

Why Voters Support Trump Despite His Alleged Misdeeds

We asked Trump fans how they justified their support given the accusations.

Posted October 31, 2024 | [Reviewed by Gary Drevitch](#)

Key points

- In three studies, Trump supporters reported why they supported him despite accusations of illegal acts.
- The most common response was that they did not believe the accusations.
- Two other common responses were that his personal life did not matter and that other politicians behave badly.
- Some changes in responses occurred over time.



Trump supporters

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This post was co-written by my colleague Cindy Harmon-Jones, who is first author on the manuscript reporting these results.

People who are opposed to [Donald Trump](#) being elected to serve as president of the United States likely believe that his supporters are weird—and vice versa. Trump stands out from other former and potential presidents, however, in terms of the number of crimes and moral misdeeds

he has been accused of. Given this backdrop, we, as [cognitive dissonance](#) researchers, wondered what supporters of Trump would say when asked why they support him given his alleged crimes and misbehaviors. We assumed that most of his supporters are decent folks who would experience some dissonance from supporting a president who had been accused of so many misdeeds.

The Survey Question

To attempt to understand Trump supporters, we surveyed them and asked how they justified their support given the accusations that he had engaged in [sexual](#) misconduct and illegal activities. [We conducted three studies since Trump was elected president.](#)

The Responses

In the first study, conducted in October of 2019, the most frequent response was that participants said they did not believe the accusations: “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.” Two other common responses were that his policies matter, not his personal life (“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”), and that other politicians also behave badly (“I don’t doubt that most presidents have been immoral in their personal lives”).

These answers remind us of the opening to [Leon Festinger](#) and colleagues’ first book about dissonance theory (1956). They wrote: “A man with a conviction is a hard man to change. Tell him you disagree and he turns away. Show him facts or figures and he questions your sources. Appeal to logic and he fails to see your point.”

A second study was conducted in December of 2019, two days after the House of Representatives voted to impeach Trump for abuse of power and obstruction of Congress. The reasons people gave for justifying their support at this point were similar to those observed in the previous study, with the addition of a new category: They stated they did not care about the allegations (“I don’t care about his sex life or what it does involve”). This latter response is similar to the dissonance reduction strategy that has been referred to as trivialization, or mentally reducing the importance of dissonant information (Simon et al., 1995).

In the third study, which was conducted two days after Trump was arraigned for election interference for his involvement in the riot at the U.S. Capitol in January 2021, the justifications were similar to those given in the previous studies, but a new category emerged: Some who previously supported him no longer did (“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”). Dissonance reduction sometimes does involve changing one’s mind and learning from one’s mistakes. This way of reducing dissonance is likely common in life but not studied much within the field.

Changes Over Time?

One of the greatest differences between the 3 studies (which parallel Trump's time in office) is that by Study 3, participants were much less likely to justify their support by saying that other politicians engaged in similar misdeeds. They were also more likely at the time of Study 3 to say they did not believe the allegations compared to Studies 1 and 2.

Conclusion

For those who, like us, have trouble understanding why Trump's supporters favor him, we hope these results shed some light on their thinking. We also hope that they provide food for thought about the many ways people may justify their beliefs in the face of disconfirming information.

References

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