure of political ideology from Study 1 (1 = extremely Liberal, 9 = extremely conservative). Next, they imagined that they were planning a trip and came across two hotels offering similar services and amenities. These two hotels managed their employees differently. While one hotel employed a strict control system, dutifully following step-by-step guidelines and rules when serving customers, the other hotel employed a loose control system, encouraging employees to express themselves and be their best when serving customers. The behavioral control descriptions were presented in random order.

Participants then indicated their preference for strict (vs. loose) control service by responding to a three-item measure adapted from Burton et al. (1999): “Please give your comparative evaluations of these two hotels” (1 = Hotel Lila with loose control is much better, 7 = Hotel Nora with strict control is much better); “Which hotel are you more likely to consider staying at?” and “Which hotel is it more probable that you would consider staying at in the future?” (1 = Definitely the Hotel Lila with loose control, 7 = Definitely Hotel Nora with strict control;  $\alpha = 0.98$ ). Higher scores indicate a greater preference for a hotel with strict control. Because hotel names were counterbalanced, we included the control type alongside each name to ensure clarity after participants read the detailed descriptions of the options. Following Woolley et al. (2023, Studies 5–6), this approach helps minimize measurement error if participants fail to recall the hotel names, which served only as contextual cues.

Participants next responded to measures of potential mediators, including two measures of SDO. First, we included a well-established 16-item measure of SDO from Ho et al. (2015) (e.g., “Some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups”;  $\alpha = 0.96$ ). Second, similar to prior research (Ordabayeva and Fernandes 2018; Pratto et al., 1994), SDO can be defined and measured through the perceived legitimacy of social hierarchy. Therefore, we included a four-item measure of the legitimacy of corporate authority adapted from van der Toorn et al. (2011) (e.g., “Companies should have the authority to do whatever they think is best to serve their customers”;  $\alpha = 0.82$ ). Furthermore, we measured alternative mechanisms identified from the literature, including a seven-item measure of belief in free will from Paulhus and Carey (2011) ( $\alpha = 0.87$ ), a nine-item measure of need for closure from Fernandes et al. (2022) ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ), and a seven-item measure of empathic concern from Davis (1983) ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ). Web appendix G provides the complete scales.

## Results

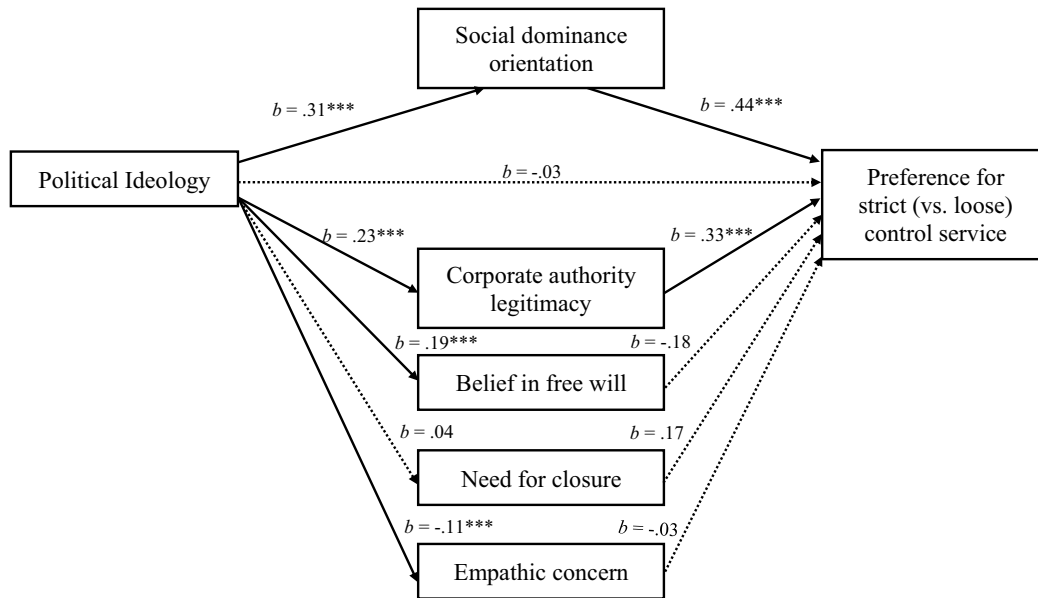
**Preference for strict (vs. loose) control service** As both variables were captured on an interval scale, we ran a simple

linear regression predicting preference from political ideology. The results revealed that the linear regression model was significant ( $Adjusted R^2 = 0.035$ ;  $F(1, 422) = 16.47$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Political ideology had a significant positive effect on preference for a hotel with strict behavioral control, such that the more liberal (conservative) participants were, the more likely they were to prefer the hotel with loose (strict) behavioral control ( $b = 0.19$ ;  $S.E. = 0.039$ ;  $p < .001$ ).

**Mediation analysis** We conducted a mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 4 (5,000 bootstraps, 95% CIs) to test the mediating roles of SDO, corporate authority legitimacy, belief in free will, need for closure, and empathic concern (See Fig. 3). All mediators were entered simultaneously. The analysis revealed significant indirect effects through SDO (indirect effect = 0.139, 95% CI [0.0830, 0.1934]) and corporate authority legitimacy (indirect effect = 0.075, 95% CI [0.0348, 0.1194]). In contrast, the indirect effects through belief in free will (indirect effect = -0.034; 95% CI [-0.0729, 0.0068]), need for closure (indirect effect = 0.007; 95% CI [-0.0015, 0.0194]), and empathic concern (indirect effect = 0.003; 95% CI [-0.0170, 0.0237]) were not significant. The remaining direct effect of political ideology on the preference for strict (vs. loose) control service became non-significant ( $b = -0.03$ ,  $p = .54$ , 95% CI [-0.1251, 0.0652]).

Political ideology had significant effects on SDO ( $b = 0.31$ ,  $p < .001$ ), corporate authority legitimacy ( $b = 0.23$ ,  $p < .001$ ), belief in free will ( $b = 0.19$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and empathic concern ( $b = -0.11$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, only SDO ( $b = 0.44$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and corporate authority legitimacy ( $b = 0.33$ ,  $p < .001$ ) had significant positive influences on the preference for strict (vs. loose) control service.

**Exploratory serial mediation analysis** We additionally conducted a serial mediation analysis for exploratory purposes using PROCESS Model 6 (5,000 bootstraps, 95% CIs) to test a model with SDO as the first mediator and corporate authority legitimacy as the second mediator, while controlling for other potential mediators. The analysis revealed a significant serial mediation effect through SDO and corporate authority legitimacy (indirect effect = 0.01, 95% CI [0.0021, 0.0215]). The indirect effects through SDO alone (indirect effect = 0.113, 95% CI [0.0668, 0.1601]) and through corporate authority legitimacy alone (indirect effect = 0.039, 95% CI [0.0157, 0.0681]) were also significant. After accounting for the mediators, the direct effect of political ideology on preference for strict (vs. loose) control service became non-significant ( $b = -0.03$ ,  $p = .54$ ). Specifically, political ideology significantly predicted SDO ( $b = 0.26$ ,  $p < .001$ ), which in turn significantly predicted corporate authority legitimacy ( $b = 0.12$ ,  $p = .009$ ). Finally, corporate authority



**Fig. 3** Mediation analysis. All coefficients are unstandardized. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ . Dashed lines represent non-significant effects; solid lines represent significant effects. Higher scores on the political ideology scale indicate a more conservative ideology

legitimacy had a positive effect on preference for strict (vs. loose) control service ( $b = 0.33$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

## Discussion

Study 3 confirms the ideological effect on the preference for strict (vs. loose) control. This effect is explained by conservatives' (versus liberals') stronger SDO, which increases their preference for strict behavioral control. Moreover, SDO emerges as a stronger mediator than the alternative explanations tested. Exploratory analysis also reveals significant serial mediation through SDO and corporate authority legitimacy.

## Study 4: Moderating role of employee's hierarchy

Study 4 aims to examine the moderating role of employee hierarchy. We propose that the effect of political ideology on preferences for strict behavioral control is attenuated when the power asymmetry is smaller. Specifically, we predict that liberals react more negatively to strict control than conservatives when it is applied to low-level staff (e.g., FSEs), while this effect is weaker when it is applied to high-level executives (e.g., CEOs). We also examine this effect beyond the service setting by investigating behavioral control policies related to social media presence, which are extremely common nowadays (Swaybase, 2023).

## Participants, procedure, and measures

This study examined respondents' reactions to a company's strict behavioral control policy on employees' social media presence. The policy stipulated that company-related posts should be approved before posting and prohibited sharing personal opinions related to industry topics. The study employed a between-subjects design to manipulate employee hierarchy (high-level vs. low-level) and measured political ideology. A prior power analysis using G\*Power, with  $\alpha = 0.05$  and power = 0.80, indicated a required sample size of 467 participants to detect an estimated small effect size of  $f = 0.13$ , with four groups. Six hundred and four participants completed an online survey ( $M_{age} = 39.4$ ; 50.7% female, 48.3% male, and 1.0% non-binary). Participants read an online article about a hotel that implements strict social media guidelines for either executive leadership (in the high-level condition) or service staff (in the low-level condition). All details were similar except for the policy's target.

Participants then responded to the purchase intention measure from Study 1 ( $\alpha = 0.96$ ). For the manipulation check, they indicated their perceived hierarchical distance: "Please indicate the perceived hierarchical distance between the people who implemented the strict social media policy and those who are subjected to it" (1 = Very distant in hierarchy [e.g., top manager to frontline employee], 7 = Very close in hierarchy [e.g., manager to manager]).

Next, participants responded to two measures of political ideology from Han et al. (2019). First, they indicated their party affiliation: “Please indicate the party you most closely identify with in general” (0=Democrat, 1=Republican; presented in random order). In total, 384 participants (64%) identified as Democrats and 215 (36%) as Republicans. Second, they indicated their preferred broadcasting station: “Which news broadcasting station do you prefer to watch?” (0=CNN/MSNBC, 1=Fox News; presented in random order). In total, 396 participants (66%) preferred CNN/MSNBC and 206 (34%) preferred Fox News.

## Results

**Manipulation check** The manipulation was successful. Participants in the low-level staff condition ( $M=4.77$ ) perceived a higher hierarchical distance than those in the high-level management condition ( $M=2.68$ ;  $t(584)=14.886$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

**Purchase intention** As both employee hierarchy and party affiliation were binary, we conducted a two-way ANOVA on purchase intention. The main effect of political ideology was not significant ( $F(1, 595)=0.937$ ,  $p=.33$ ), but the main effect of employee hierarchy was significant ( $F(1, 595)=19.37$ ,  $p<.001$ ); such that strict behavioral control of high-level management (vs. low-level staff) increased purchase intention. Importantly, the analysis revealed a marginally significant interaction between employee hierarchy and party affiliation ( $F(1, 595)=3.740$ ,  $p=.05$ ). In the low-level staff condition, Democrats ( $M=3.84$ ) were less likely than Republicans ( $M=4.18$ ) to use the service from a hotel with a strict behavioral control policy ( $F(1, 595)=4.172$ ,  $p=.042$ ). However, this difference was non-significant in

the high-level management condition ( $M_{\text{Democrats}} = 4.59$  vs.  $M_{\text{Republicans}} = 4.48$ ;  $F(1, 595)=0.471$ ,  $p=.49$ ). Figure 4 illustrates the interaction. The results featuring the preferred broadcasting station measure were similar and were reported in web appendix H.

## Discussion

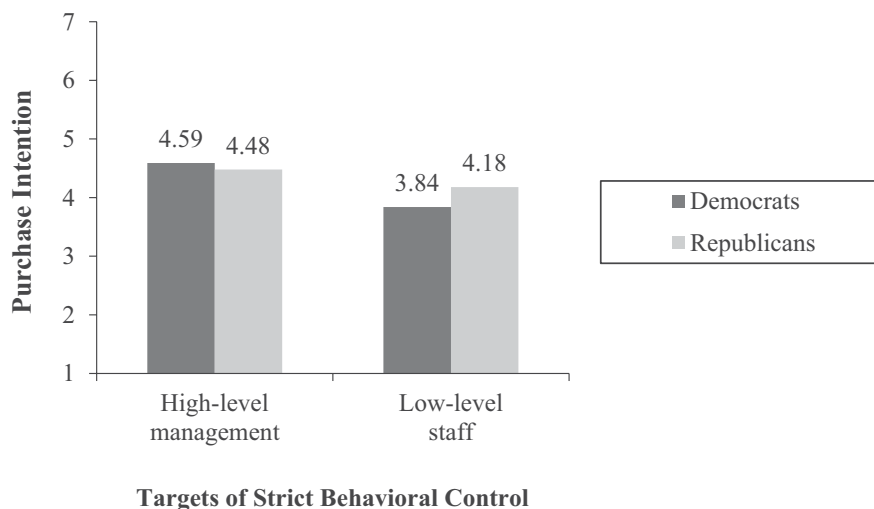
Study 4 demonstrates that the influence of political ideology on consumer reactions to strict behavioral control decreases when there is less power asymmetry between the controller and the controlled. Specifically, when strict behavioral control is applied to high-level management, both liberals and conservatives exhibited higher acceptance of strict control (H3). Moreover, this study shows that imposing strict behavioral control on FSEs engaging on social media can evoke a stronger negative reaction from liberals than conservatives.

## Study 5: Moderating role of firm’s power

Study 5 aims to examine the moderating role of a firm’s power in the relationship between political ideology and consumer response to strict behavioral control. We predict that liberals will react more negatively than conservatives to strict behavioral control imposed by a high-power company (e.g., a service chain). In contrast, this difference is weaker when exerted by a lower-power company (e.g., an independent firm) (H4).

## Participants and design

The study employed a single factor between-subjects design with two conditions of firm power (a high-power firm vs. a



**Fig. 4** The interaction effect of employee hierarchy and political ideology on purchase intention in Study 4

low-power firm), measured political ideology, and used respondents' preference for a strict and loose behavioral policy as the dependent variable. A prior power analysis using G\*Power, with  $\alpha=0.05$  and power=0.80, indicated a required sample size of 395 participants to detect an estimated small effect size of  $f^2=0.02$ , with three predictors. Six hundred and one U.S. participants recruited via Connect completed an online survey ( $M_{\text{age}} = 42.4$ ; 50.7% female, 48.3% male, and 1.0% non-binary).

### Pretest of firm's power manipulation

We conducted a pretest with 100 U.S. participants recruited via Connect to examine perceptions of power between different types of service firms. We used a single factor 2 (fitness chain vs. independent fitness center) between-subjects design. Participants were informed about each company's scale—a number of gyms (500 vs. 1), annual revenue (\$1 billion vs. \$500,000), membership (10 million vs. 500), and staff (1000 vs. 10). They responded to a 3-item 7-point measure of company power adapted from prior works (Fan et al., 2022; Jiang et al., 2014): "I feel [the company name] is ...": powerless (1)/powerful (7); submissive (1)/dominant (7); insecure (1)/confident (7);  $\alpha=0.92$ ). Results confirmed that the fitness chain was perceived as more powerful ( $M=5.71$ ) than the independent fitness center ( $M=3.69$ ;  $t(98)=-8.538, p<.001$ ). Additionally, the type of firm did not significantly influence perceptions of the political orientation of the firm (Jung and Mittal 2020) ("If this company were a person, how conservative or liberal would you consider this person to be?" 1=extremely Liberal; 7=extremely conservative;  $p=.41$ ). Thus, we used these stimuli to manipulate firm's power in our main study.

### Procedure and measures

Participants first responded to a single-item measure of political ideology from Study 1 (1=extremely Liberal, 9=extremely conservative). They were then asked to imagine searching for a gym to improve their fitness. Depending on the condition, participants encountered either two chain fitness centers (high-power firm) or two independent fitness centers (low-power firm). In each condition, participants read descriptions of two local gyms, FitnessCo and FitnessNow, which had similar services and profiles (as shown in the pretest) but differed in how they managed employees. Next, participants viewed the "Employee Policy" webpages of the two companies describing strict versus loose behavioral control (see web appendix A). The order of behavioral control descriptions was counterbalanced.

Participants then indicated their preference for strict (vs. loose) control using a three-item measure adapted from Study 3 (e.g., "Which fitness center are you more likely to consider using?"; 1=Definitely FitnessCo [FitnessNow]

with loose control, 7=Definitely FitnessNow [FitnessCo] with strict control;  $\alpha=0.97$ ). For attention check, we asked participants to recall which type of fitness centers were described in the scenario (0 = "Two large-size fitness chains", 1 = "Two small, local, independent fitness centers"; order counterbalanced). We excluded 25 participants who failed the attention check.

## Results

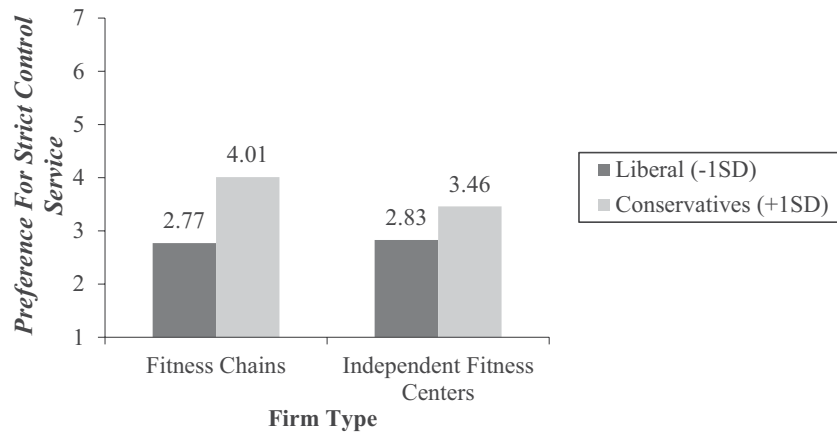
**Preference for strict (vs. loose) control service** As political ideology was captured on an interval scale, we tested its interaction with firms' power on preference for strict control using PROCESS Model 1 (5,000 bootstraps, 95% CIs). The main effect of political ideology ( $b=0.006, t=0.06, p=.95$ ) and firm's power ( $b=-0.33, t=-1.07, p=.29$ ) were non-significant. The interaction was significant ( $b=0.14, t=2.11, p=.035$ ). In particular, in the fitness chains' condition, liberals ( $-1SD; M=2.77$ ) were less likely to prefer the fitness center with strict behavioral control than conservatives ( $+1SD; M=4.01; b=0.28, t=5.78, p<.001$ ). The effect was attenuated in the independent fitness centers' condition ( $M_{\text{liberal}} = 2.83$  vs.  $M_{\text{conservative}} = 3.46; b=0.14, t=3.31, p=.001$ ). Additionally, liberals' preference for loose control was similar across the firms' power conditions ( $b=-0.06, t=-0.28, p=.78$ ), whereas conservatives showed a stronger preference for strict control in the fitness chains' condition than in the independent fitness centers' condition ( $b=0.55, t=2.72, p=.007$ ). Figure 5 illustrates the interaction.

## Discussion

This study further demonstrates that the effect of political ideology on consumer responses to strict behavioral control is contingent on power asymmetry. Results show that compared to powerful firms, strict behavioral control by less powerful firms weakens the influence of political ideology on consumer responses (H4), driven mainly by shifts in conservatives' preferences, while liberals' preferences remain stable.

### Study 6: Moderating role of service failure salience

In this study, we aim to examine how consumers react to strict employee control when service failure is more salient. We hypothesize that the salience of service failure threat can attenuate the impact of political ideology on consumer response to behavioral control, leading to a preference for strict behavioral control among all consumers (H6).



**Fig. 5** The interaction effect of firm's power (type) and political ideology on preference for strict (vs. loose) control service in Study 5

### Participants, procedure, and measures

In this study, we used a 2 (behavioral control: strict vs. loose)  $\times$  2 (service failure salient: yes vs. no) between-subjects design and measured political ideology. Five hundred and ninety-seven U.S. participants ( $M_{\text{age}} = 40.5$ ; 50.9% male, 48.4% female, and 0.7% non-binary) recruited from the Connect platform completed an online survey. Sensitivity power analysis using G\*Power indicated that our sample size could detect a small effect size of  $f^2=0.013$  at the  $\alpha=0.05$  and power=0.80 levels, with seven predictors.

We first manipulated the service failure salience by instructing participants to imagine planning a trip to a city in Europe in the near future. In the service failure salient condition, they subsequently read that, when searching for information, they encountered mixed online reviews regarding hotel quality in the chosen area. Particularly, the service provided by local hotels appeared to be prone to error. In the no-failure salient condition, participants were presented with generic information about the area.

Following this scenario, participants were exposed to behavioral control manipulations. Specifically, they read that they had come across promotional material about a Hotel. Participants learned that the hotel offered a convenient location with a Fantastic city view and good amenities, including free Wi-Fi, complimentary breakfast, fitness facilities, a spa, an extremely comfortable bed, and a 24-hour front desk. Next, in the strict FSE behavioral control condition, participants read that to ensure a satisfactory consumer experience, the hotel took measures to regulate the uncertain behaviors of its staff during service interactions. The hotel had strict step-by-step guidelines and rules that staff members were required to follow when serving customers. In the loose FSE behavioral control condition, they read that, to ensure a satisfactory consumer experience, the hotel encouraged employees to express themselves freely and to be their best selves

during service transactions. The hotel had flexible, adaptable guidelines and suggestions that staff members were encouraged to consider when serving customers.

Next, participants indicated their purchase intention with two items adapted from Study 2a: "Based on the information about this hotel, how likely are you to stay at this hotel?" and "Based on the information about this hotel, how likely are you to book a room with this hotel?" (1=very unlikely, 7=very likely; inter-item correlation:  $r=.92$ ,  $p<.001$ ). For manipulation check, participants completed the three-item measure of perceived behavioral control from Study 1 ( $\alpha=0.93$ ). Participants then completed a multiple-item measure of political ideology from Kidwell et al. (2013) and Nail et al. (2009). This scale assesses participants' opinions on a range of policies, encompassing abortion, gun control, universal health care, same-sex marriage, democrats, and capital punishment (1=strongly against, 7=strongly support;  $\alpha=0.78$ ). The first five items were reverse-coded. The resulting composite scale provided a representation of political ideology, where the higher scores indicated a more conservative ideology and the lower scores indicated a more liberal ideology.

### Results

**Manipulation check** The manipulation was successful. Participants in the strict FSE behavioral control condition ( $M=4.70$ ) perceived higher behavioral control on employees than those in the loose behavioral control condition ( $M=2.67$ ,  $t(595) = -17.550$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

**Purchase intention** As political ideology was captured on an interval scale, we tested its three-way interaction with behavioral control and failure salience on purchase intention using PROCESS Model 3 (5,000 bootstraps, 95% CIs), specifying political ideology and failure salience as the first (W) and second (Z) moderators, respectively.

The three-way interaction was marginally significant ( $b = -0.266$ ,  $t = -1.93$ ,  $p = .055$ ). The graphs in Fig. 6 plot the three-way interaction.

In the no-failure salience condition, the interaction of behavioral control and political ideology was statistically significant ( $b = 0.22$ ,  $F(1, 589) = 4.87$ ,  $p = .028$ ). Specifically, among liberals ( $-1SD$ ), participants in the loose behavioral control condition scored higher on purchase intention than participants in the strict behavioral control condition ( $M_{loose} = 6.10$  vs.  $M_{strict} = 5.70$ ;  $b = -0.395$ ,  $t = -2.00$ ,  $p = .046$ ), while the effect was non-significant among conservatives ( $+1SD$ ;  $M_{loose} = 5.60$  vs.  $M_{strict} = 5.84$ ;  $b = 0.24$ ,  $t = 1.19$ ,  $p = .23$ ).

In the failure salience condition, the interaction of behavioral control and political ideology was statistically non-significant ( $b = -0.04$ ,  $F(1, 589) = 0.205$ ,  $p = .65$ ). Specifically, among liberals ( $-1SD$ ), participants in the loose behavioral control condition scored lower on purchase intention than participants in the strict behavioral control condition ( $M_{loose} = 5.26$  vs.  $M_{strict} = 5.70$ ;  $b = 0.43$ ,  $t = 2.20$ ,  $p = .028$ ). Moreover, although the observed effect among conservatives ( $+1SD$ ) did not reach statistical significance, the pattern closely resembled that observed among liberals ( $M_{loose} = 5.25$  vs.  $M_{strict} = 5.56$ ;  $b = 0.31$ ,  $t = 1.63$ ,  $p = .10$ ).

## Discussion

Study 6 explores the effect of political ideology on FSE behavioral control when the service failure is salient. The findings indicate that when the threat of service failure is salient, political ideology no longer moderates the effect of

behavioral control on purchase intention. Under these circumstances, loose behavioral control leads to more negative consumer responses than strict behavioral control.

## General discussion

Unlike prior research that treats FSE behavioral control as an internal operational tool, this study conceptualizes it as a visible management policy. We investigate how political ideology shapes consumer responses to behavioral control policies across varied service contexts (i.e., hotels, coffee shops, airlines, and fitness centers), using diverse manipulations and capturing multiple customer outcomes. Studies 1 and 2 assess the effect of political ideology, while Study 3 examines the underlying mechanism. Studies 4–6 explore boundary conditions. Our findings reveal that liberal consumers prefer loose behavioral control over strict control, whereas conservative consumers are largely indifferent. This occurs because liberals (vs. conservatives) tend to have lower SDO, leading them to oppose dominance-based hierarchies signaled by strict control. Furthermore, we show that ideological differences are reduced when the power asymmetry between the firm and FSEs is smaller. Specifically, liberals are more likely to accept stricter control when it applies to higher-status employees, whereas conservatives react more negatively when such control is imposed by lower-power firms. Finally, consumers across the ideological spectrum generally prefer strict control policies when the likelihood of service failure is higher.

Additionally, exploratory analyses in Study 3 reveal significant serial mediation through SDO and corporate authority legitimacy. Consistent with our theorization, these

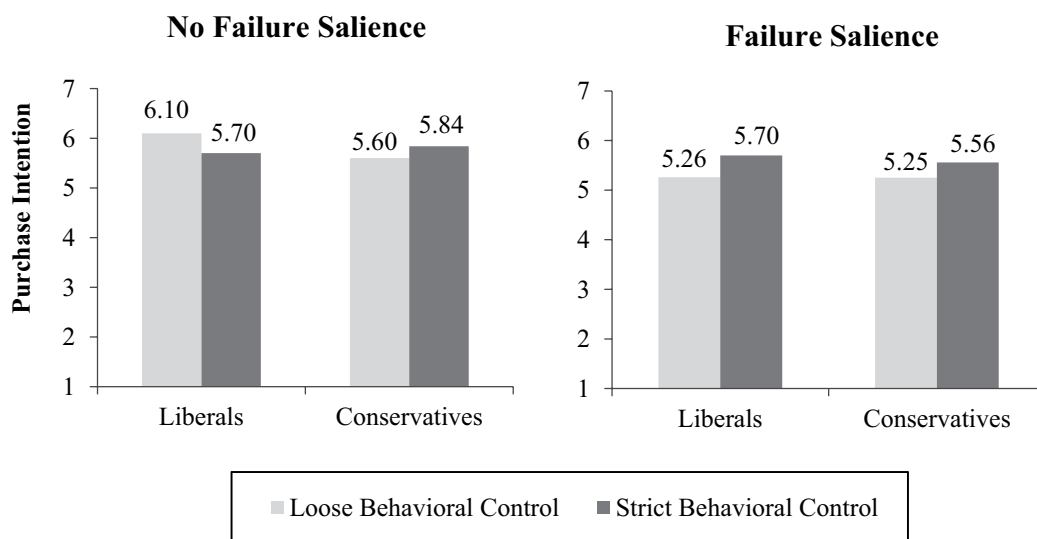


Fig. 6 The interaction effect of behavioral control, political ideology, and service failure salience on purchase intention in Study 6

findings suggest that conservatives' higher SDO makes them more likely to view private firms as legitimate authorities with the right to act as they see fit to serve customers. As a result, the specific managerial policies these firms adopt matter less to conservatives than the firms' perceived ability to succeed within a free-market system.

### Theoretical contributions

This work makes several contributions to the literature on employees' behavioral control and political ideology. Prior research has primarily examined behavioral control as an internal managerial tool designed to improve operational outcomes (Schau et al., 2007; Schepers et al., 2012). In contrast, we demonstrate that such controls can function as public-facing signals, shaping consumer perceptions and behaviors even before any service interaction occurs. Our research consistently reveals a significant negative main effect of strict controls on purchase intentions across multiple studies (for details, see web appendix I). Importantly, we find that the negative impact of strict behavioral control on consumer responses is moderated by political ideology, with conservatives generally more accepting of such controls. The complexity of these effects is further illustrated by our finding that even liberals may tolerate strict controls when they are applied to higher-level employees or in contexts with a high risk of service failure.

Second, a growing body of research has begun to examine how visible internal management policies, such as management team diversity and CEO-to-employee pay ratios, shape consumer judgments about brands (Khan and Kalra 2021; Merlo et al., 2024; Mohan et al., 2018). We extend this literature by investigating employee behavioral control policies, which are common yet previously overlooked and, when publicly disclosed, signal hierarchy and dominance. Our findings show that consumers interpret these policies through the lens of political ideology, responding to what they symbolize about the firm. In doing so, we uncover a novel mechanism through which internal management policies influence brand perception and consumer behavior, specifically via SDO.

Finally, we extend research on political ideology, which shows that liberals and conservatives respond differently to various forms of firm stimuli (e.g., Irmak et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2018; Ordabayeva and Fernandes 2018), by demonstrating that they also react differently to FSE management policies, namely behavioral control. Additionally, our study contributes to the debate on the foundational values of conservatism. Research indicates that conservatives generally prioritize individual freedom and personal autonomy (Everett et al., 2021; Fernandes et al., 2022; Irmak et al., 2020). However, they are also shown to possess higher levels of

SDO, favoring hierarchical structures and the dominance of certain groups (Cozzolino and Snyder 2008; Duckitt, 2006; Pratto et al., 1994). Our research navigates the complexities of these often-conflicting perspectives by investigating how strict FSE behavioral controls, which limit personal freedom yet facilitate the dominance-oriented structure of the free market, influence conservatives' judgments. By exploring the interplay between service management policies and political ideology, we provide compelling evidence that SDO may be a more fundamental ideological basis for conservatism, overshadowing the commitment to individual autonomy. This finding opens new avenues for consumer research into political ideology, particularly in examining how contrasting fundamental values conflict and which values are prioritized in the marketplace.

### Managerial implications

Our research provides actionable insights on how to effectively communicate employee management policies to the public. Most consumers respond favorably to public disclosures of loose control policies. Therefore, in most cases, firms should actively communicate more flexible aspects of their employee control policies to generate positive consumer responses. In practice, certain service firms may need to impose strict employee controls in some areas (e.g., uniforms, rigid sales quotas, continuous monitoring), while allowing more freedom in others (e.g., flexible scheduling, employee-led decision-making). Importantly, managers should not confuse loose control with no control. Our results suggest that managers can maintain appropriate oversight when necessary, while publicly emphasizing the flexible aspects of their control policies. For example, an airline with a mandatory "always smile" policy might choose to spotlight its flexible route bidding system, which allows flight attendants to select preferred destinations or shifts. A hotel chain that uses rigid housekeeping checklists and time tracking may emphasize its employee-led guest engagement programs.

Additionally, because liberal consumers react more positively to loose control, firms should identify the political leaning of their target audience to better tailor media efforts. For instance, firms can actively promote more flexible employee management policies in "blue" states and urban areas, or place sponsored content on liberal-leaning media outlets (e.g., *New York Times*, *CNN*, *The Guardian*). Alternatively, as shown in our follow-up study B (web appendix D), firms can analyze publicly available user-generated content (e.g., Twitter or Facebook profiles) using natural language processing to identify liberal audiences and deliver targeted messages. By contrast, conservative consumers are generally less sensitive to messages about employee

behavioral control, suggesting that for these segments, managers should build their brand through other means, such as service performance or customer experience, rather than emphasizing employee control policies.

When stringent behavioral control policies are made visible to customers, our findings suggest that managers can mitigate negative consequences by altering the perceived power asymmetry between the firm and its employees. One effective strategy is to demonstrate that strict policies apply at all organizational levels, potentially even more rigorously for senior management. For instance, brands like Amazon or Ryanair could emphasize that executives, captains, and supervisors are subject to the same rigorous standards (e.g., performance evaluations or codes of conduct) as FSEs, thereby reducing the perception of a dominance-based hierarchy. Additionally, publicizing authentic examples (e.g., employee testimonials or media coverage) of frontline staff influencing strategic decisions or advancing within the organization can further reassure liberal consumers that FSEs are not simply subordinates. This strategy is particularly important for small and independent firms, which may require strict controls for operational reasons but are also more vulnerable to backlash when such controls are disclosed to the public.

Our findings demonstrate that when the risk of service failure is salient, strict employee control can appeal to both liberal and conservative consumers. In high-stakes industries such as healthcare or airline safety, highlighting intensive performance checks and structured procedures can appeal to most consumers with heightened SDO. Even in more casual service settings, managers can frame control policies in the context of widespread service disruptions, heightening concern about potential failures and increasing the appeal of strict employee management. For instance, budget airlines like Ryanair might emphasize that the entire low-cost carrier segment and the broader airline industry are facing rising consumer dissatisfaction and complaints (UK Civil Aviation Authority, 2023), while positioning their strict frontline employee protocols as a proactive solution.

Finally, while our findings offer guidance on how firms can optimize perceptions of employee control, they also raise important ethical concerns. Like other purpose-driven initiatives, such as corporate social responsibility, publicly communicating loose employee control policies can enhance a brand's appeal. However, this incentive may also lead some firms to engage in what we term "freedom-washing", a concept that is beginning to surface in legal and governmental commentary (Hain et al., 2023), whereby firms strategically portray employee autonomy to attract consumers while internally enforcing rigid and potentially dehumanizing controls. This mirrors the dynamics of greenwashing, in which firms overstate their environmental

practices for reputational gain without taking substantive action. We urge consumers to remain vigilant and encourage policymakers to promote greater transparency around internal employment policies.

## Limitations and future research

Using diverse manipulations, from verbal and visual cues to policy descriptions and media content, our study examines how restricting the agency of human employees influences consumer responses across the political spectrum. Future studies should consider investigating other control mechanisms, such as surveillance tools or tracking software, to further understand consumer reactions. Additionally, as many service industries transition to frontline automation with both human and robotic staff (McLeay et al., 2020; van Doorn et al., 2017), investigating how consumers react to varying levels of control over these interactions becomes essential. Our research shows that the hierarchical dynamics between non-human and human entities can evoke different responses among liberal and conservative consumers; future research might consider whether similar dynamics between non-human entities (e.g., chatbots vs. frontline robots) exert similar effects.

While our study focuses on the effects of strict behavioral controls on consumer responses before service interactions, future research should explore the impacts of these controls during and after interactions across ideological differences. This investigation could further enrich our understanding of the effects of behavioral control and political ideology on service quality and customer satisfaction. Additionally, exploring how liberals and conservatives respond to service outcomes under strict versus loose employee control, especially in cases of service failure, could be valuable. In such situations, FSEs under strict control may exhibit limited human agency, possibly leading consumers to place blame on the firm rather than the FSEs. However, the differences in blame attribution between liberals and conservatives remain unclear, making this an interesting area for further study.

Finally, our research focused on a specific consumer characteristic, namely political ideology. Future research could explore other consumer characteristics that shape their responses to behavioral control measures. For instance, given the conceptual relevance of SDO in explaining ideology-driven responses to hierarchy and of power distance belief in capturing broader acceptance of authority, future research could examine how national cultural differences in power distance shape consumer reactions to employee control policies.

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**Data availability** Data for all studies is available upon request from the authors.

## Declarations

**Ethical approval** Before commencing any of the data collection, we received ethical approval from an institutional review board:

- ESSL, Environment and LUBS (AREA) Faculty Research Ethics Committee University of Leeds.
- University of Liverpool Management School Research Ethics Committee.

**Competing interests** The authors have no conflict of interest to declare that are relevant to this article.

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