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## How Does Organizational Political Environment Affect Leaders' Compliance with Justice Norms?

**Authors:** Liu Depeng, Li Juexing, Liang Pin, Xuhong Pang, Li Juexing

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### Abstract

Based on the strength model of self-control, this study investigates the mechanism and boundary conditions through which the organizational political environment, as a situational factor, influences leader justice rule adherence. Analysis of 570 experience sampling method (ESM) data points collected across 10 consecutive working days from 73 branch managers of a state-owned commercial bank reveals: (1) At the within-individual level, leaders' perceived organizational politics increases ego depletion, and leader job tenure weakens this positive relationship. (2) The effect of within-individual ego depletion on justice rule adherence depends on the between-individual level of leader identity: when leader identity is high, the relationship is positive; when leader identity is low, the relationship is negative. (3) When leader job tenure is short and leader identity is high, perceived organizational politics promotes justice rule adherence through ego depletion; when job tenure is short and leader identity is low, perceived organizational politics hinders justice rule adherence through ego depletion. These findings extend antecedent research on justice rule adherence from an actor-centered perspective to a situation-centered perspective, pioneer the examination of within-individual variation in perceived organizational politics and its effects, and enhance understanding of the mechanism and boundary conditions of ego depletion.

### Full Text

## How Does Organizational Political Environment Influence Leader Justice Rule Adherence?

**LIU Depeng<sup>1</sup>, LI Juexing<sup>2</sup>, LIANG Pin<sup>1</sup>, PANG Xuhong<sup>1</sup>**

(1 School of Management, Shandong University, Jinan 250100, China)

(2 School of Economics and Management, Yunnan Normal University, Kunming 650500, China)

## Abstract

Drawing on the strength model of self-control, this study examines the mechanisms and boundary conditions through which organizational political environments influence leaders' adherence to justice rules as a situational factor. Using experience sampling methodology, we analyzed 570 observations from 73 branch managers over 10 consecutive workdays from a state-owned commercial bank. Results show that: (1) At the within-person level, leaders' perceptions of organizational politics increase ego depletion, and this positive relationship is weakened by leaders' position tenure. (2) The effect of within-person ego depletion on justice rule adherence depends on between-person leader identity: the relationship is positive when leader identity is high and negative when leader identity is low. (3) When leaders have short position tenure and high leader identity, perceptions of organizational politics promote justice rule adherence through ego depletion; when tenure is short and leader identity is low, perceptions of organizational politics hinder justice rule adherence through ego depletion. These findings extend antecedent research on justice rule adherence from an actor-centric to a situation-centric perspective, pioneer research on within-person variation in perceptions of organizational politics and its effects, and advance understanding of the mechanisms and boundary conditions of ego depletion.

**Keywords:** justice rule adherence, perceptions of organizational politics, ego depletion, position tenure, leader identity

**Classification Code:** B849; C93

## 1 Introduction

Justice perceptions are critical factors that enhance employee performance, innovation, and organizational citizenship behavior while reducing organizational retaliation and deviance (Colquitt et al., 2013; Rupp et al., 2017). To improve employees' justice perceptions, leaders must first adhere to justice rules by engaging in fair behaviors (Cropanzano et al., 2015; Muir Zapata et al., 2022). However, a frustrating and puzzling reality is that leaders frequently violate justice rules despite recognizing their importance (Baer et al., 2018; Brockner, 2006). Early scholars adopting an actor-centric perspective identified moral identity (Brebels et al., 2011), trait compassion (Patient & Skarlicki, 2010), self-awareness (Whiteside & Barclay, 2016), and justice motives (Qin et al., 2018) as primary determinants of leader justice rule adherence. Yet growing evidence shows that even leaders possessing these justice-related traits and motives sometimes behave unjustly (Li et al., 2012; Sherf et al., 2019), suggesting limited explanatory power of the actor-centric view. Consequently, scholars have called for moving beyond actor-centric perspectives to examine how the contexts in which leaders are embedded shape their justice behaviors (Kleshinski et al., 2020; Sherf et al., 2019).

Sherf et al. (2019) took the first step toward a situation-centric perspective,

finding that when leaders face excessive workloads, they must trade off between task completion and justice goals, with most prioritizing the more critical, rigid task-oriented work while relatively neglecting justice rule adherence. However, organizations are not merely workplaces for task allocation and completion but also political arenas filled with political behaviors (Ferris et al., 2000; Schmid et al., 2019). A survey of 2,700 employees across over 100 countries identified organizational politics as one of the most significant barriers to employee effectiveness (HBR Ascend Staff, 2019). Scholars have astutely observed that “organizational politics will have an important impact on people’s decisions to act justly or unjustly” (Ambrose, 2017, p. 155). Unfortunately, no research has yet examined how and when the political environment in which leaders are embedded influences their justice rule adherence. To address this gap, this study builds on the strength model of self-control to develop a theoretical model linking within-person leader perceptions of organizational politics to justice rule adherence through ego depletion, with between-person position tenure and leader identity as moderators, as shown in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper].

**Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper] Research Model**

### 1.1 Leaders’ Perceptions of Organizational Politics and Ego Depletion

Organizational politics refers to the extent to which a work environment is characterized by self-serving behaviors pursued at the expense of others or the organization without formal or informal punishment (Chang et al., 2009). Perceptions of organizational politics represent individuals’ beliefs about how much their organization is filled with such political behaviors (Ferris et al., 2000). Consistent with existing literature, this study uses leaders’ perceptions of organizational politics to reflect the political environment, as the environment must first evoke such perceptions to influence leader behavior (Valle et al., 2019). At the level of analysis, we focus on leaders’ perceptions of political behaviors among their team members (Hochwarter et al., 2003). Finally, responding to Hochwarter et al.’s (2020) call, we examine within-person variation in leaders’ perceptions of organizational politics.

The strength model of self-control posits that self-control success depends on the amount of self-control resources available, which are homogeneous and limited (Baumeister et al., 1998; Baumeister et al., 2007). This means that when individuals expend considerable self-control resources on certain behaviors, they struggle to exercise effective self-control in subsequent behaviors requiring such resources (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000), leading to socially and organizationally undesirable actions (Baumeister, 2003). Scholars term the state of insufficient self-control resources “ego depletion” and refer to the phenomenon where depleted resources impair subsequent self-control as the ego depletion effect (Johnson et al., 2014; Muraven, 2012). Typical self-control behaviors—including decision-making, emotion regulation, and impression management—are primary causes of ego depletion (Baumeister et al., 2007). Beyond individual behaviors, situational factors can also induce ego depletion by increasing self-control

demands, including environmental uncertainty, negative events, and coworker incivility (Baumeister et al., 2007; Rosen et al., 2016).

Based on the strength model of self-control, we argue that at the within-person level, leaders experience higher ego depletion on days when they perceive greater organizational politics. First, leaders must expend more self-control resources to identify political behaviors, which are often covert (Ferris & Kacmar, 1992). Only by closely monitoring team members' political activities can leaders identify them promptly and effectively. Second, leaders must consume additional self-control resources to judge the instigators and potential impacts of political behaviors. For instance, employees' impression management behaviors make it difficult for leaders to ascertain their true motives, and certain employees' actions may be instigated by others, making it challenging to identify the masterminds (Hochwarter, 2017; Hochwarter et al., 2020). Consequently, leaders must devote attention and energy to evaluating organizational politics to reduce associated uncertainties (Baumeister et al., 2007; Rosen et al., 2016). Third, leaders must expend self-control resources to handle and respond to political behaviors. After identifying and assessing impactful political behaviors requiring intervention, leaders must choose appropriate ways to intervene. Sometimes external pressures force leaders to make difficult trade-offs to balance competing interests or act against their own preferences (Chang et al., 2009; Ferris & Kacmar, 1992). Moreover, the negative impacts of political behaviors on leaders' daily work and team goal achievement may generate tension, disappointment, and other negative emotions (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), requiring continuous emotion regulation. According to the strength model, these behaviors intensify self-control resource depletion, thereby increasing leaders' ego depletion (Baumeister et al., 2007). Conversely, on days with low perceptions of organizational politics, leaders expend fewer resources identifying, judging, and responding to political behaviors, resulting in lower ego depletion. Therefore, we propose:

**Hypothesis 1:** At the within-person level, leaders' perceptions of organizational politics are positively related to ego depletion.

## 1.2 The Moderating Role of Position Tenure

The ego depletion effect is typically demonstrated in dual-task models (Hagger et al., 2010). However, in reality, people face multi-task, continuous self-control demands. Scholars have extended the strength model in multi-task contexts by proposing a "practice effect" beyond the ego depletion effect. The practice effect suggests that long-term practice improves the efficiency of self-control resource use or expands the resource pool, thereby enhancing self-control capacity and reducing ego depletion from self-control behaviors (Baumeister et al., 2007; Hagger et al., 2010).

Building on the practice effect, we propose that leader tenure weakens the within-person positive relationship between perceptions of organizational poli-

tics and ego depletion. First, longer-tenured leaders better understand the types and methods of political activities in their organizations, enabling them to effectively identify covert political behaviors. Second, longer-tenured leaders are more familiar with complex interpersonal relationships (Hambrick & Gregory, 1991), including who belongs to which cliques, which employees can mobilize superiors to exert pressure, employees' impression management strategies, and their underlying true purposes (Ma et al., 2006). Third, longer-tenured leaders have had more opportunities to practice and master effective methods for handling common political behaviors. Therefore, when facing equivalent levels of perceived organizational politics, longer-tenured leaders expend fewer self-control resources identifying and judging political activities and can more readily draw on experiential methods to quickly identify and resolve issues without consuming excessive resources for deep thinking and difficult decision-making (Hagger et al., 2010; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). In this case, the within-person positive relationship between perceptions of organizational politics and ego depletion is weaker. Conversely, when leaders have shorter tenure, their ability to identify, judge, and respond to political activities is weaker, resulting in higher self-control resource consumption and a stronger within-person positive relationship. Therefore, we propose:

**Hypothesis 2:** Leaders' position tenure negatively moderates the within-person positive relationship between perceptions of organizational politics and ego depletion.

### 1.3 The Moderating Role of Leader Identity

Justice rules that leaders should adhere to typically include distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational dimensions (Colquitt et al., 2013; Colquitt & Zipay, 2015). Consistent with existing literature, we treat these as a single construct for theoretical and empirical analysis (Sherf et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2013). Additionally, like most leadership behaviors, justice rule adherence exhibits non-negligible within-person variation (Johnson et al., 2014; Sherf et al., 2019); thus, this study focuses on within-person variation in justice rule adherence and its antecedents.

How will leaders' ego depletion caused by organizational politics affect subsequent justice rule adherence? Existing literature generally supports the ego depletion effect, suggesting that higher ego depletion leads to lower justice rule adherence (Whiteside & Barclay, 2018). However, leadership behavior does not operate in simple dual-task models but within a continuous multi-threaded context where justice rule adherence is just one of many tasks. Beyond the practice effect, the strength model of self-control in multi-task contexts also proposes conservation and recovery effects (Baumeister et al., 2007; Hagger et al., 2010). The conservation effect refers to individuals reducing self-control in subsequent behaviors when ego-depleted to preserve existing resources for potentially more important future tasks. The recovery effect refers to people restoring and replenishing depleted resources through rest and energy replenishment after ego

depletion to enable future successful self-control. Therefore, the effect of leaders' ego depletion on justice rule adherence may be more complex than assumed in existing literature.

Lord et al. (2010) note that identity plays a crucial role in self-control processes. Although all leaders occupy formal leadership positions, they differ in their identification with the leadership role (Day et al., 2009). Scholars use leader identity—the extent to which leaders define themselves using the leadership role—to capture these differences (Lanaj, Gabriel, et al., 2021; Lord et al., 2010). The leader role comprises various leadership behaviors, primarily task-oriented and relationship-oriented behaviors (Sherf et al., 2019; Yukl, 2012), with justice rule adherence being a typical relationship-oriented behavior. In terms of importance, task-oriented behaviors are generally more critical and must be completed as job requirements (Yukl, 2012). While relationship-oriented behaviors may not be leaders' primary focus, treating subordinates fairly is crucial for enhancing team performance and leader legitimacy (Ambrose & Schminke, 2009; Leventhal, 1980). Regarding discretion, leaders have greater latitude in deciding whether, when, to whom, and how to express fairness compared to task-oriented behaviors. Research shows that people experience greater self-verification and expression—and better resource recovery—when engaging in high-discretion behaviors (Trougakos et al., 2014). These distinctions affect not only leaders' willingness to exercise self-control in justice behaviors when ego-depleted but also how they perceive the resource implications of justice rule adherence.

When leader identity is low, leaders are more likely to view task-oriented behaviors as work priorities and justice rule adherence as an external requirement (Quinn, 2005). In this case, adhering to justice rules requires further consumption of self-control resources (Johnson et al., 2014). Consequently, leaders are more likely to activate the conservation effect after ego depletion, reducing expenditure of already limited self-control resources on justice rule adherence to preserve them for more important task-oriented work (Muraven et al., 2006). Therefore, when leader identity is low, the within-person relationship between ego depletion and justice rule adherence is negative.

When leader identity is high, leaders are more likely to view justice rule adherence as inherent to their leadership role (Lanaj, Gabriel, et al., 2021; Lord & Hall, 2005). In this case, adhering to justice rules is no longer externally pressured but rather a form of self-expression and self-verification. Research indicates that self-expression and self-verification effectively alleviate self-control resource depletion and facilitate resource recovery. For example, Schmeichel and Vohs (2009) found that when ego-depleted individuals engage in behaviors enabling self-verification, their self-regulatory resources are effectively replenished. This suggests that for leaders with high leader identity, justice rule adherence can restore resources after ego depletion. This aligns with research on recovery at work; for instance, Halbesleben and Bowler (2007) found that when self-control resources are depleted, people do not decrease but rather increase interpersonal organizational citizenship behaviors because such behaviors

help restore resources. According to the recovery effect, higher ego depletion increases leaders' motivation to seek resource restoration, making them more likely to engage in justice rule adherence. Therefore, when leader identity is high, the within-person relationship between ego depletion and justice rule adherence is positive. Thus, we propose:

**Hypothesis 3:** Leader identity moderates the within-person relationship between ego depletion and justice rule adherence such that the relationship is positive when leader identity is high and negative when leader identity is low.

In summary, we propose that position tenure and leader identity respectively moderate the relationship between perceptions of organizational politics and ego depletion and the relationship between ego depletion and justice rule adherence, thereby moderating the indirect effect of perceptions of organizational politics on justice rule adherence through ego depletion. We therefore propose a two-stage moderated mediation hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 4:** Leaders' position tenure and leader identity moderate the within-person indirect effect of perceptions of organizational politics on justice rule adherence through ego depletion: the indirect effect is positive when position tenure is low and leader identity is high, and negative when position tenure is low and leader identity is low.

## 2 Method

### 2.1 Sample and Data Collection

This study employed a time-lagged interval-based experience sampling methodology (ESM) to collect data. All participants were branch managers from a prominent state-owned commercial bank in an eastern Chinese city. Some branches were also called business departments; through interviews, we confirmed that branch manager and business department manager are two titles for the same position. For narrative simplicity, we uniformly refer to them as "branches" and "branch managers." Generally, compared to private enterprises, state-owned commercial banks may harbor more political behaviors, making internal members more likely to perceive organizational politics and be influenced by them (Chen et al., 2004). Additionally, branch managers are the primary leaders of their branches. Given the geographical separation from headquarters and certain operational independence, branch managers possess considerable discretion in resource allocation and management practices, enabling them to autonomously decide whether to treat subordinates fairly or unfairly in daily management. For these two reasons, branch managers from a state-owned commercial bank constitute an appropriate sample for this study.

After obtaining consent and support from senior bank management, we sent emails to all 110 branch managers in the city, inviting them to participate. The invitation email introduced the research purpose and basic procedures while promising 200 RMB compensation for completing all surveys. Eighty-three

managers agreed to participate.

All questionnaires were distributed via Wenjuanxing (a Chinese online survey platform); participants could click the received link to complete and submit questionnaires. In the first week, participants completed a baseline survey measuring between-person variables, including demographic characteristics (position tenure), leader identity, instrumental motives for justice behavior, value-expressive motives for justice behavior, and moral identity. All 83 participants completed the baseline survey. Following the baseline survey, we conducted daily surveys for two weeks (10 consecutive workdays).

To reduce common method bias, we followed scholars' recommendations by splitting the questionnaire into two parts and administering them at different times (Gabriel et al., 2019; P. M. Podsakoff et al., 2003). Time 1 measured perceptions of organizational politics and ego depletion. Given that both constructs require time to manifest and are unsuitable for measurement at the workday's start, we placed them around the end of the workday. After understanding branch managers' work schedules, we distributed the Time 1 questionnaire daily at 4:00 PM, keeping it open until 7:00 PM. Justice rule adherence, positive affect, and negative affect were measured at Time 2. Based on our understanding of participants' typical work and overtime hours, discussions with some managers, and following Sherf et al.'s (2019) approach, we distributed the Time 2 questionnaire daily at 8:00 PM, keeping it open until midnight. Our timing choices align with existing ESM research; for example, one ESM study with MBA students also administered afternoon and evening questionnaires at 4:00 PM and 8:00 PM (Fouk & Lanaj, 2022). On average, the 83 branch managers completed Time 1 at 5:27 PM and Time 2 at 9:46 PM.

To control for previous-day ego depletion and justice rule adherence, we retained data for day  $t$  only if participants completed the questionnaire on day  $t-1$ . Additionally, following scholars' recommendations, we retained only participants who completed at least three full days of surveys (Gabriel et al., 2019). After matching, we obtained 570 observations from 73 participants (averaging 7.81 observations per participant). Among these 73 participants, the average age was 34.95 years ( $SD = 5.48$ ), 23.7% were female, and average tenure was 2.84 years ( $SD = 2.45$ ).

## 2.2 Measures

All original scales were in English and were translated into Chinese following Brislin's (1986) translation-back-translation procedure. All scales used 5-point Likert formats.

**Perceptions of Organizational Politics.** Daily perceptions of organizational politics were reported by participants at Time 1 using Hochwarter et al.'s (2003) 6-item scale. Consistent with our research design, we added introductory instructions emphasizing that the evaluation target was the participant's own branch (or department). Additionally, because perceptions of organizational

politics needed to be measured at the within-person level daily, we adapted the scale accordingly. Adapted items included “Today, there were many selfish behaviors occurring in my branch (or department),” “Today, people spent too much time ingratiating themselves with those who could help them,” and “Today, people engaged in behind-the-scenes maneuvering to get what they wanted.” Within-person  $\alpha = 0.92$ .

**Ego Depletion.** Daily ego depletion was reported by participants at Time 1 using Tangney et al.’s (2004) 5-item scale, adapted for measuring leaders’ daily ego depletion at the within-person level. Johnson et al. (2014) also demonstrated this scale’s applicability for within-person ego depletion measurement. Sample items included “Right now, it takes a lot of effort for me to concentrate on one thing,” “Right now, I feel my willpower is gone,” and “Right now, I feel distracted.” Within-person  $\alpha = 0.90$ .

**Justice Rule Adherence.** Daily justice rule adherence was reported by participants at Time 2 using Sherf et al.’s (2019) 12-item scale, including “Today, before making decisions affecting employees, I sought their input,” “Today, when making decisions, I suppressed personal biases,” and “Today, I maintained employees’ dignity.” Within-person  $\alpha = 0.95$ .

**Position Tenure.** Position tenure was reported by participants in the baseline survey as the number of years they had worked in their current position.

**Leader Identity.** Leader identity was reported by participants in the baseline survey using Lee et al.’s (2016) 4-item scale: “Being a leader is very important to me,” “I see myself as a leader,” “I feel I possess the characteristics of a leader,” and “It is very important to me that others see me as a leader.”  $\alpha = 0.90$ .

**Control Variables.** At the within-person level, we followed ESM best practices by controlling for autoregressive effects and within-person trends and cycles during the survey period (Gabriel et al., 2019). For autoregressive effects, we controlled for previous-day ego depletion and justice rule adherence. For trends and cycles, we controlled for day number, sine, and cosine. Day number referred to the survey day (ranging from 1 to 10, as participants completed surveys only on workdays). Sine and cosine were calculated following Liu and West (2016):  $\text{sine} = \sin(2\pi t/7)$ ,  $\text{cosine} = \cos(2\pi t/7)$ , where  $t$  represents the day of the week.

We also controlled for within-person positive and negative affect states for two reasons. First, to control for alternative explanatory mechanisms: perceptions of organizational politics represent an important hindrance stressor (Cavanaugh et al., 2000), which can influence behavior through emotional mechanisms (Rodell & Judge, 2009). Additionally, according to affective events theory, perceptions of organizational politics may function as affective events triggering leaders’ positive or negative emotions, thereby influencing their attitudes and behaviors (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Second, to strengthen causal inference: ESM best practices consistently call for controlling affective influences (Beal, 2015; Gabriel et al., 2019), as centering and other techniques cannot fully eliminate the impact of factors like emotions on causal relationships, especially when all

variables are reported by leaders. Although we used time-separated measurement, common source bias cannot be completely ruled out. Controlling for affect represents an effective method for reducing common method bias. Positive and negative affect were measured using Kercher's (1992) PANAS scale with 10 items total. Positive affect included "excited," "enthusiastic," "alert," "inspired," and "determined" (within-person  $\alpha = 0.93$ ). Negative affect included "distressed," "upset," "scared," "nervous," and "afraid" (within-person  $\alpha = 0.89$ ).

At the between-person level, we controlled for instrumental motives for justice behavior, value-expressive motives for justice behavior, and moral identity—variables established as important predictors of justice rule adherence (Brebels et al., 2011; Qin et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2014). Justice motives were reported in the baseline survey using Qin et al.'s (2018) scales. Instrumental motives included items such as "Treating subordinates fairly maximizes my interests," "Treating subordinates fairly is a means to protect my own interests," and "Treating subordinates fairly helps me obtain more rewards and benefits" (6 items,  $\alpha = 0.94$ ). Value-expressive motives included "Treating subordinates fairly reflects my core values and beliefs," "Treating subordinates fairly helps me become the person I want to be," and "Treating subordinates fairly is a virtue to me" (6 items,  $\alpha = 0.91$ ).

Moral identity includes two dimensions: symbolization (emphasizing communicating moral standards and behaviors to others) and internalization (viewing oneself from a moral perspective, considering the moral implications of one's actions, and valuing moral behavior) (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Following previous research, we controlled for internalized moral identity using Aquino and Reed's (2002) scale. The scale first presents words reflecting personal moral character — "caring, compassionate, fair, friendly, generous, helpful, hardworking, honest, kind" —then uses 5 items to measure participants' views, including "I would be happy to be someone who has these characteristics," "Being someone who has these characteristics is important to me," and "I strongly desire to have these characteristics."  $\alpha = 0.99$ .

### 2.3 Analytical Strategy

To examine the construct validity of key measures, we conducted multilevel confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using Mplus 8.3 (Muthén & Muthén, 2010). Since position tenure was measured objectively and did not require CFA, our multilevel CFA included three within-person variables (perceptions of organizational politics, ego depletion, and justice rule adherence) and one between-person variable (leader identity). Results are shown in Table 1. The four-factor model (our measurement model) fit better than alternative models. Justice rule adherence fit best as a second-order factor model:  $\chi^2 = 1167.64$ ,  $df = 537$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.17$  ( $< 5$ ),  $RMSEA = 0.05$  ( $< 0.08$ ),  $CFI = 0.94$  ( $> 0.9$ ),  $TLI = 0.93$  ( $> 0.9$ ), within-person  $SRMR = 0.04$  ( $< 0.08$ ), between-person  $SRMR = 0.05$  ( $< 0.08$ ).

#### Table 1 Multilevel Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results

Model	df	$\chi^2/df$	$\Delta^2(\Delta df)$	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR (Within)	SRMR (Between)
1. Four-factor: PP, ED, JRA (2nd-order), LI	537	2.17	-	0.05	0.94	0.93	0.04	0.05
2. Four-factor: PP, ED, JRA (1st-order), LI	545	3.06	501.72(8)	-	-	-	-	-
3. Three-factor: PP + ED, JRA (2nd-order), LI	542	5.22	1659.65(5)	-	-	-	-	-
4. Three-factor: PP + ED, JRA (1st-order), LI	550	8.27	1721.01(8)	-	-	-	-	-

Note: PP = Perceptions of Organizational Politics, ED = Ego Depletion, JRA = Justice Rule Adherence, LI = Leader Identity. In  $\Delta^2(\Delta df)$ , indicates comparison with Model 1, indicates comparison with Model 3; all  $p < 0.001$ .

Given our ESM design, data exhibited a multilevel nested structure. We therefore used multilevel structural equation modeling (MSEM) to analyze data and test hypotheses while accounting for data nesting (Preacher et al., 2010). To conduct within-person analyses, variables measured daily must exhibit sufficient within-person variance. We first partitioned variance into within-person ( $\sigma^2$ ) and between-person ( $\tau_{00}$ ) components and calculated the proportion of within-person variance [ $\sigma^2/(\sigma^2 + \tau_{00})$ ] (N. P. Podsakoff et al., 2019). Table 2 reports variance decomposition, showing that within-person variance proportions all exceed 30%, providing sufficient variance for multilevel path analysis.

**Table 2 Within-Person Variance Decomposition**

Variable	Within-Person Variance ( $\sigma^2$ )	Between-Person Variance ( $\tau_{00}$ )	Within-Person Variance Proportion [ $\sigma^2/(\sigma^2 + \tau_{00})$ ]
Perception of Organizational Politics	0.42	0.97	30.33%
Ego Depletion	0.48	0.71	40.37%
Justice Rule Adherence	0.59	0.80	42.42%
Positive Affect	0.52	0.72	42.06%
Negative Affect	0.73	0.78	48.35%

We conducted multilevel path analysis using Mplus 8.3. Following ESM best practices (Gabriel et al., 2019), we person-mean centered all within-person variables and grand-mean centered between-person moderators. We tested hypothesized paths with random slopes and analyzed other paths with fixed slopes to reduce unnecessary model complexity (Beal, 2015). For moderation effects of position tenure and leader identity, we calculated the magnitude and difference of the moderated relationships at high (+SD) and low (-SD) moderator values and tested their significance. Because Mplus 8.3 does not support bootstrap-

ping in multilevel analysis, we used R 4.0.3 with Monte Carlo methods based on 20,000 parameter draws to estimate indirect effects and their differences at different moderator values ( $\pm$ SD), obtaining more precise confidence intervals for significance testing.

### 3 Results

Table 3 reports descriptive statistics and correlations. Justice rule adherence was significantly positively correlated with positive affect ( $r = 0.26, p < 0.001$ ), instrumental motives for justice behavior ( $r = 0.23, p < 0.001$ ), value-expressive motives for justice behavior ( $r = 0.37, p < 0.001$ ), and moral identity ( $r = 0.21, p < 0.001$ ), consistent with previous research (Brebels et al., 2011; Qin et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2007; Zheng et al., 2021), demonstrating the necessity of controlling these variables.

**Table 3 Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations**

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>Within-Person Level</b>												
1. Perceptions of Organizational Politics	2.06	0.89	-									
2. Ego Depletion	2.52	0.91	0.26***									
3. Justice Rule Adherence	3.52	0.90	-0.11**	-0.10*								
4. Positive Affect	3.31	0.77	0.15***	0.04	0.26***							
5. Negative Affect	1.68	0.71	0.12**	0.09*	-0.05	0.11**						
<b>Between-Person Level</b>												
6. Position Tenure	2.84	2.45	-0.18**	-0.17***	0.03	0.21***	-0.04					

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
7. Leader Identity	4.46	0.49	-	-	0.23**	0.03	-	-	-			
8. Instrumental Motives for Justice Behavior	3.52	0.73	-	-	0.37**	0.09*	-	0.02	0.20**			
9. Value-Expressive Motives for Justice Behavior	4.46	0.49	0.11**	0.06	0.21**	0.14**	-	0.21**	0.06	0.10*	0.15**	
10. Moral Identity	4.46	0.49	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.30***		

Note:  $N_{\{within\}} = 570$ ,  $N_{\{between\}} = 73$ . Within-person correlations calculated after group-mean centering; between-person correlations calculated after aggregating within-person variables to the between-person level and correlating with other between-person variables. †  $p < 0.1$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

Table 4 reports multilevel path analysis results. As shown in Column 2, perceptions of organizational politics had a significant positive effect on ego depletion ( $\beta = 0.10$ ,  $p = 0.049$ ), indicating that stronger daily perceptions of organizational politics were associated with higher ego depletion, supporting Hypothesis 1.

**Table 4 Multilevel Path Analysis Results**

Predictor	Ego Depletion	Justice Rule Adherence
Intercept	3.52*** (0.90)	2.30** (0.69)
Perceptions of Organizational Politics	0.10* (0.05)	-0.01 (0.05)
Perceptions of Organizational Politics × Position Tenure	-0.07*** (0.02)	-0.00 (0.04)

Predictor	Ego Depletion	Justice Rule Adherence
Leader Identity	-0.07*** (0.02)	-0.09 (0.09)
Ego Depletion × Leader Identity	-0.02 (0.05)	0.19** (0.06)
<b>Lagged Controls</b>		
Ego Depletion (previous day)	0.12 (0.11)	0.02 (0.04)
Justice Rule Adherence (previous day)	-0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.03)
<b>Other Controls</b>		
Instrumental Motives for Justice Behavior	0.20 (0.12)	0.05 (0.07)
Value- Expressive Motives for Justice Behavior	-0.03 (0.09)	0.37* (0.15)
Moral Identity	-0.05 (0.18)	0.08 (0.09)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.11 (0.26)	0.07 (0.10)

*Note: Unstandardized coefficients reported; standard errors in parentheses. Intercept reported at between-person level. †  $p < 0.1$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .\**

Hypothesis 2 proposed that position tenure moderates the relationship between perceptions of organizational politics and ego depletion. As shown in Column 2 of Table 4, the interaction between perceptions of organizational politics and position tenure had a significant negative effect on ego depletion ( $\beta = -0.07$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating significant moderation. The moderation effect is illustrated in Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper]. Simple slope analyses showed that the effect of perceptions of organizational politics on ego depletion was significantly positive under low position tenure (slope = 0.26,  $p = 0.001$ ) but non-significant under high position tenure (slope = -0.07,  $p = 0.157$ ), with a significant difference between these slopes ( $d = -0.34$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Hypothesis 2 is supported.

**Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper] Moderating Effect of Position Tenure on the Relationship Between Perceptions of Organizational Politics and Ego Depletion**

Hypothesis 3 proposed that leader identity moderates the relationship between ego depletion and justice rule adherence. Results in Column 3 of Table 4 show that ego depletion had a non-significant main effect on justice rule adherence ( $\beta = -0.001$ ,  $p = 0.984$ ), but the interaction between ego depletion and leader identity had a significant positive effect ( $\beta = 0.19$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ), indicating that the effect of ego depletion depends on leader identity level. The moderation effect is illustrated in Figure 3 [Figure 3: see original paper]. Simple slope analyses revealed that ego depletion had a significant negative effect on justice rule adherence when leader identity was low (slope =  $-0.19$ ,  $p = 0.006$ ) but a significant positive effect when leader identity was high (slope =  $0.19$ ,  $p = 0.019$ ), with a significant difference between these slopes ( $d = 0.38$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ). Hypothesis 3 is supported.

**Figure 3 [Figure 3: see original paper] Moderating Effect of Leader Identity on the Relationship Between Ego Depletion and Justice Rule Adherence**

Hypothesis 4 proposed a two-stage moderated mediation effect of position tenure and leader identity on the indirect effect of perceptions of organizational politics on justice rule adherence through ego depletion. Table 5 presents the moderated mediation analysis results. The indirect effect was significantly positive when position tenure was low and leader identity was high [95% CI: 0.01, 0.10], not containing zero. The indirect effect was significantly negative when both position tenure and leader identity were low [95% CI:  $-0.10$ ,  $-0.01$ ], not containing zero. In the other two conditions (high tenure/high identity; high tenure/low identity), the indirect effects were non-significant [95% CIs:  $-0.05$ , 0.01 and  $-0.01$ , 0.05, respectively, both containing zero]. These results indicate that the within-person indirect effect of perceptions of organizational politics on justice rule adherence through ego depletion occurs only for new leaders (short position tenure) and depends on leader identity: positive under high leader identity and negative under low leader identity. Hypothesis 4 is supported.

**Table 5 Moderated Mediation Analysis Results**

Condition	Indirect Effect: POP $\rightarrow$ ED $\rightarrow$ JRA	95% CI
1. High Tenure, High Leader Identity	-0.01	[-0.05, 0.01]
2. High Tenure, Low Leader Identity	0.01	[-0.01, 0.05]
3. Low Tenure, High Leader Identity	0.04	[0.01, 0.10]
4. Low Tenure, Low Leader Identity	-0.04	[-0.10, -0.01]

Condition	Indirect Effect: POP → ED → JRA	95% CI
Difference between 3 and 4	0.08	[0.03, 0.19]

*Note: Confidence intervals estimated via Monte Carlo method with 20,000 parameter draws. Bolded intervals are significant at 95% level.*

Additionally, following best practices for control variable usage (Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016), we conducted multilevel path analysis without control variables. Results showed that the moderating effect of position tenure on the relationship between perceptions of organizational politics and ego depletion ( $\beta = -0.06$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and the moderating effect of leader identity on the relationship between ego depletion and justice rule adherence ( $\beta = 0.20$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ) remained significant and consistent with hypothesized directions.

## 4 Discussion

Drawing on the strength model of self-control, this study examined how organizational politics as a situational factor influences leader justice rule adherence and its boundary conditions. Similar to previous research, we adopted a within-person perspective (Scott et al., 2014; Sherf et al., 2019). Analyzing 570 observations from 73 bank branch managers across 10 workdays, we found that at the within-person level, leaders' perceptions of organizational politics positively affected ego depletion. This effect was significantly positive under short position tenure but non-significant under long tenure, demonstrating the practice effect in the strength model of self-control (Hagger et al., 2010; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). This suggests that compared to high-tenure leaders, low-tenure leaders experience more severe ego depletion when organizational politics are high, warranting greater organizational attention.

More interestingly, we found that the within-person effect of ego depletion on leader justice rule adherence depends on leader identity. When leader identity is high, ego depletion leads to more justice rule adherence; when leader identity is low, ego depletion leads to less justice rule adherence. This demonstrates that whether justice rule adherence consumes or restores self-control resources for ego-depleted leaders depends on their identity, reflecting the resource conservation and recovery effects in the strength model of self-control (Hagger et al., 2010).

Furthermore, we found that when leaders have short position tenure and high leader identity, daily perceptions of organizational politics increase justice rule adherence through heightened ego depletion. Conversely, when leaders have short tenure and low leader identity, daily perceptions of organizational politics decrease justice rule adherence through heightened ego depletion. This indicates that how within-person perceptions of organizational politics affect justice rule adherence through ego depletion simultaneously depends on between-person

levels of position tenure and leader identity. Organizations should pay particular attention to low-tenure, low-identity leaders when organizational politics are high and implement targeted interventions to prevent unjust behaviors.

#### 4.1 Theoretical Contributions

First, this study contributes to justice rule adherence research in three ways. One, unlike the vast majority of actor-centric research focusing on leader traits and motives, we examine how leaders' embedded political environment influences justice rule adherence, responding to calls for shifting justice antecedent research from actors to contexts (Kleshinski et al., 2020; Sherf et al., 2019). While the only existing situational factor study conceptualized organizations as task allocation and completion sites (Sherf et al., 2019), we view the organizational environment as a social and political arena, thereby expanding research boundaries. Two, whereas previous research discussed conscious cognitive mechanisms (e.g., leaders consciously comparing task importance under workload), we demonstrate that the unconscious cognitive mechanism of ego depletion also represents an important internal process through which situational factors influence justice rule adherence, enriching and complementing our understanding of these mechanisms. Three, we show that the effect of perceptions of organizational politics on justice rule adherence varies across leaders with different tenure and identity. For short-tenure leaders, high perceptions of organizational politics decrease justice rule adherence when leader identity is low but increase it when leader identity is high. These findings not only address why and when situational factors influence leader justice rule adherence but also answer the previously unaddressed question of for whom these effects are stronger, revealing the complexity of situational influences and highlighting the need for greater attention to intricate mechanisms and boundary conditions.

Second, this study contributes to organizational politics research in two ways. One, since the concept's inception, researchers have recognized that perceptions of organizational politics likely exhibit substantial within-person variation. Only recently have theoretical discussions systematically addressed this within-person variability, calling for within-person approaches (Hill et al., 2016; Hochwarter et al., 2020). However, no empirical research has examined within-person variance and effects. Our study is the first to use ESM to document sufficient within-person variance in perceptions of organizational politics (30.33% of total variance in our sample), providing empirical support for previous observations. Further analyses show that under certain conditions of tenure and leader identity, within-person perceptions of organizational politics influence leader justice rule adherence through ego depletion, extending understanding of organizational politics' dynamic features and providing empirical evidence for its within-person effects. Two, while scholars have established perceptions of organizational politics as an important antecedent of employee justice perceptions (reactive justice), no research has examined how it influences leader justice behaviors (proactive justice) (Ambrose, 2017). By linking leaders' political perceptions to their jus-

tice rule adherence, we extend organizational politics research from reactive to proactive justice.

Finally, this study contributes to the strength model of self-control in three ways. One, although practice, conservation, and recovery effects are widely accepted extensions of the strength model (Hagger et al., 2010), few studies have tested all three mechanisms simultaneously. We find that longer tenure provides more practice opportunities, weakening the relationship between perceptions of organizational politics and ego depletion, while different levels of leader identity affect leaders' cognitions about justice behaviors, activating resource conservation versus recovery effects and producing different effects of ego depletion on justice rule adherence. Thus, we integrate and empirically test three important extensions of the strength model in a single framework. Two, most past research portrays individuals as passive recipients of ego depletion, overemphasizing its negative consequences (e.g., deviance or unethical behavior) (Christian & Ellis, 2011; Thau & Mitchell, 2010), while neglecting that some positive behaviors may help restore depleted resources, making individuals more likely to engage in them when ego-depleted (Lilius, 2012). We find that when leader identity is high, leaders may view justice behaviors as consistent with their role definition and resource-restorative, leading them to engage in more justice rule adherence after ego depletion. Three, we show that whether ego depletion promotes or inhibits justice rule adherence depends on leader identity, which determines whether leaders view justice rule adherence as resource-restorative or resource-depleting. Thus, we not only provide insight into the positive side of ego depletion but also extend understanding of boundary conditions for its positive versus negative effects.

## 4.2 Practical Implications

Our findings offer novel practical implications for promoting leader justice behaviors.

First and foremost, organizational managers must recognize that hiring leaders with strong moral character and justice motives is insufficient; they must also cultivate work environments that facilitate justice behaviors, including monitoring daily political behaviors and implementing measures to reduce their occurrence.

Second, organizations should adopt differentiated rather than uniform management approaches for leaders. Although perceptions of organizational politics may negatively affect leader justice behaviors, this effect varies dramatically across leaders. Therefore, differentiated management may be a relatively cost-effective and efficient approach. When organizational politics are high, managers should focus attention on leaders with short tenure and low leader identity, as they are more susceptible to political perceptions and less likely to adhere to justice rules.

Third, organizations should implement more effective leader identity training for short-tenure leaders. Although organizational politics may be impossible to

eliminate, organizations can use targeted training to enhance leader identity and channel its effects in positive directions. Potentially effective methods include early-tenure socialization training emphasizing leadership responsibilities and roles, helping leaders gain subordinate recognition of their leadership identity (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Guillén et al., 2015; Lanaj, Gabriel, et al., 2021). Additionally, leaders can take steps to enhance their own leader identity, such as engaging in behaviors matching the leadership role (Ibarra, 2015) and developing leader role self-compassion (Lanaj, Jennings, et al., 2021).

### 4.3 Limitations and Future Directions

First, this study has several limitations. One, despite adopting rigorous design features such as time-separated measurement to enhance causal inference (Gabriel et al., 2019; P. M. Podsakoff et al., 2003), common method bias may remain. Both the independent variable (perceptions of organizational politics) and mediator (ego depletion) were measured at Time 1 (afternoon). Ideally, ESM studies should measure independent variables, mediators, and dependent variables in three separate time periods (e.g., morning, afternoon, evening). However, both constructs require sufficient time to manifest, making earlier measurement inadequate for capturing daily levels. We therefore measured them between 4:00-7:00 PM, around branch managers' departure time. Additionally, all variables were leader-reported because they measure leaders' own perceptions and behaviors, for which self-report provides accurate assessment. Following ESM best practices, we controlled for daily positive and negative affect to reduce common method bias from rater mood (Gabriel et al., 2019; P. M. Podsakoff et al., 2003). Moreover, common method bias would only attenuate rather than enhance the likelihood of finding moderation effects, meaning any such bias would make our conclusions more conservative and suggest that the true moderation effects of tenure and leader identity are stronger (Siemsen et al., 2010). Nevertheless, we encourage future researchers to use experimental designs or even more rigorous procedures to constructively replicate our findings.

Two, we recruited participants from an organization. Manager samples are typically small and more difficult to recruit than employee samples. After excluding participants without two consecutive days of data and those with fewer than three total days, we obtained data from only 73 leaders. While this sample size is not small for ESM research with managers (Gabriel et al., 2019), we encourage future researchers to recruit larger samples through platforms like Wenjuanxing or MTurk to validate our conclusions.

Three, due to data collection difficulties and questionnaire length constraints, we could not collect morning data, preventing control for daily baseline effects (e.g., morning ego depletion affecting afternoon ego depletion). Although we controlled for previous-day ego depletion, this remains a limitation. Additionally, positive and negative affect were not measured in the morning or afternoon. We hope future researchers can improve study design and data collection procedures with appropriate measurement timing to achieve best practices.

Second, regarding boundary conditions for within-person ego depletion effects on justice rule adherence, we focused on the between-person variable leader identity and found that the direction of the ego depletion effect depends on leader identity level. The non-significant main effect of ego depletion on justice rule adherence—positive under high leader identity and negative under low leader identity—is consistent with our theory and underscores the necessity of examining boundary conditions. However, higher-level team and organizational factors such as justice climate and value norms may also influence the ego depletion-justice rule adherence relationship, warranting future investigation.

Third, from the ego depletion perspective, we selected ego depletion as the mediator explaining how situational factors (perceptions of organizational politics) influence justice rule adherence. We controlled for other individual factors affecting justice rule adherence, including positive/negative affect, instrumental and value-expressive motives for justice behavior, and moral identity (Brebels et al., 2011; Qin et al., 2018). However, other important factors may remain uncontrolled. We encourage future researchers to adopt more rigorous and comprehensive designs, considering additional controls. Furthermore, researchers should explore other mechanisms linking perceptions of organizational politics to justice rule adherence and examine additional situational and individual factors and their interactions.

## References

*References are preserved exactly as provided in the original text.*

## Appendix: Scales Used in This Study

### Perceptions of Organizational Politics

The following items describe the organizational political situation in your branch (department) today. Based on your true feelings, select the appropriate response:

1. Today, there were many selfish behaviors occurring in my branch (or department)
2. Today, people spent too much time ingratiating themselves with those who could help them
3. Today, people engaged in behind-the-scenes maneuvering to get what they wanted
4. Today, people were more concerned with protecting themselves than with helping others
5. Today, people did things for their own benefit rather than for the benefit of the branch (or department)

6. Today, some people appeared friendly on the surface but “tripped others up” behind their backs

*1 = Never occurred, 2 = Rarely occurred, 3 = Hard to say, 4 = Occasionally occurred, 5 = Always occurred*

### **Ego Depletion**

To what extent do the following descriptions match your current state:

1. Right now, I need great effort to concentrate on one thing
2. Right now, I feel my willpower is gone
3. Right now, I feel distracted
4. Right now, I feel I cannot control my thoughts
5. Right now, I feel my energy is depleted

*1 = Very uncharacteristic, 2 = Somewhat uncharacteristic, 3 = Uncertain, 4 = Somewhat characteristic, 5 = Very characteristic*

### **Justice Rule Adherence**

To what extent do the following statements match your actual behavior today:

1. Today, before making decisions affecting employees, I sought their input
2. Today, when making decisions, I suppressed personal biases
3. Today, I maintained employees' dignity
4. Today, I treated employees politely
5. Today, I refrained from making improper remarks or comments
6. Today, I explained my decision-making logic to employees
7. Today, I considered employees' perspectives when making decisions
8. Today, I made decisions based on accurate and complete information
9. Today, I allowed employees to challenge or appeal decisions
10. Today, I made decisions in a consistent manner
11. Today, I provided timely feedback to employees
12. Today, I explained decision-making procedures to employees

1 = *Very uncharacteristic*, 2 = *Somewhat uncharacteristic*, 3 = *Uncertain*, 4 = *Somewhat characteristic*, 5 = *Very characteristic*

### **Leader Identity**

The following statements describe your perceptions of your leadership identity. Please indicate your agreement based on your true feelings:

1. Being a leader is very important to me
2. I see myself as a leader
3. I feel I possess the characteristics of a leader
4. It is very important to me that others see me as a leader

1 = *Strongly disagree*, 2 = *Somewhat disagree*, 3 = *Uncertain*, 4 = *Somewhat agree*, 5 = *Strongly agree*

### **Positive and Negative Affect**

To what extent are you currently experiencing the following emotions:

*Positive Affect:*

1. Excited
2. Enthusiastic
3. Alert
4. Inspired
5. Determined

*Negative Affect:*

6. Distressed
7. Upset
8. Scared
9. Nervous
10. Afraid

1 = *Very slightly or not at all*, 2 = *A little*, 3 = *Moderately*, 4 = *Quite a bit*, 5 = *Extremely*

### **Motives for Justice Behavior**

The following items describe your motives when treating subordinates fairly. Please indicate your agreement based on your actual situation:

*Instrumental Motives:*

1. Treating subordinates fairly maximizes my interests
2. Treating subordinates fairly is a means to protect my own interests
3. Treating subordinates fairly helps me obtain more rewards and benefits
4. Treating subordinates fairly helps me gain a good reputation
5. Treating subordinates fairly helps me achieve my goals
6. Treating subordinates fairly is beneficial for my promotion and career development

*Value-Expressive Motives:*

7. Treating subordinates fairly reflects my core values and beliefs
8. Treating subordinates fairly helps me become the person I want to be
9. Treating subordinates fairly makes me feel authentic
10. Treating subordinates fairly is consistent with my self-image
11. Treating subordinates fairly is an important part of who I am
12. Treating subordinates fairly is a virtue to me

*1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Somewhat disagree, 3 = Uncertain, 4 = Somewhat agree, 5 = Strongly agree*

**Moral Identity**

The following statements describe people' s different views. We want to know your opinion on each statement. There are no right or wrong answers as long as they reflect your true views. Please circle a number to express your agreement. The following are words describing a person' s character:

*Caring, compassionate, fair, friendly, generous, helpful, hardworking, honest, kind*

1. I would be happy to be someone who has these characteristics
2. Being someone who has these characteristics is important to me
3. I strongly desire to have these characteristics
4. I often wear clothes that identify me as having these characteristics
5. I would want others to know I have these characteristics

*1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Somewhat disagree, 3 = Uncertain, 4 = Somewhat agree, 5 = Strongly agree*

*Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.*

*Source: ChinaXiv –Machine translation. Verify with original.*