



Responses to Belief-Conflicting Information: Justification of Support for Donald Trump

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Journal of Social and Political Psychology, 2026, Vol. 14(1), 33–56, <https://doi.org/10.5964/jspp.16085>

Received: 2024-11-07 • **Accepted:** 2025-12-12 • **Published (VoR):** 2026-03-26

Handling Editor: Klaus Michael Reininger, University Medical Center Hamburg-Eppendorf, Hamburg, Germany

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Abstract

These studies take a dissonance theory perspective to understanding why individuals support Donald Trump as president of the United States despite accusations that he has engaged in sexual misconduct and illegal activity. Participants from the US provided open-ended responses to questions that asked why they support Trump and how they justify their support given the allegations against him. Study 1 was conducted in 2019 two months before Trump was impeached for abuse of power and obstruction of Congress. In this study, 7 categories of reasons for supporting Trump, and 3 categories of justification despite allegations, were identified. Study 2 was conducted in 2019 two days after a vote to impeach Trump. Study 3 was conducted in 2022 two days after Trump was arraigned for his involvement in the January 6, 2021, attack on the US Capitol Building. Results from Studies 2 and 3 replicated the categories of support and justification. Across studies, the reasons given to justify support of Trump despite allegations of wrongdoing were stating that they disbelieved the allegation, claiming that others do similar misdeeds, and stating that they care about his policies, not his personal life. The current results suggest that individuals in a naturalistic context may choose a number of different strategies in response to information that conflicts with their important beliefs, including denying the veracity of information, increasing the importance of consonant information, directing attention to the immoral acts of others, and making cognitions irrelevant to the dissonant relationship. Study 3 provided evidence that some of these processes may be influenced by dissonance discomfort. These



results are unlike those of most laboratory research on dissonance theory, in which participants are given only one dissonance reduction opportunity.

Keywords

cognitive dissonance, self-justification, motivated reasoning, defensive processing

In the vast majority of previous experiments on cognitive dissonance theory, researchers have provided participants with a single opportunity to reduce dissonance and have measured the extent to which they changed their attitudes or beliefs in response to this opportunity. In contrast, the current studies use open-ended responses to explore how participants react to information that conflicts with their beliefs when given a free opportunity to do so. In the current studies, individuals who were favorable towards President Donald Trump were asked why they support him and how they justify their support for him given evidence that he has behaved immorally and illegally. The responses were content-analyzed, suggesting several novel means by which individuals respond to information that counters their important beliefs. These findings add novel understanding to why people continue to support leaders who may have violated moral and legal societal standards.

In his original theory of cognitive dissonance, [Festinger \(1957\)](#) proposed that cognitions, defined broadly as pieces of knowledge, are either relevant or irrelevant to each other. If they are relevant to each other, they exist in a relationship of consonance or dissonance to each other. Inconsistency between cognitions occurs when two cognitions conflict with one another, such that one cognition implies that the other ought not to be true. Festinger proposed that the degree of dissonance (psychological discomfort) that a person experiences depends on both the number and importance of cognitions that are consistent and inconsistent with a particular cognition. Further, he proposed that this dissonance motivates one to do cognitive work to reduce the cognitive inconsistency. Individuals can reduce dissonance by adding consonant cognitions or elevating their importance, or subtracting dissonant cognitions or reducing their importance. The reduction of the cognitive discrepancy (e.g., attitude change) was proposed to work on the cognition that was least resistant to change.

Despite the breadth with which [Festinger \(1957\)](#) framed the theory, most research on dissonance has focused on a small number of modes of dissonance reduction. Dissonance experiments are designed to constrain participants' response to a single, easily measured, outcome. Typically, the researcher experimentally evokes dissonance, provides participants with a single overt dissonance reduction opportunity, and measures participants' response to this opportunity ([Harmon-Jones, 2019](#)). This is likely to poorly capture the breadth of responses to holding conflicting cognitions, since participants may respond in ways that were not measured.

One way dissonance may be evoked is by “belief disconfirmation,” that is, presenting participants with information that challenges their important beliefs. In belief disconfirmation studies, the dissonance reduction opportunity typically measures the extent to which participants intensify their original belief (Batson, 1975). However, this measure is unlikely to fully capture the ways in which individuals respond to belief-disconfirming information, particularly in a naturalistic context in which an explicit route is not necessarily presented.

In experiments testing dissonance theory, it is assumed that participants will use the dissonance-reduction opportunity that is presented to them, rather than reduce dissonance by some other route. Indeed, a few studies have suggested that when participants are presented with two opportunities to reduce dissonance, they will use the one presented first more than the later one (Götz-Marchand et al., 1974; Simon et al., 1995). Presumably this is because reducing dissonance via the first opportunity reduces the motivation to further reduce dissonance. However, it is still possible that some participants also reduce dissonance via routes that are not measured and/or continue to experience some dissonance after being presented with the dissonance-reduction opportunity.

Belief disconfirmation is one of the lesser-explored dissonance paradigms. Nevertheless, several responses to belief disconfirmation have previously been identified. In Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter’s (1956) original participant-observer study of a doomsday cult, the participants sought consensual validation of their beliefs by proselytizing when the continent failed to be destroyed on the expected day. In a later study, believers in Jesus’ divinity were found to intensify this belief when they were exposed to information that claimed that the death and resurrection of Jesus was a hoax, particularly when they accepted the truth of the contradictory information (Batson, 1975). Individuals who believe that God is good and powerful have also been found to appeal to a superordinate belief that would integrate the contradictory information (“God works in mysterious ways”), when exposed to a news story about a tragedy striking believers as they prayed for safety (Burris et al., 1997). In addition, individuals look longer at evidence that disconfirms their beliefs than information that agrees with their beliefs, and judge this disconfirming evidence as weaker (Edwards & Smith, 1996). Furthermore, in another study, individuals who were in favor of or opposed to capital punishment read an article that suggested that capital punishment increases crime and another one that suggested that it deters crime; they intensified their original belief and judged the evidence in favor of their original belief as stronger than opposing evidence (Lord et al., 1979).

A current case of collective belief disconfirmation can be found for the supporters of Donald Trump, the 45th and 47th president of the United States. Even before Trump took office in 2017, he was confronted with allegations of morally questionable statements and behavior. For instance, several women accused Trump of sexual assault (Nelson & Crockett, 2017). Furthermore, video footage emerged showing Trump boasting about

his attempt to seduce a married woman and discussing sexual assault through kissing women without consent (Fahrenthold, 2016). Once elected, it was furthermore reported that Trump's lawyer paid hush money to adult film star Stormy Daniels to prevent her from speaking out about a sexual encounter while Trump was married with his then pregnant wife Melania (Rothfield & Palazzolo, 2018).

Given that most individuals are motivated to think of themselves as moral (Aronson, 1969), Trump supporters' favorability towards Trump along with the awareness that he has been accused of violating their important values should create dissonance. During his presidency, supporters were also confronted with information that questioned Trump's image as a law-abiding citizen: Trump, for instance, allegedly pressured Ukrainian president Zelensky to investigate claimed wrongdoings of Joe Biden and his son Hunter Biden. In order to pressure Zelensky, Trump was accused of withholding military aid and an invitation to the White House, which would constitute abuse of power (Barrett et al., 2019). These allegations were included in the impeachment articles in the first impeachment of Donald Trump (Raju et al., 2019).

After the loss of the 2020 presidential election, Trump was again accused of questionable and possibly illegal behavior as a political figure. For example, his speech on the day of the United States Capitol attack on January 6, 2021, contained misrepresentations about the preceding election (Cabral, 2021). Furthermore, Trump asked his supporters to "fight", to "walk down to the Capitol", and to prevent the counting of the electoral votes (Blake, 2021). Shortly afterwards, a crowd of 2000 to 2500 people attempted (with partial success) to storm the US Capitol building. His involvement in the attack formed the basis for Trump's subsequent second impeachment trial (Fandos, 2021) charging him with "incitement of insurrection". Despite these and other incidents where information about Trump was discrepant with supporters' beliefs, many seemed to maintain their admiration and support.

A recent study showed another possible response to belief disconfirmation – drawing attention to the foibles of an outgroup member (Harmon-Jones et al., 2020). In this study, participants reported their favorability towards President Trump, and then were randomly assigned to read either a neutral article about the history of space exploration or an article that detailed accusations of sexual assault and misconduct that have been brought against Trump. The sex scandal article began, "President Donald Trump has been accused of rape, sexual assault, and sexual harassment, including non-consensual kissing or groping, by over 20 women since the 1980s. The accusations have resulted in 3 reported instances of litigation," and continued to provide the details of each of these allegations. The neutral article also included political content such as, "Space exploration has often been used as a proxy competition for geopolitical rivalries such as the Cold War. The early era of space exploration was driven by a "Space Race" between the Soviet Union and the United States." It was non-partisan and included no criticisms of Trump. The sex scandal article was expected to evoke dissonance in those participants

who supported Trump. After reading their assigned article, participants then rated their likelihood to share a meme that derogated Trump's political rival Hillary Clinton, which served as the measure of dissonance reduction. As predicted, results showed that, for participants in the sex scandal condition, those who were highly favorable towards Trump and had high belief in the veracity of the article were more likely to share the meme (Harmon-Jones et al., 2020).

This published study also included two open-ended questions, one asking why participants support Trump and one asking how they justify this support given the highly publicized allegations that he has engaged in sexual misconduct and illegal activity. In Study 1 of the present research, we performed secondary data analysis by coding the answers to the two open-ended questions into categories to better understand the reasons why Trump is viewed favorably by his supporters and to identify naturalistic responses to belief disconfirming information that participants may have used.

Study 1

Method

Participants were American individuals from MTurk who volunteered in exchange for \$2.50USD (they were not required to be citizens or voters). This sample was from a larger dataset of 409 individuals from which quantitative results have been previously published (Harmon-Jones et al., 2020). Of these, 217 rated their support for Trump a 1 (not at all favorable) and were excluded. Another 64 gave a nonsensical response to the open-ended questions (i.e., examples, one-word answers, text copied from the Internet that did not answer the questions). In this and the other studies, these exclusion criteria were based on the guidelines from Chmielewski and Kucker (2020). The remaining 128 (75 men, 53 women; $M_{\text{Age}} = 39.05$, $SD = 11.61$) rated their favorability towards Trump at least a 2 (slightly favorable) and provided an intelligible answer to at least one of the open-ended questions on why they support Trump. Their reported ethnicities were White 75.0%, Black 9.4%, Asian 3.1%, Hispanic 7.8%, and Other 4.7%. They participated in this study on October 31, 2019 (start and end date), at a time when support was building in the US legislature to call for Trump's impeachment. All 3 studies in this article were approved by the Human Research Ethics Approval Panel – C: Behavioral Sciences at the University of New South Wales.

After participants provided written informed consent, participants answered demographic questions (gender, age, ethnicity, first language, religious affiliation). They also reported how religious they considered themselves (1 = not at all to 7 = very), their employment status (1 = unemployed to 6 = employed greater than full time), and their yearly household income (1 = < \$20,000 to 7 = > \$200,000). Then, they answered the following questions: 1) How much do you try to follow the rules/stick to the rules/respect

authority; 2) How much do you care about justice; 3) How much do you believe in one true religion; 4) How often do you tend to vote for politically liberal candidates? These questions were answered on 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much) scales. Next, they were asked to indicate their city and state of current residence; which social media platforms they used (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat); how often they used social media sites (1 = never to 8 = several times per day); how often they shared memes on social media (1 = never to 8 = several times per day); how often they read online or paper newspapers (1 = never to 7 = very often).

Then, they answered the following questions: 1) How favorable are you toward Donald Trump as president of the United States at the current moment (1 = not at all favorable to 7 = very favorable); 2) The US House of Representatives recently voted to approve two articles of impeachment against President Trump. To what extent do you agree with this statement? The House of Representatives made the correct decision (to approve impeachment) (1 = disagree completely to 7 = agree completely).

After they responded to these questions, they were instructed to read the following news article carefully and that they would be asked “questions about its content and about your thoughts and opinions on the article and the events that it reported upon.”

They were randomly assigned to read one of two articles. One article was titled, “Donald Trump sexual misconduct allegations.” It was presented on 3 separate screens and it contained a total of 495 words. It summarized the allegations of sexual misconduct by Trump. It was based heavily on the summary provided in Wikipedia at the time we created the study. The other article was titled, “Space Exploration.” It was also presented on 3 separate screens and it contained a total of 502 words. It was a neutral article about the history of space exploration involving multiple countries, and it was also based on a summary provided in Wikipedia at the time we created the study. See [Supplementary Materials](#) for exact wording. After reading the article, participants were asked to report how likely they were to share a meme (these results were previously published).

Next, participants were informed: “We are interested in the reasons why people do or do not support Donald Trump as president.” And they were instructed to answer one of the two following open-ended questions based on whether they were favorable or unfavorable toward Trump: 1) “If you are favorable toward Donald Trump as president, what are the most important reasons for your support for his presidency”; 2) “If you are unfavorable toward Donald Trump as president, what are the most important reasons why you do not support his presidency?” We included these questions to provide context to why Trump was supported. We also thought participants might give more honest and valid responses if they were asked both positive and negative questions about Trump, as recommended in guidelines for methods ([Harmon-Jones, Harmon-Jones, et al., 2025](#)).

After that, participants were informed: “The media has included many reports that Donald Trump has engaged in illegal or sexually immoral activities. We are interested in how people feel about this.” And they were instructed to answer one of the two

following open-ended questions based on whether they were favorable or unfavorable toward Trump: 1) “If you support Trump, why do you support him?” and 2), “Trump has been accused of sexual misconduct; if you support him, how do you justify your support given these allegations?” The second question was more specifically relevant to dissonance because it explicitly asked participants to justify their support given allegations of misconduct, whereas the first question asked for their reasons for support without mentioning possible misconduct.

Then, within each article condition, participants were asked 4 multiple-choice questions related to their article, to assess memory for the article’s contents. Following those questions, participants were asked the following: How accurate do you believe the information presented in the newspaper article is? (1 = not at all accurate to 7 = very accurate).

Results

The open-ended responses were coded by a judge (first author) to identify the themes expressed therein. This single rater read all of the responses to get an overall sense of the themes they included. She then created categories that reflected these themes. She then reread the responses and assigned a 1 to the category if the participant’s response included the theme and a 0 if it did not. Responses were allowed to fit multiple categories. A second judge independently coded the responses and reliability was good for the categories of economic reasons and not being a career politician ($ICC > .75$; Koo & Li, 2016). Reliability was acceptable for the other categories ($ICC > .5$), except for *good character* which was poor ($ICC < .5$), suggesting that this category may be difficult to categorize. Experimental condition did not influence open-ended responses.

In answer to the question of why participants support Trump, the most frequent category was economic reasons. This was followed by Trump’s communication style, his competence, Trump’s good character, that he is not a career politician, that he cares about Americans and is committed to making America great, and his specific policies/issues. An additional 18.8% of the responses could not be placed in any of these categories (see Table 1).

Table 1*Reasons Given for Supporting Trump*

Reasons categories	Examples	Percent	ICC
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The economy is the best it has done in years. • He is making America get out of debt more than anyone ever has. 	29.7	.86
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He does not back down from the media one bit. • He is very communicative with America and talks in a VERY informal way. • He isn't afraid to speak his mind in this era of forced political correctness. 	19.5	.66
Competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He's someone who can get things accomplished. • ...he gets things done. 	21.1	.56
Good character	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He brings honesty to the White House. • Donald Trump is a very genuine person. 	18.0	.47
Not a politician	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He's not an entrenched politician like those we've had in the past. 	11.7	.84
Cares about America	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He is the only president that has worked for the good of the US and not its enemies or the Deep State. 	10.2	.64
Policies and issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He is keeping illegals from getting in which reduce crime... • Our country needs a president who cares about babies and our borders and our military. 	8.6	.61
Unable to categorize	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • let's give him a chance once • i like his stance on almost everthing 	18.8	.64

Note. $N = 128$.

Of the participants, 113 answered the second question regarding how they justify their support for Trump given the reports of his sexual misconduct. In response to this question, three non-exclusive categories were identified (see Table 2). The most common category of responses was explicitly disbelieving the accusations, and the other two categories were stating that they support Trump based on his policies not his personal life, and pointing out that other politicians also behave immorally. In addition, 9.7% provided responses that could not be placed into these categories. A second judge coded the responses and reliability was good ($ICC > .75$) for all categories.

Table 2*Justifications for Supporting Trump Despite Allegations*

Justifications categories	Examples	Percent	ICC
Disbelieve accusations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I think the reports of his misconduct are false and fake. I don't believe the media's lies. 	52.2	.77
Policies matter, not his personal life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The policies are what affect the people, and the policies are what I care about. ...what he does in private is none of the public's business, since I feel he is running the country well 	29.2	.93
Others do similar misdeeds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All politicians seem to be caught talking that way. I don't doubt that most presidents have been immoral in their personal lives. 	31.0	.78
Unable to categorize	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I like his immoral activities I support his behavior and encourage others to follow him. 	9.7	.68

Note. $N = 113$.

Study 2

Study 2 was conducted on December 20, 2019 (start and end date), two days after the vote to impeach Trump for the first time was passed by the US House of Representatives. The charges brought against Trump were abuse of power and obstruction of Congress. Trump was accused of soliciting foreign interference in the upcoming election and illegally influencing Ukraine to investigate Trump's political opponent. We were interested to examine whether their reasons for supporting Trump or their justification of this support differed from what was found in Study 1. Because Study 1's procedures were already approved by our ethics committee and there was no time to get a new ethics approval to coincide with these new allegations, we simply re-started data collection using the procedures of Study 1 to assess whether support for Trump had changed.

Method

Similar to Study 1, American participants were recruited from MTurk and paid \$2.50 USD for their participation (they were not required to be citizens or voters). Of the 713 individuals who participated in this study, 309 rated their favorability towards Trump as a 1 and were excluded, another 10 did not answer this question and were excluded. Another 221 participants gave non-sensical responses (examples, one-word answers, text copied from the Internet that did not answer the questions). The remaining 173 (105 men, 68 women, age $M = 37.05$, $SD = 12.28$) rated their favorability towards Trump at least a 2

(slightly favorable) and provided an intelligible answer to at least one of the open-ended questions on why they support Trump. Their reported ethnicities were White 76.3%, Black 4.0%, Asian 4.0%, Hispanic 8.7%, and other 6.9%. The open-ended responses were coded by two judges, similarly to Study 1.

Participants completed the same MTurk study that was used in Study 1 and they were prevented from completing it if they had already participated in Study 1. They were given the same instructions and questions that were used in Study 1.

Results

In answer to the question of why participants support Trump, similar themes were identified to those categorized in Study 1, plus one additional category (see Table 3). In this sample, the most frequent category was economic reasons, followed closely by specific policies/issues. The other categories were that Trump cares about America and her people, his competence, his good character, his communication style, and that he is not a politician. The new category was that Trump has been treated unfairly by his enemies. An additional 6.9% of the responses could not be placed in any of these categories.

The second judge (who also coded Study 1) independently coded the responses and reliability was good for the categories of economic reasons, caring about America, and unfair treatment ($ICC > .75$). It was acceptable for the other categories ($ICC > .5$; Koo & Li, 2016).

Of the participants, 164 answered the second question regarding how they justify their support for Trump given the reports of his sexual misconduct. In response to this question, three non-exclusive categories that were found in Study 1 were again identified (see Table 4). The most common was explicitly disbelieving the accusations, followed by stating that they support Trump based on his policies not his personal life, and pointing out that others also behave immorally. A new category also emerged: explicitly stating that they do not care about the allegations (“I really don’t care about these activities”, “I don’t care about his sex life in the past”). In addition, 17.1% provided responses that could not be placed into these categories. A second judge coded the responses, and reliability was good ($ICC > .75$) for all categories except stating that Trump had been treated unfairly, which had adequate reliability ($ICC > .5$).

In both Studies 1 and 2, participants indicated that they supported Trump because of economic issues. To unpack the meaning of economic issues, we collected examples of some direct quotations from the open-ended responses: 1) “The economic policies of Donald Trump, which were outlined in his campaign pledges, include trade protectionism, immigration reduction.” 2) “I would support Donald Trump do (sic) to his views on Trade Deals, Taxes, and Economic Issues.” 3) “Almost 4 million jobs created since election. More Americans are now employed than ever recorded before in our history, created more than 400,000 manufacturing jobs.”

Table 3*Reasons Given for Supporting Trump*

Reasons categories	Examples	Percent	ICC
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The economy is thriving and he has balls. • The economy and the lessening of red tape. 	37.0	.83
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He is more transparent than most politicians. • He tells it like it is. 	12.7	.65
Competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I believe he is doing a good job. • He has what it takes to get the job done. 	20.8	.66
Good character	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I like his willpower. • He is very honorable. 	19.7	.60
Not a politician	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He is NOT a politician. He is not playing the political game. 	11.0	.64
Cares about America	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The love he has for the people. 	21.4	.88
Policies and issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He is showing that our military is still a force to be feared. • He is for Capitalism and against Socialism, he's against abortion and for Christianity. 	34.7	.73
Unfair treatment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I was watching the impeachment hearing yesterday and the democrats flat out said they simply dislike him. What a horseshit reason to want to impeach a president. I hope these democrats and liberals get what they deserve. • He has been put through hatred hell by his insane political enemies. 	12.7	.86
Unable to categorize	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I think he is good. • I am always favorable to Donald Trump. 	6.9	.56

Note. $N = 173$.

Table 4*Justifications for Supporting Trump Despite Allegations*

Justifications categories	Examples	Percent	ICC
Disbelieve accusations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The media has made it a habit to spread spurious lies about Donald Trump because they are still salty that he dared win the election. • If he has done something illegal, show me the evidence. 	48.2	.85
Policies matter, not his personal life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As for immoral actions, I don't really like Trump as a person, but I didn't vote for him to be my best friend. I voted for him to be my president, and as long as he does good at that, his person issues and morality are none of my business anymore than anyone else's. 	29.3	.83
Others do similar misdeeds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He probably did some things in business that all wealthy businessmen do that may have been illegal but nothing compared to ruining America, as most politicians on left are trying to do. 	25.0	.76
Explicitly do not care about the misdeeds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I don't care about his sex life or what it does involve. • Things he did in his past are not of interest to me in my current support of him. 	15.6	.67
Unable to categorize	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I always stand beside Trump always in any situation. 	17.1	.87

Note. $N = 164$.

Study 3

Method

This study was conducted on October 17, 2022 (start and end date), two days after Trump was arraigned for election interference. There were initially 192 participants, and 3 were excluded for rating their support for Trump as a 1. Another 2 were excluded for not providing intelligible answers to the questions, leaving 187 for analyses. Of these individuals, 173 (96 men, 91 women, age $M = 45.27$, $SD = 13.66$) responded to at least one of the open-ended questions. Their reported ethnicities were White 85.0%, Black 3.2%, Asian 2.7%, Hispanic 5.9%, and other 0.5%. These participants were recruited from Prolific with the pre-screening condition being that they indicated they had voted for Trump in 2020. Participants provided written informed consent. As in the first two studies, the open-ended responses were coded by two judges (the first author and a new second coder was added to this study). The second open-ended question was slightly rephrased: "If you were favorable toward Donald Trump as president, how do you reconcile your

support for his presidency with the reports that he engaged in illegal activities related to the 2020 election and January 6?”

As in Studies 1 and 2, prior to responding to the open-ended questions, participants answered demographic questions (gender, age, ethnicity, first language, religious affiliation). They also reported how religious they considered themselves (1 = not at all to 7 = very), their employment status (1 = unemployed to 6 = employed greater than full time), and their yearly household income (1 = < \$20,000 to 7 = > \$200,000). Then, they answered the following questions: 1) How much do you try to follow the rules/stick to the rules/respect authority; 2) How much do you care about justice; 3) How much do you believe in one true religion; 4) How often do you tend to vote for politically liberal candidates? These questions were answered on 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much) scales. Next, they were asked to indicate their city and state of current residence; which social media platforms they used (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat); how often they used social media sites (1 = never to 8 = several times per day); and how often they shared memes on social media (1 = never to 8 = several times per day); and how often they read online or paper newspapers (1 = never to 7 = very often). Then, they answered the following questions: 1) How favorable were you toward Donald Trump when he was president of the United States (1 = not at all favorable to 7 = very favorable); 2) The US Congress is holding hearings to investigate the protest that occurred on January 6, 2021 at the US Capitol. To what extent do you agree with the following statement. Congress made the correct decision to investigate these events (1 = disagree completely to 7 = agree completely).

After they responded to these questions, they were instructed to read the following news article carefully and that they would be asked “questions about its content and about your thoughts and opinions on the article and the events that it reported upon.” The article was titled, “Summary of the Hearing on the Events of January 6, 2021.” It was presented on 3 separate screens and it contained a total of 761 words. It summarized the public hearings of the United States House Select Committee on the January 6 attack that occurred between primarily in June and July 2022. It was based heavily on the summary provided in Wikipedia at the time we created the study. See [Supplementary Materials](#) for exact wording.

After this article, participants were asked to indicate whether or not they had read the article. Then, they were asked the following: 1) How accurate do you believe the information presented in the newspaper article is? (1 = not at all accurate to 7 = very accurate); 2) Thinking back to the article you read, to what degree did it contradict or dispute what you had previously believed? (1 = It did not contradict what I believe at all to 7 = It contradicted what I believe an extreme amount); 3) Thinking back to the article you read, if it contradicted or disputed what you had previously believed, to what extent did this cause you to feel bothered, uncomfortable, or upset? (1 = The article did not contradict what I had previously believed to 8 = The article contradicted what I previously believed and I felt extremely bothered). This last question was included

to measure dissonance discomfort (Elliot & Devine, 1994; Harmon-Jones, Willardt, & Harmon-Jones, 2025).

Next, participants were asked 4 multiple-choice questions to assess their memory for the article they read. One example question was: According to the news article, in which states did election officials say they had been pressured to "find votes" for Donald Trump and change the results in their jurisdictions? 1) Massachusetts and Connecticut; 2) Georgia and Arizona; 3) Oregon and California; 4) Florida and Virginia.

After these questions, participants were informed that we were interested in the reasons why people did or did not support Donald Trump as president. They were asked to answer only 1 of the 2 open-ended questions: 1) If you were favorable toward Donald Trump as president, what are the most important reasons for your support for his presidency; 2) If you were unfavorable toward Donald Trump as president, what are the most important reasons why you did not support his presidency?

Next, they were informed that: The media has included many reports that Donald Trump has engaged in illegal activities related to the 2020 election and January 6. We are interested in how people feel about this. Please select only one of the two questions below to answer, regarding these issues. Select the question depending on whether you were favorable or unfavorable towards Donald Trump's presidency. Please write, in detail, your thoughts and feelings about these activities. You will have one minute to write your response before the button to advance to the next page becomes visible.

The questions were: 1) If you were favorable toward Donald Trump as president, how do you reconcile your support for his presidency with the reports that he engaged in illegal activities related to the 2020 election and January 6? 2) If you were unfavorable toward Donald Trump as president, how do the reports that he engaged in illegal activities related to the 2020 election and January 6 affect your opinion regarding his presidency?

Then, participants were to "Please select only one of the two questions below to answer. Select the question depending on whether you were favorable or unfavorable towards Donald Trump's presidency and whether your feelings have changed over time. Please write, in detail, your thoughts and feelings about why your views changed. If your favorability toward Donald Trump's presidency has not changed, simply write, "My views have not changed." You will have one minute to write your response before the button to advance to the next page becomes visible."

The questions were: 1) If you were previously favorable toward Donald Trump as president, but are now unfavorable, why did your views change? When did your views change and how have they changed? 2) If you were previously unfavorable toward Donald Trump as president, but are now favorable, why did your views change? When did your views change and how have they changed?

Finally, participants were asked to provide any comments they wished to share about the study. Then, they were provided a short explanation of the reasons for conducting the study.

Results

The categories of reasons given for supporting Trump were similar to those in Studies 1 and 2. The most common categories were policies and issues and economic reasons, followed by that Trump cares about America. Communication, competence, good character, that he is not a politician, and that he had been treated unfairly were less common. Agreement between the raters was good ($ICC > .75$) for economic reasons, not a politician, cares about America, and treated unfairly. Agreement was acceptable ($ICC > .5$) for communication, competence, and policies and issues. Agreement was poor ($ICC < .5$) for unable to categorize and for good character (see Table 5).

Table 5

Reasons Given for Supporting Trump

Reasons categories	Examples	Percent	ICC
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He managed our economy so much better than ever! Our economy has tanked since. 	43.9	.82
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • because he is an energetic president with the mentality of a successful businessman, who tells the truth bluntly. 	14.4	.55
Competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He is a strong leader, makes excellent financial and business decisions, and has a great amount of love and pride in the United States. • He is well respected and strong and I share most of his political beliefs. 	15.0	.60
Good character	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He never lied to we the people and he fights for us still. 	7.5	.15
Not a politician	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He was NOT a politician. 	17.6	.75
Cares about America	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trump stood up for our country. He supported the military and added tariffs to keeps jobs in America. I felt safer when he was President. 	30.5	.80
Policies and issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • His energy and foreign policies. The rest of the world were scared to mess with the US. • Unemployment was low and minorities gained. 	44.4	.60
Treated unfairly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All of the liberal lobby was against him. All the networks were against him except fox news. 	2.1	.75
Unable to categorize	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He was the only thing standing in between a societal collapse and a great depression with the full robbing of the middle class. 	5.3	.23

Note. $N = 177$ for ICCs and $N = 187$ for percentages. The first 10 participants were mutually coded together by the two raters, so these were not included in calculating the ICCs.

In response to the second question, on why they continue to support Trump despite allegations against him, the categories were also similar to Studies 1 and 2, with the addition of a category for those who said they supported Trump in the past but no longer support him. Agreement between the raters was good ($ICC > .75$) for disbelieving the allegations and no longer supporting him. Agreement was acceptable ($ICC > .5$) for others doing similar misdeeds. Agreement was poor ($ICC < .5$) for policies matter not his personal life and not caring about the allegations (see Table 6).

Table 6

Justifications for Supporting Trump Despite Allegations

Justifications categories	Examples	Percent	ICC
Disbelieve accusations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> President Trump did NOT incite violence on J6. He said he knew people would be going to PEACEFULLY PROTEST at the capital. 	61.4	.80
Policies matter, not his personal life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I reconcile them by looking at his actions while in office. His policies were great for the country and made many improvements while in office. 	9.8	.48
Others do similar misdeeds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Every president has probably been involved in some unscrupulous activity that we don't hear about. 	12.5	.58
Do not care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I didn't care. I feel the left used very dirty tricks on Trump and created the conditions for hostility. 	2.2	.17
No longer support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> After all of the hearings and as information came out, I lost respect for Trump. It was fine that he contested the results through the courts, but when the courts decided the election was fair, he should have accepted the results. I wish Trump had behaved differently. 	13.0	.87
Unable to categorize	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I still am unsure what to think about the reports he engaged in illegal activities in regards to the election and January 6. 	8.7	.33

Note. $N = 174$ for ICCs and $N = 184$ for percentages. The first 10 participants were mutually coded together by the two raters, so these were not included in calculating the ICCs.

Correlations of Continuous Measures (Discomfort)

Next, we assessed correlations of how much discomfort participants experienced upon reading about Trump's illegal behaviors ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 2.11$) with other relevant variables. The open-ended responses were coded 0 if they were not provided by participants and 1 if they were provided. As shown in Table 7, feeling bothered correlated positively with Trump favoritism, religiosity, and not believing the accusations. In addition, feeling bothered correlated negatively with the "politics-not-personal" and "no-longer-support"

open-ended responses, but these correlations should be regarded cautiously because there were so few responses of these types.

Table 7*Correlations Between Variables*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Bothered	–						
2. Fav Trump	.38***	–					
3. Religious	.15*	.17*	–				
4. They all do	-.08	-.04	.09	–			
5. Don't believe	.29***	.29***	.10	-.21**	–		
6. Pol-not-person	-.15*	-.13	-.04	-.02	-.35***	–	
7. No support	-.19**	-.37***	-.12	-.14	-.42***	-.13	–

Note. Fav Trump is rated favorability toward Trump. Pol-not-person is politics-not-personal open-ended response. No support is no longer support Trump.

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

To explore whether dissonance discomfort mediated the effect of favorability toward Trump on disbelieving the accusations, we conducted a mediation analysis. The indirect effect was significant, $estimate = 0.03$, $SE = 0.01$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.05], $z = 2.54$, $p = .011$, suggesting that mediation occurred. The direct and total effects were also significant, $estimate = 0.08$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [0.03, 0.14], $z = 2.84$, $p = .005$; $estimate = 0.12$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [0.06, 0.17], $z = 4.05$, $p < .001$.

General Discussion

The current research explored ways individuals react to information that conflicts with their beliefs (cognitive dissonance), using the context of supporters of US President Trump during times when the news cycle reported allegations that he engaged in illegal and immoral activities. In Studies 1 and 2, participants who supported Trump were asked how they justified this support given the allegations of sexual misconduct. In Study 3, they were asked how they reconciled their support for his presidency with the reports that he engaged in illegal activities related to the 2020 election and January 6. Across studies, participants' responses fell primarily into 3 categories: 1) they stated that they disbelieved the accusations; 2) they stated that his policies mattered and his personal life did not; and 3) they stated that other politicians engage in similar illegal/immoral behaviors. In Studies 2 and 3, an additional category emerged: 4) Participants stated that they do not care about the allegations. In Study 3, a new category emerged: 5) a small

minority of participants noted that while they supported Trump in the past, they no longer support him.

It appears that the justifications (dissonance reduction) participants used differed somewhat between the studies that focused on Trump's sexual misdeeds and the study that focused on his misdeeds surrounding the election. Compared to Studies 1 and 2, in Study 3, participants expressed somewhat greater disbelief of evidence against Trump and lesser "policies-over-personal behavior" and "others-do-it" justifications. These differences may have occurred because Study 3 concerns evidence that participants may have found to be less ambiguous (documented behavior regarding January 6) than the evidence presented in Studies 1 and 2 (accusations of sexual misconduct). For the January 6 events, saying that "others do it" will not work easily as no other US president has attempted undermine a presential election. In addition, the "policies are more important than personal behavior" may also be a less plausible justification for the January 6 events because undermining elections is a problematic policy in a democratic country like the US. Because the evidence against Trump may have been stronger in Study 3, participants may have been more likely to disbelieve the evidence or abandon support for Trump.

As noted earlier, the open-ended responses were coded in a way that made it possible for one participant to provide multiple justifications for Trump's misdeeds. Because past dissonance research had assumed that participants only use one justification to reduce dissonance, we assessed whether this also occurred in these open-ended responses. In Study 1, 22% of participants ($N = 24$) provided more than one justification. Moreover, 10 participants indicated that they did not believe the accusations and they also gave the "politics not personal" justification. Another 12 participants indicated that they did not believe the accusations and they also indicated that "they all do it". In Study 2, 19% of participants ($N = 31$) provided more than one justification. Moreover, 11 participants indicated that they did not believe the accusations and they also gave the "politics not personal" justification. Another 10 participants indicated that they did not believe the accusations and they also indicated that "they all do it". In Study 3, 7% of participants ($N = 12$) provided more than one justification. Moreover, two participants indicated that they did not believe the accusations and they also indicated that "politics not personal". Another eight participants indicated that they did not believe the accusations and they also indicated that "they all do it".

The fact that several participants indicated that they did not believe the accusations while also indicating other justifications, especially that "they all do it", suggests that these participants may have believed the accusations somewhat but claimed that they did not. In other words, it seems illogical to say that Trump did not do the action but then say that all politicians do it.

The Relationship of the Current Responses to Methods of Dissonance Reduction Found in Past Research

Across all 3 studies, the most common justification for continuing to support Trump despite the allegations against him was that participants disbelieved the allegations. Past research on belief disconfirmation from a dissonance perspective has typically examined responses of individuals who believed the belief disconfirming information was accurate (presumably because of researchers' interest in counterintuitive responses). However, it is also possible that the current participants believed the disconfirming information enough to experience dissonance, but then denied the information as a way to reduce dissonance. This method of reducing dissonance would be conceptually equivalent to subtracting a dissonant cognition.

When individuals state that other politicians engage in the same immoral/illegal behaviors, or when they state that they "don't care" about the behaviors, they may be reducing dissonance by reducing the importance of the dissonant cognitions, conceptually speaking. This mode of dissonance reduction has been referred to as "trivialization" in past research (Simon et al., 1995).

When individuals stated that Trump's policies mattered and his personal life did not, they may be reducing dissonance by compartmentalizing information about him. In conceptual terms, they may be making the information about his immoral/illegal personal life an irrelevant cognition, which is an unexplored and novel way of reducing dissonance.

Dissonance theory predicts that Trump supporters may feel dissonance discomfort upon considering Trump's illegal and immoral behaviors. Correlational evidence in Study 3 supports this prediction by showing that the more they favored Trump, the more discomfort they felt after reading about his illegal behaviors. In addition, the more they felt discomfort, the more they indicated that they did not believe the accusations (and discomfort mediated the effect of Trump favorability on disbelief). Moreover, in the current studies, participants were asked questions that could have reduced dissonance (e.g., why they supported him) prior to the open-ended responses about why they supported Trump given his misdeeds. This procedure could have reduced the dissonance and open-ended justifications. The current results are also impressive because it is likely that this study was not the first time they encountered this dissonant information, and participants had thus had plenty of opportunities to reduce this dissonance prior to taking part in our studies. Thus, these results suggest that dissonance may persist for long periods of time after individuals have had several chances to reduce it. In contrast, most past research had assumed that once dissonance discomfort is reduced, it stays low (Elliot & Devine, 1994).

Novel Methods of Reducing Dissonance

Although each of the specific dissonance reduction methods individuals may have used can be placed into one of the conceptually abstract ways of reducing dissonance, we believe that this research suggests some previously untested ways of reducing dissonance, at both concrete and abstract levels of analysis. Most of the concrete ways are relatively new to dissonance theory research, because no previous research has measured them, with the exception of research showing that individuals respond to the misdeeds of a respected ingroup member by pointing out how opponents also misbehave (Harmon-Jones et al., 2020).

With regard to the more conceptually abstract ways of reducing dissonance, making cognitions irrelevant to the dissonant relationship has not been empirically examined, to our knowledge. Dissonance theory posited that cognitions are either relevant or irrelevant to each other; that is, relevant cognitions are psychologically connected or related to each other. If they are relevant to each other, then they are consonant or dissonant with each other. And then those cognitions are weighted for their importance, to determine the magnitude of dissonance discomfort and reduction. Past research has explored dissonance reduction via adding consonant cognitions, subtracting dissonant cognitions, or altering the importance of the relevant cognitions. It is possible that statements that were coded as “policies matter, not his personal life” could be viewed as reduction in the perceived importance of dissonant cognitions. However, we suspect that *some* participants may have instead been making those cognitions irrelevant, which is a dissonance reduction strategy that was not formally mentioned by Festinger (1957), but that is theoretically possible. Good examples of statements seeming more like making cognitions irrelevant and not reducing their importance were shown in Tables 2 and 4: “...what he does in private is none of the public’s business, since I feel he is running the country well” and “As for immoral actions, I don’t really like Trump as a person, but I didn’t vote for him to be my best friend. I voted for him to be my president, and as long as he does good at that, his person issues and morality are none of my business anymore than anyone else’s.”

Limitations

Although the goal of the present research was to explore the wide variety of ways individuals might reduce dissonance when exposed to belief disconfirming information, we should note that the samples were not representative of the US population, and results might differ with a more representative sample. They might also differ during the midst of an election, where partisans’ passions may further fuel dissonance discomfort and dissonance reduction when their dear leader acts in ways that violate standards (e.g., morals, laws). Also, their leader’s opponent may provide additional consonant

cognitions that bolster support for their preferred candidate (e.g., the opponent is old and incoherent).

In addition, researchers have noted that some MTurk participants might provide low quality data (Hauser et al., 2019). Studies 1 and 2 used MTurk participants but Study 3 used Prolific participants, who generally provide higher quality data (Douglas et al., 2023). The results from Study 3 were very similar to those obtained in Studies 1 and 2. Also, we carefully read the open-ended responses from participants and all participants (included in the analyses) provided sensible answers, suggesting that their responses were not of low quality.

When this research was initiated, we assumed that supporters of Trump would perceive his sexual assaults, abuses of power, and incitement of insurrection as immoral and/or illegal. However, this may not be the case, and these studies do not provide any direct evidence of this. Our assumption, however, is supported by other research that has found that over 74% of Americans regard the issue of sexual assault as very important (Pew Research, 2017). In addition, many of Trump's supporters are Christians (73% of our sample), and 2 of their 10 commandments (i.e., adultery, coveting neighbor's wife) concern sexual behaviors that seem much less immoral/harmful than sexual assault. With regard to Trump's illegal behaviors, we trust that most Americans find acting in illegal ways to be dissonant with their beliefs. Indeed, for the question we asked about following rules, the mean was 5.92 ($SD = 1.12$) on a 7-point scale, suggesting that most participants believe in following the rules and laws. Future research should more directly test this assumption.

Other Examples of Support for Admired Figures Despite Allegations

Continuing to follow and to idealize a person despite being confronted with belief-disconfirming information about that person is not limited to Trump followers. Another recent US President, Bill Clinton, was also accused of sexual misconduct that led to his impeachment (Waxman & Fabry, 2018). We suspect that his supporters may have also reduced dissonance about his misconduct. To our knowledge, no research examined these responses.

Conclusion

We hope these results shed light on the multiple ways that people respond to belief disconfirmation. The results from the current studies suggest that individuals respond to disconfirming information in a variety of ways when they are not constrained to a single dissonance reduction opportunity. Further research is needed to verify the robustness of these phenomena and whether different responses emerge in other circumstances.

Funding: The authors have no funding to report.

Acknowledgments: The authors have no additional (i.e., non-financial) support to report.

Competing Interests: The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Data Availability: Data and materials can be used by colleagues upon request to the corresponding author.

Supplementary Materials

The Supplementary Materials file contains the exact articles participants read about Trump's misdeeds and about space exploration (for access, see [Harmon-Jones et al., 2026S](#)).

Index of Supplementary Materials

Harmon-Jones, C., Willardt, R. R., Denson, T. F., & Harmon-Jones, E. (2026S). *Supplementary materials to "Responses to belief-conflicting information: Justification of support for Donald Trump"* [Stimuli]. PsychOpen GOLD. <https://doi.org/10.23668/psycharchives.21751>

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