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Impact of system justification on protest support: insights from two experimental studies

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Abstract
Collective actions and protests are often considered the most influential means to achieve changes in current systems. Therefore, achieving high support for such actions is essential. However, factors such as system justification or the aim of the actions might reduce public support for collective actions. In two studies, we examined the effects of dispositional and situational system justification on protest support, using between-subjects design with scenarios describing protests aimed at legislation on strikes (Study 1) and working time (Study 2). In Study 1 (N=203), we found that people high in system justification and those who read a scenario describing a protest challenging the current system compared to a protest supporting the current system reported less support for the described protest. In Study 2 (N=797) we were able to replicate these results using a different protest topic and a larger sample. Thus, system justification can influence the support for protests, but further factors, such as the protest topic, should be considered by both protest organizers and researchers.

Keywords System justification · Protest · Collective action

Introduction

Protests are a powerful tool for raising awareness of important issues and advocating for or against pending changes. They can vary considerably in scope, from strikes targeting a single factory or local protests addressing policies in one's hometown to nationwide demonstrations like the Black Lives Matter protests or Make America Great Again rallies in the United States, or even global movements such as those organized by climate activists. This trend is evidenced by a more than 11% increase in mass protests worldwide from 2009 to 2019 (Brannen et al., 2020). Additionally, the Global Protest Tracker reports that more than 140 countries have experienced significant protests (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024).

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Previous research addressing the question of when protests can gather support has focused on various aspects, such as how dispositional system justification is related to willingness to protest (Jost et al., 2012) or whether the protest aims to support or challenge the current system (Osborne et al., 2019). However, these studies either relied on correlational analyses using more general measures for protests support (Osborne et al., 2019) or manipulating precursors of the protest, such as stereotype exposure or system rejection (Jost et al., 2012) rather than the aim of the protest. As protest support can be affected by both, dispositional and situational factors (Banfield et al., 2011), it is necessary to examine their joint effects to better understand the impact of system justification on protest support.

Thus, we conducted two experiments to examine the role of dispositional and situational system justification and their interaction on protest support using two different protest topics: strike legislation and working time. We hypothesized that people who are generally inclined to defend the current system would be less likely to support protests. However, we predicted that protests aimed at maintaining the status quo would receive more support than protests challenging it. This should especially be the case among individuals who are high in system justification. These two experiments contribute to the literature in

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two important ways: First, we extend existing research on system justification and collective action support by using experimental methods rather than correlates to examine the effects of dispositional system justification and protest aim, that is system-supporting versus system-challenging protest on generating willingness to participate and support among the public. Second, we respond to the call from Shuman et al. (2024) to integrate system justification into the research on protest forms. Our findings show that both dispositional system justification attitudes and the aim of protest, whether system-supporting or system-challenging, can have differing effects on support and willingness to protest, however we observed no significant interaction of dispositional system justification and protest aim on protest support.

System justification

System justification theory (SJT) posits that people have an inherent tendency to justify and support the systems they live in, whether these systems are political, social, or economic (Jost, 2019; Jost & Banaji, 1994). According to SJT, this motivation can vary depending on dispositional and situational aspects. Hence, people can vary in their tendency to justify the current status quo based on their individual characteristics or due to situational circumstances. It provides explanations for why people accept and live within systems that disadvantage them, rather than fighting against such systems. SJT is understood as a motivational and goal-oriented psychological process (Jost, 2019), explaining why disadvantaged groups may not be motivated to advocate for changes but instead justify the existing system. Pending changes or feelings of instability and insecurity can threaten the need for certainty and security, thereby motivating people to justify the current system (Jost et al., 2017).

System justification motivation is assumed to fulfil three basic needs: epistemic, existential, and relational needs (Jost et al., 2003), and this by reducing the threat of uncertainty, the threat of security and safety, and the threat to social relationships (Jost et al., 2017). Previous research on system justification has observed that people with higher system justification tendencies are more likely to be politically conservative (Jost, 2019). This association between political conservatism and system justification has been observed globally, including in countries such as Lebanon, New Zealand, Argentina, and the United States (Badaan et al., 2018).

However, system justification theory has been criticized, particularly regarding whether there is a system justification motive. Other researchers have suggested that the social identity model of system attitudes (Rubin et al., 2023a) could also explain why people from disadvantaged groups justify the current system without incorporating a specific system justification motive. While a review of this criticism is beyond the scope of this paper, we refer interested readers to Jost et al. (2023) and Rubin et al. (2023b). Since the focus of this paper is on the question of when people are willing to participate in protest, we refer to the existing literature on system justification and collective actions.

System justification and collective action

According to SJT, existing inequalities and injustice are generally accepted by the majority until they exceed a certain threshold (Jost, 2019). The social identity model of collective action (SIMCA; van Zomeren et al., 2008) identifies group-based injustices as one of the three most important predictors for collective actions, alongside social identity and perceived (group) efficacy. Additionally, violated moral beliefs and identity content have been found to influence the group identity, thereby increasing the willingness to participate in collective actions (van Zomeren et al., 2018). However, those who are dispositionally motivated to defend the current system are more likely to refrain from challenging the current system due to several reasons (Jost et al., 2017): First, collective actions would imply changes to the status quo and a system threat, which would run counter to the positive effects of system justification on their well-being. The so-called palliative function of system justification not only enhances individuals' well-being, but also reduces anger about injustices, which further diminishes the willingness to participate in collective actions (Jost et al., 2012). Second, defending the current system is part of their moral beliefs and participating in collective actions would thus violate these moral beliefs. Third, the uncertainty about the protest outcomes also reduces the willingness to participate among individuals with high system justification as they often have a low tolerance for uncertainty. Thus, we hypothesize *that people with higher dispositional system justification tendency report lower support of collective actions (H1).*

The willingness to participate in collective actions might not only depend upon the dispositional system justification of individuals, but also the situational circumstances that could elicit system justification tendencies. Collective actions can manifest in different forms, either as system-challenging, such as demonstrations, protests, or strikes aiming to change the current system, or as system-supporting, seeking to maintain existing group differences (Jost et al., 2017). The central message of SJT regarding collective action is that system justification is a psychological tendency that can occur among all individuals in various situations, regardless of their dispositional system justification motivation (Jost, 2019). Therefore, when the current system is threatened or when individuals perceive a high dependence on the existing system, most people react with heightened system justification tendencies (Kay & Friesen,

2011). Sometimes, merely being confronted with criticism of the system can increase system-justifying tendencies and lead to the rationalization of system flaws. It can thus be assumed that due to the inherent nature of system justification tendencies and their underlying needs, individuals are more inclined to support system-supporting protests than system-challenging ones. Thus, we hypothesize *that collective actions aiming at system-supporting changes will lead to higher support compared to collective actions targeting system-challenging changes (H2).*

Furthermore, situational and dispositional factors can jointly affect system justification tendencies as described in the person by situation account (Banfield et al., 2011). According to this account, people react differently to specific threats based on their system confidence (Banfield et al., 2011). Those with low system justification tendencies adopt indirect methods to defend the system, while those with high system justification tendencies seek more explicit ways to defend a threatened system (Cutright et al., 2011). Furthermore, when people with high dispositional system justification motivation encounter situations that reinforce their epistemic, existential, or relational needs, their underlying system justification motivation tends to increase (Mallett et al., 2011). For instance, individuals dispositionally inclined to justify the current system often lean towards conservatism, accepting social and economic inequalities and endeavoring to maintain the status quo. Consequently, those with a high system justification motivation are likely to be more willing to participate in collective actions that aim to support the current system rather than challenge it. Conversely, individuals less inclined to defend the system dispositionally may be more willing to participate in protests aimed at changing the existing system.

Support for this assumption was obtained by Osborne et al. (2019), who observed that individuals high in dispositional system justification were less willing to participate in progressive, system-challenging protests such as Black Lives Matter, but more willing to engage in reactionary, system-supporting protests such as Make America Great Again. In another study, politically left- and right-oriented participants were observed to express lower system justification compared to moderates, which led both political more extreme groups to support protest for social change (Liekefett & Becker, 2022). However, the direction of the change varied with left-wing oriented people low on system justification supporting progressive social change to reduce inequalities, whereas right-wing oriented people low on system justification indicated higher support for reactionary social change, that is change further increasing inequalities.

Thus, we hypothesize *that there will be a disordinal interaction*, *wherein participants in the system-supporting scenario report higher protest support when they have higher system justification tendencies*, *whereas participants in the system-challenging scenario report higher protest support when they have lower system justification tendencies (H3).*

Current research

We conducted two studies to examine the situational and dispositional effects of system justification on protest support. In the first study, we investigated support for a demonstration addressing a proposed change in the law regarding warning strikes. We manipulated whether trade unions were protesting to keep the current system or for the change, that is challenging the current system and asked participants how likely they would be to participate in the respective demonstration. Strikes are generally viewed as effective industrial action for highlighting employees' grievances and advocating for changes in the status quo (Nicholson & Kelly, 1980). Warning strikes, primarily used in Germany, involve a short work stoppage in the early stages of collective bargaining negotiations. In Study 1, in addition to examining willingness to participate, we assessed participants' perceptions of the legitimacy of strikes and their negative reactions toward strikes as additional outcomes. This approach acknowledges the public as a third involved group in protests, alongside protestors and the targets of protests (Simon & Klandermans, 2001). According to this perspective, both protestors and the targets of protests aim to influence the public to share their views and support their claims.

In Study 2, we aimed to address two shortcomings identified in Study 1. Firstly, we incorporated a manipulation check to ensure that the scenarios were perceived as either system-supporting or system-challenging. This step was taken to enhance the validity of our experimental manipulation. Secondly, we used a different topic for the protests, this time focusing on possible changes in working time. By slightly changing the topic of the protests, we aimed to conceptually replicate the results of Study 1 using a topic that was debated in the German public at time of data collection and examine whether this influences individuals' willingness to participate, alongside their dispositional and situational system justification tendencies.

The data from both experiments is available at https://osf.io/txhsy/overview?view_only=665cc68a6e0146f98f38eef081a96d62.

Study 1

This experiment was preregistered. The pre-registration can be found following this link: https://aspredicted.org/39y3-tymw.pdf.

Sample

We conducted a power analysis for the required sample size in a multiple regression when entering the interaction effect. Based on an assumed effect size of $f^2 = 0.04$ for the interaction effect, reaching a power of $1 - \beta = 0.80$ and applying an α-level of 0.05, we would have needed to gather data from 200 participants. Participants were recruited online via social networks such as Facebook in Germany for this first study, which focused on warning strikes. Only individuals who worked at least 15 h per week were eligible to participate. We applied this exclusion criterion to only include participants that would have been affected by the proposed changes. A total of 215 people took part in Study 1. Among these, nine had to be excluded because they worked fewer than 15 h per week, and three were excluded because they did not consent to the use of their data for scientific purposes (Meade & Craig, 2012). Consequently, the final sample consisted of 203 participants, with 102 assigned to the system-supporting group. In the final sample, there were 123 female participants, 77 male participants, and three participants who identified as non-binary. The mean age was 32.24 years ($SD = 14.06$), ranging from 18 to 76. In terms of political orientation, participants reported a mean of 4.33 ($SD = 1.86$) on an 11-point scale, indicating a tendency toward being left-leaning. Additionally, 22 participants indicated that they were union members, and 50 reported having participated in a strike at least once. Descriptive statistics broken down by group can be found in Table 1.

Design and procedure

After a welcome page, participants were prompted to indicate whether they currently worked or had worked 15 h per week. Participants who selected the option "No" were excluded from further analyses. Next, participants completed the general and economic system justification scales. Following this, participants were randomly assigned to either the system-supporting or system-challenging group and instructed to read a short text. The text began by defining warning strikes. Participants were then asked to imagine that the government was proposing a law to either restrict or simplify the law on warning strikes. In both scenarios, participants were informed that the current coronavirus pandemic was the reason for the proposed change to the law. We used this as data was collected during the pandemic and conducting protests in this time was rather difficult, making it likely that the government would consider changes in law for work stoppages. To ensure that participants in both groups were considering perspectives beyond their own interests, a brief sentence explained that they had previously been negatively affected by a warning strike conducted by a German transportation union. In the final sentence of the text, participants were informed that unions were planning a demonstration either to keep the status quo (i.e., avoiding the restriction of the law, system-supporting group) or to change the status quo (i.e., in favor of the simplification of the law, system-challenging group). They were told that this demonstration would take place at the town hall of their hometown. After reading the short text, participants indicated their willingness to participate in the demonstration and completed items assessing negative reactions toward the demonstration and the perceived legitimacy of the demonstration. Finally, participants answered demographic questions and were thanked for their participation.

Measures

Willingness to participate in the protest was assessed using a single item. After reading the scenario, participants were asked, "Would you be willing to participate in this protest." Responses were recorded on a scale ranging from 1 = very unlikely to 5 = very likely.

Negative reactions towards the demonstration and *perceived legitimacy of the demonstration* were each measured using three items adapted from the strike attitudes and behavioral reactions scale (Vesper & König, 2022), with the wording adjusted to refer to the demonstration instead of strikes. A sample item for negative reactions is "I feel disturbed by this demonstration" and a sample item for perceived legitimacy is "This demonstration is justified." Participants rated these items on a scale ranging from 1 = do not agree to 5 = agree. Both scales demonstrated satisfactory reliability, with McDonald's $\omega = 0.85$ for negative reactions and McDonald's $\omega = 0.80$ for perceived legitimacy. We used McDonald's ω as Cronbach's α is increasingly criticized for underestimating reliability of scales and its requirements (e.g., tau equivalence) are often not met (McNeish, 2018).

System justification was assessed using the 8-item General System Justification Scale by Kay and Jost (2003) administered in its German version (Ullrich & Cohrs, 2007). Participants were instructed to rate "On a scale from 1 (do not agree) to 9 (totally agree), please indicate to what extent you agree with these statements." A sample item is "In general I find society to be fair." The scale demonstrated satisfactory reliability, with McDonald's $\omega = 0.82$.

Political orientation was measured using a single item asking participants where they would place themselves on a spectrum from 1 (left) to 11 (right). This item is widely used, for example, in the European Values Survey. We used the version from German version from Breyer (2015).

Additionally, we included *economic system justification* as a measure of system justification. This was assessed using the same seven items used by Jost et al. (2012), adapted

Table 1 Descriptives for each group

	Age		Gender		Union membership		Previous strike/protest participation		Political orientation
	M	(*SD*)	Female	Male	Yes	No	Yes	No	*M* (*SD*)
Study 1									
System supporting ($n=102$)	31.91	(13.76)	64	36[a]	13	87[b]	25	72[c]	4.33 (1.92)
System challenging ($n=101$)	32.58	(14.43)	59	41[d]	9	91[e]	25	75[f]	4.33 (1.81)
Study 2									
System supporting ($n=399$)	33.40	(9.50)	154	241[g]	44	342[h]	232	157[i]	4.63 (2.15)
System-challenging ($n=398$)	34.13	(9.57)	159	226[j]	50	332[k]	198	181[l]	4.80 (2.24)

Note. Political orientation was coded with 1 = left and 11 = right

[a]Two participants in the system supporting group identified as non-binary

[b]Two participants in the system supporting group preferred not to say whether they are union members or not

[c]Five participants in the system supporting group preferred not to say whether they had participated in a strike or not

[d]One participant in the system challenging group identified as non-binary

[e]One participant in the system challenging group preferred not to say whether they were union members or not

[f]One participant in the system challenging group preferred not to say whether they had participated in a strike or not

[g]Two participants in the system-supporting condition identified as non-binary and two did not indicate their gender

[h]13 participants in the system-supporting condition did not say whether they are union members or not

[i]Ten participants in the system-supporting condition preferred not to say whether they had participated in a protest

[j]Five participants in the system-challenging condition identified as non-binary and eight did not indicate their gender

[k] 16 participants in the system-challenging condition did not say whether they are union members or not

[l]19 participants in the system-challenging condition preferred not to say whether they had participated in a protest

from Jost and Thompson's (2000) economic system justification scale. As no official German translation was available, we translated the items ourselves. Participants rated their agreement with statements such as "Economic positions are legitimate reflections of people's achievements" on the same scale as the general system justification. However, the scale did not exhibit satisfactory reliability, with McDonald's ω = 0.57. We thus decided to exclude the scale from our main analyses and only report the analyses with economic system justification as exploratory results.

Statistical analyses

To test Hypothesis 1 to 3, we conducted multivariate multiple regression with willingness to protest, negative reactions towards the protest, and perceived legitimacy of the protest as the dependent variables. The independent variables included the factors system supporting vs. system challenging protest, system justification, and their interaction term.

Results

Tables including all correlations, means, and standard deviations for the overall sample (Table S1) and both groups (Tables S2 and S3) can be found in the online supplemental materials. All results are summarized in Table 2. Means and standard deviations for the respective groups are shown in Table 3.

Table 2 Study 1 – Results of the multivariate multiple regression

	b	*SE*	*t*	*p*
Willingness to participate				
(Intercept)	2.62	0.09	30.39	< 0.001***
GSJ	−0.35	0.09	−4.01	< 0.001***
Group	−0.19	0.09	−2.25	0.026*
GSJ × Group	−0.06	0.09	−0.73	0.468
Multiple R^2	0.101			
F(3, 199)	7.45***			
Legitimacy				
(Intercept)	3.77	0.06	59.58	< 0.001***
GSJ	−0.16	0.06	−2.53	0.012*
Group	−0.17	0.06	−2.76	0.006**
GSJ × Group	0.08	0.06	1.26	0.208
Multiple R^2	0.08			
F(3, 199)	5.66***			
Negative reactions				
(Intercept)	3.75	0.08	49.68	< 0.001***
GSJ	−0.09	0.08	−1.17	0.242
Group	−0.10	0.08	−1.32	0.189
GSJ × Group	0.03	0.08	0.41	0.681
Multiple R^2	0.02			
F(3, 199)	1.19			

GSJ General System Justification. Group was coded with −1 = system-supporting and 1 = system-challenging

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

In relation to H1, general system justification significantly predicted willingness to participate and perceived legitimacy of the protest, but not negative reactions towards the protest. Specifically, participants with higher general system justification tendencies reported lower willingness to protest and perceived the protest as less legitimate. However, there were no significant differences in their negative reactions towards the protest. These findings lend partial support for our first hypothesis.

The results for the groups revealed significant differences in willingness to participate and perceived legitimacy, but not in negative reactions. Consistent with H2, participants in the system-supporting scenario reported a higher willingness to participate in the protest and perceived the protest as more legitimate. However, they did not differ in their negative reactions towards the protest. Regarding the hypothesized disordinal interaction (H3), we did not find support for any of the dependent variables. The interaction between system justification and scenario did not significantly predict willingness to participate, perceived legitimacy, or negative reactions. Thus, our third hypothesis could not be supported. The relation between general system justification and group in predicting willingness to protest is illustrated in Fig. 1.

The results using economic system justification as the independent variable yielded similar findings to those obtained with general system justification. However, there was one notable difference: economic system justification predicted negative reactions towards the protest. Participants with higher economic system justification reported lower negative reactions toward the protest. For further details and analyses using economic system justification as the independent variable, please refer to the online supplemental materials (Table S4).

Discussion

The results of Study 1 supported Hypotheses 1 and 2, indicating that individuals high in system justification were less willing to protest compared to those low in system justification. Additionally, protests perceived as system-supporting were more supported by participants than those perceived as system-challenging. However, Hypothesis 3, which proposed a significant interaction between dispositional and situational factors on willingness to participate, legitimacy of the protest, or negative reactions, was not supported. Despite these findings, Study 1 had limitations, with the most significant being the absence of a manipulation check to confirm whether the scenarios were perceived as genuinely system-supporting and system-challenging. To

Table 3 Means and standard deviations between the groups

	Protest support		Negative reactions to the protest		Legitimacy of the protest	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	M	*SD*
Study 1						
System-supporting ($n=102$)	2.83	1.32	3.86	1.09	3.96	0.92
System-challenging ($n=101$)	2.41	1.22	3.65	1.05	3.59	0.91
Study 2						
System supporting ($n=399$)	2.75	1.37	1.66	0.78	3.21	0.54
System-challenging ($n=398$)	2.22	1.32	1.83	0.93	2.87	0.59

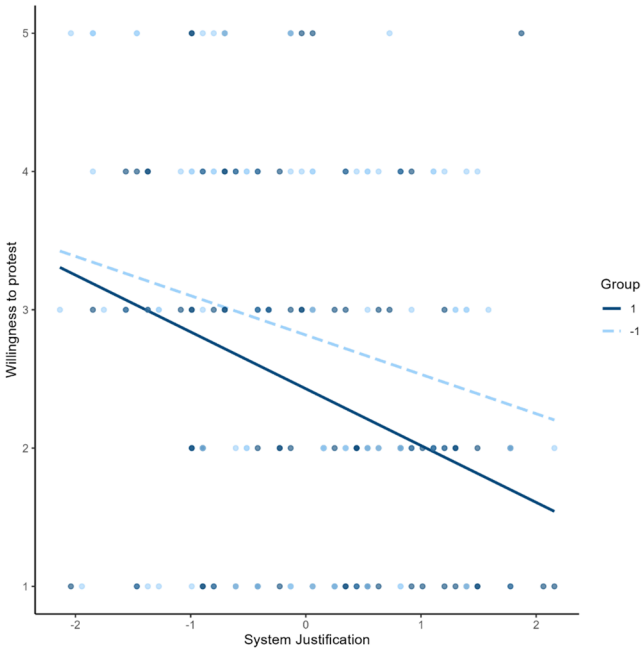

Fig. 1 Study 1- General System Justification and Group Predicting Willingness to Protest
Note. Group was coded with -1 = system-supporting and 1 = system-challenging

address this and other limitations and expand upon the findings of the first study, we conducted a second study.

Study 2

With this second study, we aimed to address two limitations identified in Study 1: (a) In Study 1, we did not include a manipulation check to verify whether the different scenarios were truly measured system-challenging or system-supporting forms of protest. Thus, we incorporated a manipulation check to ensure that the scenarios used in the main study were perceived as intended. (b) In Study 1, we had a rather small sample of 203 participants. To replicate our results, we decided to conduct a well-powered study aiming for at least 784 participants (see Sample description for a justification).

We decided to keep the context of the protest like that of Study 1 by using a topic from the labor context: Working time. At the time of the study, there was an on-going debate about the eight-hour working day in Germany (The Stepstone Group, 2025). Therefore, we opted to use this topic as reason for demonstration, with either organizations calling for protests to keep the eight-hour working day or to abolish it in Study 2. This experiment was also preregistered. The preregistration of this experiment can be found here: https://aspredicted.org/8m4v-qt7g.pdf.

Sample

Following recommendations by Sommet et al. (2023), we aimed to collect data from at least 784 participants as this should be enough to detect a reversed interaction effect of Cohen's $d=0.20$, a power of $1-\beta=0.80$ and applying an α-level of 0.05. Participants were recruited online in Germany via Prolific. As in Study 1, participants were required to work at least 15 h a week, to ensure that they would be affected by the proposed changes. A total of 842 individuals participated in Study 2. Five participants were excluded due to their lack of consent for the use of their data for scientific purposes (Meade & Craig, 2012). Another 22 participants were excluded as they worked less than 15 h per week. Additionally, 17 participants were excluded as they failed to solve the reCAPTCHA and one participant was excluded as she indicated to be younger than 18 years. Thus, the final sample consisted of 797 participants. The mean age was 33.76 ($SD=9.53$, ranging from 18 to 71). Of the participants, 313 were female, 467 were male, seven identified as non-binary, and ten did not indicate their gender. More than half of the participants (430) indicated that they had previously participated in a protest. Further descriptive statistics, broken down by group, can found in Table 1.

Design and procedure

After a welcome page, participants indicated whether they worked at least 15 h per week. If not, they were screened out. Participants who worked at least 15 h per week then

completed the general system justification scale. Subsequently, participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions. All texts were preceded by an identical introductory sentence, which instructed participants to read the following newspaper article carefully as they would later be asked questions about this text. Participants then read one of two newspaper texts describing the current debate about daily working time in Germany initiated by the new government. The system-supporting condition featured a headline stating, "Preservation of the eight-hour day" and described that the German Trade Union Confederation warned as this could lead to increased pressure on employees who already worked millions of overtime hours. Additionally, work researchers also indicated that longer working days could decrease productivity and recovery. The newspaper teaser ended with several associations calling for protests to preserve the eight-hour day. In the system-challenging condition, the headline stated, "Abolition of the eight-hour day." This article then described that the goal of this measure would be to increase flexibility for employees and indicated that surveys had reported a high approval as employees would hope for a better compatibility of family and career. It also indicated that companies and organizations such as the German Retail Association supported this idea. The newspaper teaser ended with several associations calling for protest to abolish the eight-hour day. All texts, along with their English translations, have been uploaded to the OSF project. Participants indicated their willingness to participate in this protest and the extent to which they perceived the protest as legitimate and stressful. Participants then had to solve a reCAPTCHA to ensure that only humans participated. We then administered two items to serve as a manipulation check. Additionally, participants provided demographic information on age, gender, education, their political orientation, union membership status, and previous protest participation. Subsequently, participants were asked to provide consent for the use of their data for scientific purposes. Upon completion, participants were thanked for their participation, informed about the study's research questions, and provided with contact information should they have any further questions.

Measures

Willingness to participate in the protest was assessed using the same single item as in Study 1. *Negative reactions towards the demonstration* and *perceived legitimacy of the demonstration* were also measured using the same items as described in Study 1. The reliability of both scales was good, with McDonald's $\omega = 0.81$ for negative reactions and McDonald's $\omega = 0.86$ for perceived legitimacy.

General system justification was measured using the same items as in Study 1. Like Study 1, the scale exhibited satisfactory reliability, McDonald's $\omega = 0.89$.

Political orientation was measured using the same single item as in Study 1, asking participants to place themselves on a continuum from 1 (left) to 11 (right).

Statistical analyses

We applied the same statistical analysis as in Study 1.

Results

The means and standard deviations of the two groups are shown in Table 3. All other means, standard deviations, and correlations for the overall sample (Table S5) as well as for each group (Table S6 – S7) can be found in the SOM.

To ensure that the two scenarios differed regarding the factors system-supporting vs. system-challenging protest, we conducted a manipulation check by asking participants to what extent the described protests were supporting the existing societal system and to what extent they were aiming to change the existing societal system. Participants answered both items on a scale from 1 = do not agree to 5 = totally agree. We conducted two one-sided paired t-tests. As anticipated, participants in the system-supporting condition perceived the protests as significantly more supportive ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 1.05$) than system-challenging ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.19$), $t(398) = 5.46$, $p < .001$. Similarly, those in the system-challenging condition evaluated the protest as more challenging ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.12$) than supporting ($M = 2.68$, $SD = 1.01$), $t(397) = -8.44$, $p < .001$. When comparing these means across groups using a Welch two-sample t-test, we also observed that the system-supporting group evaluated the protest as significantly more supporting than the system-challenging group, $t(794.02) = 8.32$, $p < .001$, and as significantly less challenging, $t(792.33) = -8.96$, $p < .001$ We thus concluded that the manipulation was successful.[1]

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a multivariate multiple regression to predict willingness to protest, negative reactions towards the protest, and perceived legitimacy of the protest, with general system justification, protest aim (system-supporting vs. system-challenging), and their interactions as predictors. The results are shown in Table 4. Means and standard deviations for the respective groups are provided in Table 3. As in Study 1, general

[1] We also reran the analyses, this time excluding participants who failed the manipulation check ($n = 218$). The results are reported in Table S8 of the supplemental material. Aside from group being a non-significant predictor of negative reactions, all results were similar to those reported here, which included these participants.

Table 4 Study 2 – Results of the multivariate multiple regression

	SE	*t*	*p*	
Willingness to participate				
(Intercept)	2.49	0.05	52.56	<0.001***
GSJ	−0.16	0.05	−3.38	<0.001***
Group	−0.27	0.05	−5.72	<0.001***
GSJ × Group	0.02	0.05	0.40	0.693
Multiple R^2	0.05			
F(3, 793)	14.48***			
Legitimacy				
(Intercept)	3.04	0.02	153.00	<0.001***
GSJ	−0.08	0.02	−3.96	<0.001***
Group	−0.18	0.02	−8.83	<0.001***
GSJ × Group	0.01	0.02	0.68	0.500
Multiple R^2	0.11			
F(3, 793)	30.87***			
Negative reactions				
(Intercept)	1.75	0.03	57.30	<0.001***
GSJ	0.02	0.03	0.63	0.527
Group	0.09	0.03	2.85	0.004**
GSJ × Group	−0.04	0.03	−1.28	0.200
Multiple R^2	0.01			
F(3, 793)	3.38*			

GSJ General System Justification. Group was coded with −1 = system-supporting and 1 = system-challenging

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

system justification significantly negatively predicted willingness to participate and perceived legitimacy of the protest, but not negative reactions towards the protest. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was partially supported. The results for the groups revealed significant differences in all three outcome variables. As assumed in H2, participants in the system-supporting scenario reported a higher willingness to participate in the protest, perceived the protest as more legitimate, and reported fewer negative reactions compared to those in the system-challenging condition. The hypothesized interaction between group and general system justification was not significant for any of the outcome variables, lending no support for H3.

Discussion

The results of Study 2 replicate those of Study 1 in that participants with higher system justification tendencies were less willing to participate in a protest and reported a lower legitimacy of the protest. Additionally, we observed that those in the system-supporting condition were more willing to participate, perceived the protest as more legitimate, and had fewer reactions than those in the system-challenging condition. As in Study 1, general system justification and group did not interact.

General discussion

These two experiments aimed to examine the effects of dispositional and situational system justification on protest support using two protest contexts: Work stoppages and protests addressing changes in working time. In both contexts, we collected data on the dispositional general system justification of our participants, and we manipulated the protest to be either system-challenging or system-supporting. In both studies, people were more willing to support the protest when they were dispositionally low in system justification or when confronted with a system-supporting protest, consistent with our hypotheses. However, we did not observe significant interactions between dispositional system justification and protest aim in either study. These results imply that dispositional and situational factors can affect willingness to participate in protests independently of each other.

SJT posits that people with higher dispositional system justification tendencies are less willing to participate in and support protests (Jost, 2019). Our studies showed support for this assumption as participants with higher system justification reported lower willingness to protest and lower perceived legitimacy of the protests, regardless of whether the protest was system-supporting or challenging in both studies. This could be explained by the fact that protests are generally perceived as a threat to the system, which runs counter to the positive effects of system justification on individuals' well-being (Jost et al., 2017). This makes individuals less likely to engage in protests. Furthermore, our results align with the assumption that participation in collective action among high system justifiers violates their moral beliefs (Jost et al., 2012), which also decreases their willingness to participate. Thus, our studies demonstrate that dispositional factors, such as system justification motivation, can influence individuals' willingness to participate in protests.

According to SJT, people should be more willing to support protests aiming at preserving the existing status quo than those challenging the existing system (Osborne et al., 2019). We manipulated the protest aim in both studies accordingly. In Study 1, we observed the assumed effect: participants were more willing to participate in protests aiming to support the current system and perceived this protest as more legitimate. In Study 2, we observed similar effects and additionally observed a significant effect of protest aim on negative reactions with those in the system-supporting condition reporting fewer negative reactions.

In both studies, however, we did not observe any significant interactions between dispositional and situational system justification. The lack of interaction between dispositional system justification and protest aim contrasts

with the results of Osborne et al. (2019), who observed that people high in system justification were more likely to support system-supporting protests and less likely to support system-challenging protests. In both studies, we were not able to replicate this interaction. One reason for these diverging results could be the different operationalization of protests in the studies from Osborne et al. (2019) and ours. In their first study, system-challenging collective actions were examined, referring to protests supporting the rights of Maori, whereas system-supporting collective actions were assessed by asking participants whether they were willing to fight in a war for their country. Hence, Osborne et al. (2019) employed two different topics to assess protest aim, which might have confounded their results, whereas we focused on the same topic (warning strike legislation, working hours) and manipulated the aim of these protests as either supporting or challenging the status quo. Additionally, the measure of support for system-supporting and system-challenging collective action was altered in the second study by Osborne et al. (2019). They utilized five items each, asking participants to indicate the extent of their support for five different forms of protests, such as Black Lives Matter demonstrations or rallies to help "Make America great again." However, they aggregated these responses into general support for system-supporting and system-challenging collective actions, without considering potential differences between protest topics.

Since our studies focused on protests related to labor issues, one could conclude that the interactive effect of dispositional and situational system justification is context-specific. Compared to the protest topics used by Osborne et al. (2019), which focused on societal issues, our focus on labor issues could have entailed more direct effects on participants, as changes in working hours or strikes might have been more personally relevant than, for example, hypothetical participation in a war. This could explain why we only observed main effects, not interactive effects, in our studies.

Another potential explanation for the lack of a significant interaction effect comes from the research of Cutright et al. (2011). They found that people with low and high system justification had different reactions to system threat: those with low system justification preferred indirect methods of defending the system, while those with high system justification preferred more direct methods. Since protests are a direct method of defending the system, this could explain our results. Therefore, future research could include other forms of system defense, such as signing petitions or willingness to donate, to capture more subtle and indirect forms of system defense.

Nevertheless, our experiments underscore the significance of dispositional system justification and protest aims to garner public support. In line with the findings of Shuman et al. (2024), we assert that collective actions must be tailored to both their target audience and intended outcomes to be effective. Our results suggest that a protest aiming at system support or system challenge could independently influence support, regardless of other factors such as dispositional system justification. Therefore, we advocate for future research to examine potential forms of protest that people high in system justification might be willing to engage in and to delve deeper into tailored aims of protests and their impact on public support.

Limitations and future research

Some limitations warrant consideration. First, we used scenarios and asked participants to imagine specific situations. Some participants may therefore have been more adept at imagining such a situation than others. Furthermore, since the scenarios were purely hypothetical, results may differ in real-life situations, as we solely assessed intended behavior rather than actual behavior (see Sheeran & Webb, 2016, for further insight into the intention-behavior gap). Additionally, future research could assess how strongly participants identify as workers to control for the effects of identification on collective action participation as perceiving a shared group identity is one important predictor for participation in collective actions (see also van Zomeren et al., 2008).

Second, our manipulation in Study 1 may have been biased by a confounding variable: Self-interest. Despite our efforts to keep this constant by informing all participants to imagine that they had previously been affected by a strike, we cannot rule out that especially those in the system-challenging condition might report lower support to avoid future effects of warning strikes on themselves. Similarly, the manipulations in Study 1 may have induced an additional, unintended form of system threat. A reviewer noted that the system support condition asked participants if they would be willing to challenge the government's proposal to restrict strike requirements. Thus, this manipulation may have been perceived as a challenge to the system's authority, which could have distorted the results of Study 1. As the reviewer pointed out, this could have created ambiguity regarding which aspect of system threat drove the results. Nevertheless, since we obtained similar results in Study 2, which did not include government action in its manipulations, we would assume that the results can be trusted. However, future research should be aware of possible confounding effects if government action is included next to other forms of system threat in such manipulations, which might partly explain the smaller effect of condition in Study 1 compared to Study 2.

Third, both studies used labor-related issues as protest topics. Beyond self-interest being a potential confounding

variable, one could argue that this limits the generalizability of the findings to different populations and topics. As discussed above, the nature of the protests may explain the lack of an interaction effect observed in Osborne et al. (2019). Future research should examine whether the observed effects can be replicated in different populations or with different topics. One approach would be to compare the willingness to support protests about labor issues with the willingness to support protests about other issues, such as climate action or societal issues. This could address the question of generalizability across topics.

Fourth, in Study 1, the economic system justification scale (Jost & Thompson, 2000), which we used for exploratory purposes, exhibited low reliability. Additionally, some participants in Study 1 expressed confusion regarding certain items due to double-negotiations. This is why we omitted this scale from our second study. We deem it necessary that the scale undergoes improvement before further use in German contexts, despite demonstrating expected correlations with other variables. Fourth, we did not include neutral or control condition in any of the studies. We decided against including such a condition, as we deemed it rather unrealistic to ask participants whether they would be willing to join a protest without stating the reason for the protest. However, there might be other options to incorporate a neutral or control condition in this kind of study. We encourage future research to address this issue. Finally, it is noteworthy that both samples exhibited a politically left-leaning orientation, with the mean political orientation scores of 4.33 (Study 1) and 4.71 (Study 2). This characteristic could have influenced our results as politically left-leaning individuals are typically less system-justifying (Jost et al., 2003) and hold more positive attitudes towards strikes and unions (Frangi et al., 2022; McAleese & Day, 2022) compared to their conservative counterparts.

One possibility for future research would be to engage with predictions of the social identity of system attitudes model (SIMSA, Rubin et al., 2023a, 2023b) as this model assumes that participation in social change might depend on the perception of opportunities. Additionally, aims of protest for social change could also be restrictive as well as progressive as seen in the study by Liekefett and Becker (2022) suggesting that support for system challenging protest might also depend on the goal of the protest, that is whether it is aimed at increasing or reducing inequalities.

Future research could enhance our studies by implementing measurements of system justification before and after experimental manipulation. This approach would allow for a deeper understanding of how the manipulation of protest descriptions not only impacts protest support but also affects participants' general system justification. Investigating whether the portrayal of protests can alter individuals' overall perceptions of the societal system could provide valuable insights into the dynamic relationship between protest aims and system justification. It would be beneficial for future studies to explore the role of protest topics as an influential factor in shaping public support. Furthermore, future research could examine whether the effect of dispositional system justification applies to different forms of protest. Those with high system justification motivation may be less likely to engage in demonstrations, which are more disruptive. However, other forms of protest, such as signing petitions or donating to protests or their organizers, may be more appealing to high system justifiers because they are perceived as less severe. Additionally, support for protests may not only entail direct participation, but also a supportive cognitive evaluation, such as perceived legitimacy. Public legitimization of protests can also be important for organizers to advocate their cause. Therefore, future research could examine whether such evaluations depend on system justification tendencies.

Finally, incorporating system justification into investigations of protest support should remain a priority for future research. Understanding how system justification motivation influences individuals' willingness to support collective actions is crucial for advancing societal changes. Exploring the circumstances under which individuals who generally justify the status quo are still willing to endorse collective actions could offer valuable insights into the complexities of protest dynamics.

Conclusion

These two experiments aimed to examine the impact of dispositional and situational system justification on protest support using the two protest aims work stoppages (Study 1) and working time (Study 2). In both studies, we observed that both dispositional and situational system justification reduced protest support. This indicates that dispositional as well as situational aspects affect attitudes and willingness to participate in protests. We can conclude that tailoring the calls for demonstrations to resonate with the target audience may effectively influence protest support. Further research is needed to better understand the nuanced dynamics underlying protest support in different contexts.

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Data availability Data of the studies is available in the Open Science Framework repository at https://osf.io/txhsy/overview?view_only=665cc68a6e0146f98f38eef081a96d62.

Declarations

Ethics approval statement These two studies were carried out in accordance with recommendations of the German Psychological Society that state that research like the one reported here is exempt from formal Ethics Committee approval. All subjects gave their informed consent in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the studies.

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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