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BRIEF REPORT

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

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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.

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

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 (α = .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 (α = .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 (α = .79) and Pratto et al.'s (1994) 16-item scale measured social dominance (α = .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		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Range
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 =−.5, pro-inquiry = .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
R2	0.052		*R2*	0.069		*R2*	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
R2	0.024		*R2*	0.007		*R2*	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.
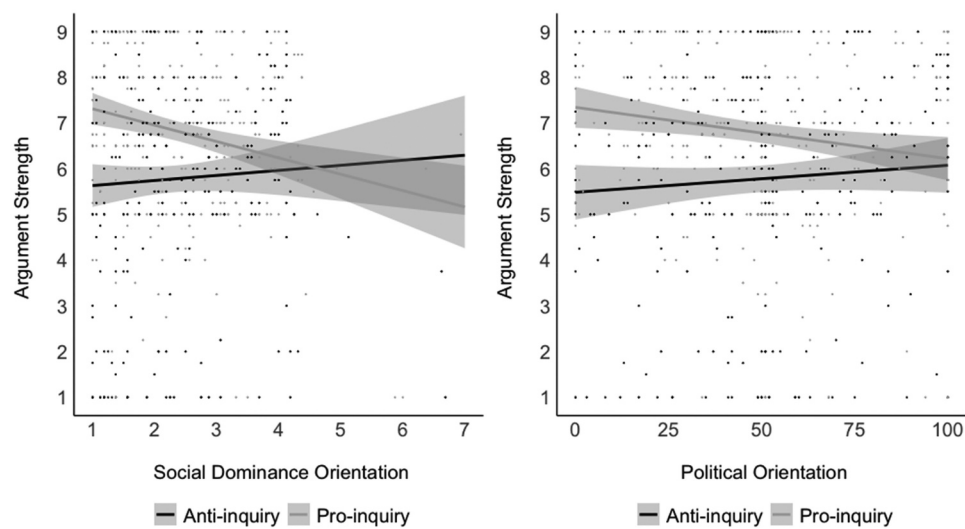* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

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.
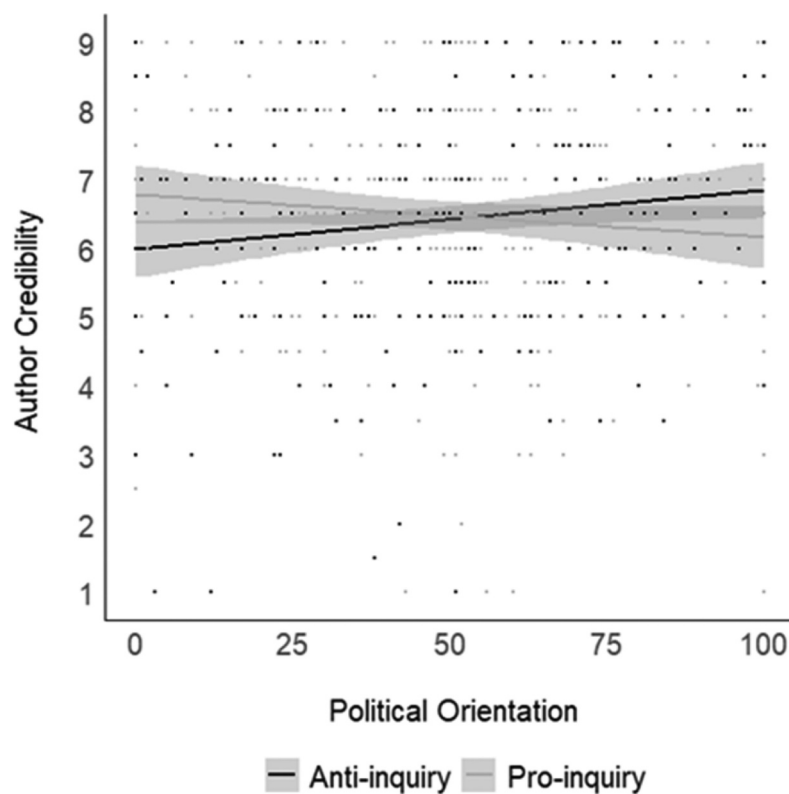

Figure 2. The interacting effect of political orientation and article stance on perceived author credibility. Grey bands reflect 95% confidence intervals.

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 partici-pants 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., Chapleau & 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.

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.

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