



Motivated inquiry: ideology shapes responses to the Christian Porter rape allegation

Morgan Weaving, Cordelia Fine & Nick Haslam

To cite this article: Morgan Weaving, Cordelia Fine & Nick Haslam (2022) Motivated inquiry: ideology shapes responses to the Christian Porter rape allegation, Australian Journal of Psychology, 74:1, 2061373, DOI: [10.1080/00049530.2022.2061373](https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530.2022.2061373)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530.2022.2061373>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



[View supplementary material](#)



Published online: 04 May 2022.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 739



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

BRIEF REPORT



Motivated inquiry: ideology shapes responses to the Christian Porter rape allegation

Morgan Weaving ^a, Cordelia Fine ^a and Nick Haslam ^b

^aSchool of Historical & Philosophical Studies, The University of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia; ^bMelbourne School of Psychological Sciences, The University of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

ABSTRACT

Objective: After learning of the rape allegation against the Attorney-General, Australians were divided in their support for an inquiry. We hypothesised that motivated reasoning on this issue would be associated with ideological preferences. We therefore examined whether perceptions of arguments about the inquiry could be explained by participants' political orientation, preference for hierarchy (SDO), and motivation to justify the gender status quo (GSJ).

Method: Three months after the allegation was made public, we recruited a gender-balanced sample of 554 Australians to complete an online survey.

Results: Participants believed that an article arguing for an inquiry was stronger than an article arguing against an inquiry. However, this effect was weaker among those on the right of the political spectrum and those high on SDO. Political orientation was also associated with differing evaluations of the article's authors: left-leaning participants found the pro-inquiry author more credible, but right-leaning participants did not. GSJ was not associated with differing evaluations of the articles or their authors.

Conclusions: These findings suggest that ideological preferences are associated with motivated reasoning when evaluating partisan allegations of sexual misconduct. Evaluations of such allegations appear to vary according to people's political attitudes and preferences for social equality or hierarchy.

KEY POINTS

What is already known about this topic:

- (1) In early 2021, Australians were deeply divided in their support for an inquiry into the rape allegation against Christian Porter.
- (2) Individuals tend to respond to political sexual misconduct allegations with a partisan bias.
- (3) Gender system justification (GSJ) and social dominance orientation (SDO) are associated with the denial of injustice towards women, and the maintenance of social hierarchies, respectively.

What this topic adds:

- (1) Ideological preferences can help to explain how people evaluate arguments about the inquiry.
- (2) Participants on the political left and those low on SDO evaluated a pro-inquiry article as significantly stronger than the anti-inquiry article, but this effect was reduced amongst those on the right and those high on SDO.
- (3) These findings provide evidence that political orientation and SDO are associated with motivated reasoning when evaluating partisan allegations of sexual misconduct.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 13 August 2021

Revised 10 January 2022

Accepted 23 March 2022

KEYWORDS

Motivated reasoning; gender; sexual assault; partisan bias; social dominance orientation; system justification

Introduction

In March 2021, Australia's Attorney-General revealed himself as the anonymous minister accused of a historical rape and issued an emphatic denial. So began Australia's second #MeToo reckoning, complete with countrywide protests, extensive media coverage, and polarised disputes. A particularly heated debate focused on the need for an

independent inquiry into the allegation. Advocates argued an inquiry was necessary to establish whether Porter was fit for office (Bornstein, 2021). Opponents argued an inquiry would subvert the presumption of innocence because the police had determined no action could be taken (Moses, 2021). Polling in March of 2021 found the public was deeply divided: 55% of Australians favoured an inquiry, but 45% believed Australia needed to 'respect the rule of law

CONTACT Morgan Weaving  mweaving@student.unimelb.edu.au

 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed at <https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530.2022.2061373>.

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

and can't have trial by mob', and 20% entirely opposed an inquiry (Guardian Essential Poll, 2021; The Australia Institute, 2021).

Theories of motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990) suggest this disagreement may reflect people's differing goals when evaluating the situation. When people have strong motivations to reach a desired conclusion, they are more likely to process information in a way that aligns with their pre-existing attitudes. As a result, they find arguments in favour of preferred conclusions stronger than opposing arguments (Kahan, 2016). The current study investigated whether differing political and social preferences were associated with motivated reasoning about the inquiry. Specifically, we examined whether arguments about the inquiry, and those propounding them, were evaluated less favourably when they drew conclusions contrary to people's ideological preferences.

Research demonstrates that political goals drive motivated reasoning. Individuals look more favourably on identical policies (Cohen, 2003), campaign tricks (Claassen & Ensley, 2016), and presidential actions (Christenson & Kriner, 2017) when enacted by members of their own party. Notably, Clark et al. (2021) found that republicans were less likely to perceive a sexual misconduct allegation as legitimate when it was aimed at a politician from their own party vs. an opposing party. Because Christian Porter is a member of the Liberal (right-leaning) party, we predicted that Australians on the political right would be motivated to oppose an inquiry, while those on the left would favour it. Consequently, we hypothesised that those on the political right would evaluate anti-inquiry arguments more favourably than pro-inquiry arguments, but this would be reversed for those on the left.

Ideological motivations beyond political orientation, such as beliefs about gender and social hierarchy, may also be implicated in inquiry-related attitudes. Gender system justification (GSJ) is the extent to which a person is motivated to defend, bolster, and legitimise the existing 'gender system', the social-relational context of male dominance (Jost & Kay, 2005). We predicted that high-GSJ individuals would be motivated to oppose an inquiry, and thus evaluate anti-inquiry arguments more positively than pro-inquiry arguments, because it would highlight the harmful treatment of women in Australia, and so disrupt the belief that existing gender relations are fair. Social dominance orientation (SDO) is an individual's support for group-based social hierarchies (Pratto et al., 1994). We predicted that high-SDO people would also be motivated to oppose an inquiry, as it would challenge the authority of a high-status

individual and so subvert hierarchical norms (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). We also expected that individuals low on GSJ and SDO would be motivated to support the inquiry, and thus evaluate arguments for the inquiry more favourably, because it aligns with their goals to disrupt the gender status quo and oppose inequality.

Materials and methods

Sample & procedure

An online survey was administered 3 months after the rape allegation became public (June 1st, 2021). A gender-balanced Australian sample ($n = 554$) was recruited using Qualtrics. Participants were randomly assigned to read an opinion piece that argued for ($n = 270$) or against ($n = 284$) an independent inquiry into the allegation. Articles were of a similar length and taken from the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Australian Financial Review*, respectively, but these outlets were not named. The research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee, University of Melbourne (21880). All participants provided informed consent and were compensated.

Measures

Participants completed a four-item measure of argument strength adapted from Zhao et al. (2011), which asked participants to rate how much the article offered a strong, convincing, compelling, and believable argument ($\alpha = .97$) and a two-item measure of author credibility adapted from Kahan, Jenkins-Smith and Braman (2011), which asked participants whether they believed the author was a knowledgeable and credible expert on legal matters involving sexual assault ($\alpha = .88$). On 9-point scales participants were also asked how familiar they were with the case against Christian Porter, and with the article author.

Jost and Kay's (2005) 8-item scale was used to assess gender system justification ($\alpha = .79$) and Pratto et al.'s (1994) 16-item scale measured social dominance ($\alpha = .92$). A sliding scale from 0 (very left leaning) to 100 (very right leaning) assessed political orientation. There were no significant differences between conditions on any measure except perceived argument strength. All multi-item scales were averaged across items. Study materials are provided in the supplemental materials. Descriptive statistics are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of participant demographics and study variables.

| | Anti-Inquiry | | Pro-Inquiry | | Range |
|-----------------------|--------------|-------|-------------|-------|-------|
| | Mean | SD | Mean | SD | |
| Age | 39.20 | 17.20 | 36.90 | 15.90 | 18-86 |
| Political Orientation | 49.90 | 27.80 | 48.10 | 26.60 | 0-100 |
| GSJ | 5.41 | 1.35 | 5.18 | 1.47 | 1-9 |
| SDO | 2.34 | 1.07 | 2.42 | 1.12 | 1-7 |
| Argument strength | 5.78 | 2.49 | 6.80 | 1.83 | 1-9 |
| Author credibility | 6.42 | 1.72 | 6.48 | 1.74 | 1-9 |

Results

Three regression models examined the interacting effects of GSJ, SDO, and political orientation with article stance on author credibility and argument persuasiveness (Tables 2 and 3). Article stance was coded so that anti-inquiry = -0.5 , pro-inquiry = 0.5 . The pro-inquiry article was seen as more persuasive overall in every analysis but neither author was seen as more credible. There was no main effect of GSJ, SDO and political orientation on either dependent variable, although GSJ unexpectedly predicted higher overall author credibility. SDO and political orientation interacted with article stance as hypothesised in three analyses. GSJ did not interact with article stance in either model.

Simple effects analyses examined the three interaction effects. Participants low on SDO (-1 SD) rated the pro-inquiry article as significantly stronger than the anti-inquiry article ($t(550) = 5.91$, $p < .001$), but this effect was diminished amongst those high on SDO

($+1$ SD; $t(550) = 2.00$, $p = .05$) (See Figure 1A). Those on the left (-1 SD) of the political spectrum perceived the pro-inquiry article as significantly stronger ($t(550) = 5.66$, $p < .001$) and perceived its author as more credible ($t(550) = 2.28$, $p = .02$). Those on the right ($+1$ SD) also perceived the pro-inquiry article as stronger ($t(550) = 2.10$, $p = .04$), but did not significantly differ in the authors' perceived credibility ($t(550) = -1.61$, $p = .11$). (See Figure 1B and 2).

Discussion

We hypothesised that Australians' differing ideological preferences motivated them to evaluate arguments about an inquiry into Christian Porter in ideologically aligned ways. We found that participants rated an article arguing for an inquiry as stronger than an article arguing against an inquiry. However, this effect was weaker or absent among those on the right of the political

Table 2. Effects of GSJ, SDO, political orientation and article stance on perceived argument strength.

| | GSJ Model | | SDO Model | | Political Orientation Model | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------|------------|-----------------------|---------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|---------|------------|
| | b | 95% CI | b | 95% CI | b | 95% CI | | |
| Article Stance | 1.02*** | 0.65, 1.39 | Article Stance | 1.04*** | 0.67, 1.40 | Article Stance | 1.02*** | 0.65, 1.38 |
| GSJ | -.02 | -.15, .11 | SDO | -.12 | -.29, .04 | Political Orientation | -.00 | -.01, .00 |
| Interaction | -.03 | -.29, .23 | Interaction | -.47** | -.80, -.14 | Interaction | -.02* | -.03, -.00 |
| <i>R</i> ² | 0.052 | | <i>R</i> ² | 0.069 | | <i>R</i> ² | 0.063 | |

Bonferroni-Holm corrections for six comparisons have been applied. Significance levels do not change when including age, gender, political orientation, GSJ, SDO, author familiarity, and case familiarity as control variables.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 3. Effects of GSJ, SDO, political orientation and article stance on perceived author credibility.

| | GSJ Model | | SDO Model | | Political Orientation Model | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------------------|--------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|--------|------------|
| | b | 95% CI | b | 95% CI | b | 95% CI | | |
| Article Stance | 0.11 | -.18, .40 | Article Stance | 0.08 | -.21, .37 | Article Stance | 0.07 | -.22, .36 |
| GSJ | 0.19*** | 0.09, .29 | SDO | -.13 | -.26, .00 | Political Orientation | 0.00 | -.00, .01 |
| Interaction | -.09 | -.29, .12 | Interaction | 0.02 | -.25, .28 | Interaction | -.01** | -.03, -.00 |
| <i>R</i> ² | 0.024 | | <i>R</i> ² | 0.007 | | <i>R</i> ² | 0.015 | |

Bonferroni-Holm corrections for six comparisons have been applied. Significance levels do not change when including age, gender, political orientation, GSJ, SDO, author familiarity, and case familiarity as control variables.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

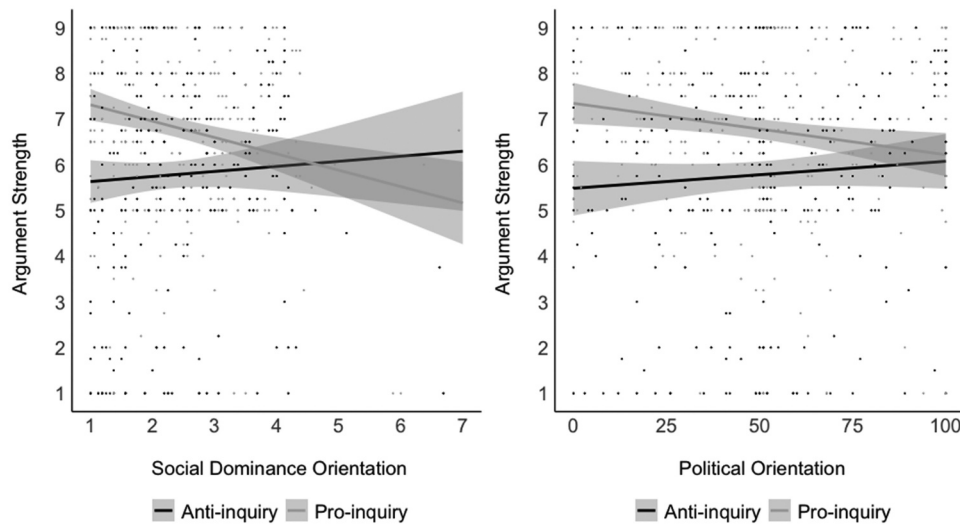


Figure 1. The interacting effects of SDO and article stance, and political orientation and article stance, on perceived argument strength. Grey bands reflect 95% confidence intervals.

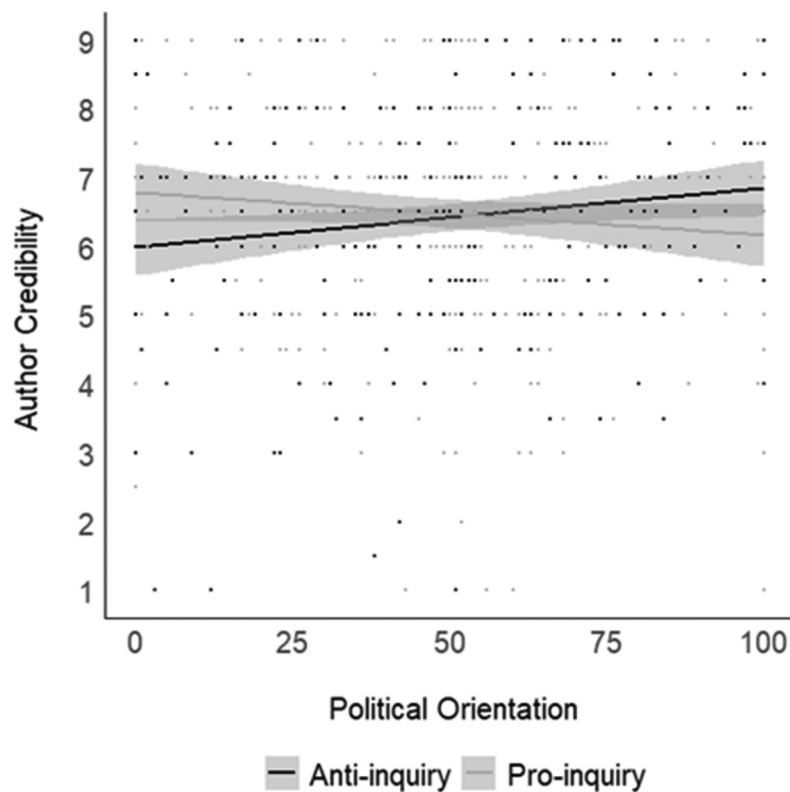


Figure 2. The interacting effect of political orientation and article stance on perceived author credibility. Grey bands reflect 95% confidence intervals.

spectrum and those high on SDO, relative to those on the left and those low on SDO. Political orientation was also associated with differing evaluations of the article authors: left-leaning participants found the pro-inquiry author more credible, whereas right-leaning participants found both authors equally credible.

These results indicate that political orientation and SDO contributed to motivated evaluations of the articles. They suggest that people judged arguments about the need for an inquiry in ways that aligned with their pre-existing ideological views by adjusting their assessment of the strength of the article and the credibility of its

author. Our findings are therefore consistent with prior evidence of partisan motivated reasoning surrounding sexual misconduct (Clark et al., 2021; Costa et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the mean argument strength of both articles was well above the midpoint, suggesting that most participants did not discount views contrary to their own.

We cannot draw strong causal conclusions about a motivated process from the current results. To do so, future research could experimentally manipulate the strength of people's hierarchical and political goals and examine effects on argument evaluation. Similarly, future research might examine other factors, such as civil libertarian concerns, that could influence support for misconduct inquiries.

We found no evidence that gender system justification was associated with differing evaluations of the articles or their authors. This finding is at odds with prior research, which has found a moderate relationship between GSJ and rape myth acceptance (e.g., Chappleau & Oswald, 2014). People high on GSJ tend to deny gender discrimination (Napier et al., 2020) and may not hold strong views on an inquiry because they sincerely believe it would clear the accused of wrongdoing. Nevertheless, the null finding suggests that divided public opinion about the Porter inquiry reflects generalised beliefs about social hierarchy and political orientation more than beliefs specifically about gender.

Australia's second #MeToo reckoning demonstrated that Australians remain divided about the best way to handle political sexual misconduct allegations. The current study investigated which ideological factors were associated with motivated reasoning surrounding the Porter inquiry, finding that evaluations of arguments about the inquiry diverged as a function of people's political attitudes and their preferred forms of social order. As #MeToo continues to provoke debate in Australia, this research provides timely information about the factors that may affect support for sexual misconduct investigations, and the sources of disagreements on this topic.

Acknowledgements

We thank Nicholas P. Tan for helpful discussions and comments.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in OSF at <http://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/JMNZC>.

ORCID

Morgan Weaving  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8519-868X>

Cordelia Fine  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6756-1668>

Nick Haslam  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1913-2340>

References

- Bornstein, J. (2021, March). Coalition's concern for rule of law a 'convenient fig leaf.' *Sydney Morning Herald*. Retrieved July 21, 2021, from <https://www.smh.com.au/national/coalition-s-concern-for-rule-of-law-a-convenient-fig-leaf-20210308-p578pc.html>
- Chappleau, K. M. & Oswald, D. L. (2014). A system justification view of sexual violence: Legitimizing gender inequality and reduced moral outrage are connected to greater rape myth acceptance. *Journal of Trauma and Dissociation*, 15(2), 204–218. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15299732.2014.867573>
- Christenson, D. P. & Kriner, D. L. (2017). Constitutional qualms or politics as usual? The factors shaping public support for unilateral action. *American Journal of Political Science*, 61(2), 335–349. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12262>
- Claassen, R. L. & Ensley, M. J. (2016). Motivated reasoning and yard-sign-stealing partisans: Mine is a likable rogue, yours is a degenerate criminal. *Political Behavior*, 38(2), 317–335. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-015-9313-9>
- Clark, E., Klas, A., Lizzio-Wilson, M., & Kothe, E. (2021). Partisan bias in responses to sexual misconduct allegations against male politicians. *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.23668/psycharchives.5290>
- Cohen, G. L. (2003). Party over policy: The dominating impact of group influence on political beliefs. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85(5), 808–822. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.85.5.808>
- Costa, M., Briggs, T., Chahal, A., Fried, J., Garg, R., Kriz, S., Lei, L., Milne, A., & Slayton, J. (2020). How partisanship and sexism influence voters' reactions to political #metoo scandals. *Research and Politics*, 7(3), 205316802094172. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168020941727>
- Guardian Essential Poll. (2021). *Most Australians back inquiry into rape allegation and fear "trial by mob."* Retrieved July 21, 2021, from <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/mar/16/most-australians-back-inquiry-into-allegation-and-fear-trial-by-mob>
- Jost, J. T. & Kay, A. C. (2005). Exposure to benevolent sexism and complementary gender stereotypes: Consequences for specific and diffuse forms of system justification. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 88(3), 498–509. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.88.3.498>
- Kahan, D. M. (2016). The politically motivated reasoning paradigm, part 1: What politically motivated reasoning is and how to measure it. *Emerging Trends in the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 29, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118900772.etrds0417>

- Kahan, D. M., Jenkins-Smith, H., & Braman, D. (2011). Cultural cognition of scientific consensus. *Journal of Risk Research*, 14(2), 147–174. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2010.511246>
- Kunda, Z. (1990). The case for motivated reasoning. *Psychological Bulletin*, 108(3), 480–498. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.108.3.480>
- Magee, J. C. & Galinsky, A. D. (2008). Social hierarchy: The reinforcing nature of social power and status. *The Academy of Management Annals*, 2(1), 351–398. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19416520802211628>
- Martini, M. & De Piccoli, N. (2020). Predicting bystander intention to intervene: The role of gender-specific system justification and rape myth acceptance for men and women. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 11. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00326>
- Moses, A. (2021, March). Without presumption of innocence we are on shifting sands. *Australian Financial Review*. Retrieved July 21, 2021, from <https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/without-presumption-of-innocence-we-are-on-shifting-sands-20210302-p5776p>
- Napier, J. L., Suppes, A., & Bettinsoli, M. L. (2020). Denial of gender discrimination is associated with better subjective well-being among women: A system justification account. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 50(6), 1191–1209. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2702>
- Pratto, F., Sidanius, J., Stallworth, L. M., & Malle, B. F. (1994). Social dominance orientation: A personality variable predicting social and political attitudes. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 67(4), 741–763. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.67.4.741>
- The Australia Institute. (2021). Poll: Support for an independent inquiry into the AG. Retrieved July 21, 2021, from <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/poll-support-for-an-independent-inquiry-into-the-ag/>
- Zhao, X., Strasser, A., Cappella, J. N., Lerman, C., & Fishbein, M. (2011). A measure of perceived argument strength: Reliability and validity. *Communication Methods and Measures*, 5(1), 48–75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19312458.2010.547822>



Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

Author/s:

Weaving, M;Fine, C;Haslam, N

Title:

Motivated inquiry: ideology shapes responses to the Christian Porter rape allegation

Date:

2022-12-31

Citation:

Weaving, M., Fine, C. & Haslam, N. (2022). Motivated inquiry: ideology shapes responses to the Christian Porter rape allegation. AUSTRALIAN JOURNAL OF PSYCHOLOGY, 74 (1), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530.2022.2061373>.

Persistent Link:

<http://hdl.handle.net/11343/322430>

License:

[CC BY](#)