

## You're Only Fooling Yourself: Self-Deception and Voting

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### Abstract

Self-deception is a psychological state in which an individual simultaneously holds two contradictory beliefs, is unaware of holding one of those beliefs, and suppresses the belief through a motivated act. This article introduces self-deception in an effort to explain electoral behavior. I explore this connection using an original survey of Louisiana voters during the 2015 gubernatorial primary. I begin by examining the individual-level characteristics that predict self-deception among citizens before evaluating how self-deception influences voter turnout at the individual level. Although I find no significant relationship between self-deception and turnout, results show that individuals' self-deception shapes their beliefs about the election. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of this research.

**Keywords:** self deception, voting behavior, survey, political psychology, voter turnout

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## Introduction

Political scientists have long sought to understand why citizens participate in politics, and a sizeable literature identifies causes of political actions in a campaign or electoral context. Some scholars theorize that citizens participate because of an interest in the campaign (e.g., Lewis-Beck et al. 2008) or because they believe their vote will carry more weight than it actually does (Campbell, Gurin, and Miller 1954). Specific psychological mechanisms, such as motivated reasoning (Taber and Lodge 2006), have also been shown to influence voter behavior. This literature, however, does not paint a complete picture of a voter's reasoning and behavior.

According to the theory of motivated reasoning, for example, voters are driven by either accuracy goals—the desire to form accurate beliefs—or directional goals in which perceptions are formed more to confirm preexisting beliefs and discount information that runs counter to their priors (Kunda 1990, Strickland, Taber, and Lodge 2011, Taber and Lodge 2006). Motivated reasoning has contributed a great deal to our understanding of political behavior, but it does not acknowledge the likelihood that many voters' judgments can serve myriad functions or motivations, one of which can be the denial of information that is damaging to one's self. In other words, as self-deception theorists maintain, voters can subconsciously internalize information that is contradictory to their prior or preferred beliefs and choose to suppress that belief rather than dismissing the information out-of-hand, as is assumed by motivated reasoning theorists.

In these instances, when an individual internalizes and *believes* unfavorable information and still chooses to suppress it in order to act on favorable information, the individual is said to be self-deceived: She holds simultaneously two contradictory beliefs and suppresses one through a motivated act (Gur and Sackeim 1979, vanderLeer and McKay 2017). This article introduces self-deception to the political behavior literature by asking whether self-deception plays a role in a voter's participatory activity. More formally, I ask the question: *Do self-deceived voters participate at different rates than voters who are not self-deceived?*

To answer this question, I leverage data from an original survey that was fielded during the 2015 gubernatorial primary election in Louisiana. I present respondents with information that enhances the probability that voters engage in self-deception in their interpretations of the on-going election, measure their self-deception, then confirm their participation via official state records. Although I do not find a statistically significant relationship between self-deception and turnout, I do find that individuals' self-deception shapes their beliefs about the election.

### **Self-Deception**

Although the concept of self-deception is widely studied in the fields of psychology and philosophy, it is understudied in the field of political science (see Galeotti 2015 for a recent exception) and remains to date an unexplored topic in the study of electoral behavior.<sup>2</sup> As such, before examining the effects of self-deception on voter behavior and electoral beliefs, I begin by introducing the concept of self-deception to the field of electoral behavior by defining the concept and providing some background on the state of the literature addressing self-deception.

Self-deception is the psychological concept associated with the idiomatic phrase “you’re only fooling yourself.” Self-deception has been studied in diverse behavioral settings ranging from athletic competition (Starek and Keating 1991) to emotional responses to fictional literature (Yanal 2007) to the acceptance of moral responsibility for one’s drug addiction (Levy 2003). Self-deception is a psychological state in which a person, *P*, simultaneously holds two contradictory pieces of information to be true. Put another way, *P* believes something to be true even when confronted with evidence, which *P* also believes, contradicting the first belief. Rääkkä (2007) posits that *P* either interprets the evidence differently or dismisses the evidence because *P* wants to assume their preferred belief is correct. *P*

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<sup>2</sup> A Google Scholar search using the term “‘self deception’ + ‘electoral behavior’” returns only 44 results, none of which seek to use self-deception to explain the behavior of voters.

is thus both the deceiver and the deceived, the victim of his own deception (Galeotti 2015). Importantly for the political context, Starek and Keating (1991, 153) contend “that self-deception is a successful strategy for enhancing motivation and performance in competitive contexts.” The formulation of Gur and Sackeim (1979) characterize self-deception as containing four attributes<sup>3</sup>:

1. The individual holds two contradictory beliefs
2. The two contradictory beliefs are held simultaneously
3. The individual is not aware of holding one of the beliefs
4. The act that determines which belief is and...is not subject to awareness is a motivated act.

As discussed in the methodology section, these four criteria were used to identify which survey respondents were self-deceived vis-à-vis the outcome of the gubernatorial election.

### **Theory & Hypotheses**

The purpose of this study is to examine both the antecedents as well as the consequences of self-deception in the 2015 Louisiana primary. In order to understand how self-deceived voters behave, it is essential to explore what individual-level attributes (e.g., sex, age, and party affiliation) are associated with their self-deception. In exploring the predictors of self-deception among voters, I follow studies of self-deception by Starek and Keating (1991) and Zoellner and Maercker (2006) as well as theories of an inflated sense of political efficacy by Campbell, Gurin, and Miller (1954) and Lewis-Beck et al. (2008).

Starek and Keating (1991, 145) contend that an individual’s “motivation to negotiate daily life depends on some degree of misplaced optimism about what we are capable of accomplishing.” They go on to argue that in a competitive environment, “such information-processing biases may be particularly advantageous.” Zoellner and Maercker (2006) further argue that self-deceived individuals respond to competition with unrealistic optimism. In the electoral context, consistent with Campbell, Gurin, and Miller (1954) and Lewis-Beck et al. (2008), I argue many voters who make

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<sup>3</sup> See Mele (2001) for an alternative but similar formulation of self-deception.

predictions about the outcome of an election often succumb to the “misplaced optimism” about their own predictive capabilities. An individual whose sense of political efficacy—i.e., belief in their ability to effect political change—is inflated will display higher confidence in their predictive abilities, even if that level of confidence is unwarranted. Thus, I propose the following hypothesis:

*Confidence Hypothesis:* Voters who are highly confident in their belief about which candidate will win will be more inclined toward self-deception than those with lower confidence.

Tenbrunsel and Messick (2004) explore the effect self-deception has on ethical decision-making and unethical behavior. They argue self-deception allows individuals to diminish the ethical aspects of a situation they face and, with the ethical importance removed, the individual behaves unethically. Although casting a ballot does not present voters with an ethical quagmire, an extension of their theoretical contribution proves valuable. Substituting “civic” for “ethical,” the theory becomes relevant to electoral politics. Gergen (1985) further argues that self-deception provides individuals with an opportunity to avoid responsibility for irresponsible actions. In democratic societies, electoral abstention is the height of civic irresponsibility (Campbell, Gurin, and Miller 1954, Campbell et al. 1960, Lewis-Beck et al. 2008, Riker and Ordeshook 1968).

Beyond the question of responsible behavior, self-deception has been shown to have effects that are countervailing to self-efficacy. Previous studies report that while self-efficacy is associated with desirable outcomes, such as the ability to learn, self-deception is associated with significant reductions in the same outcomes (Lee and Klein 2002, Martocchio and Judge 1997). In terms of voting behavior, scholars have long demonstrated a positive and significant association between political efficacy and turnout (Karp and Banducci 2008, Pinkleton, Austin, and Fortman 1998, Pollock 1983). In other words, highly politically efficacious citizens are more likely to vote than their low-efficacy compatriots. Given the countervailing effects of self-

efficacy and self-deception documented in the psychology literature, I also expect self-deception to exhibit a turnout effect opposite of what would be expected of political efficacy.

Taken together, I posit that (1) self-deceived individuals remove the civic implications from casting a ballot and avoid responsibility for their abstention, and (2) that self-deception will operate in a countervailing manner from political efficacy, leading me to propose the following:

*Turnout Hypothesis:* Individuals displaying self-deceived behavior will be less likely on average to turnout to vote than individuals who are not self-deceived.

## Data & Methods

### Survey

The data for this study comes from an online survey of 169 Louisiana voters conducted the week before Louisiana's October 24, 2015, primary election, using Qualtrics. I obtained a statewide Louisiana voter list from a commercial vendor who performs regular election analysis for political candidates, independent expenditure organizations, and the Louisiana Secretary of State's office. The voter list was the most recent available and included newly registered voters. Another commercial vendor provided e-mail appending services that matched voter file data with consumer data in order to provide e-mail addresses for 5,000 voters selected randomly from the statewide list. The week before Louisiana's primary election, an invitation to participate in the survey was sent to the 5,000 likely voters registered in Louisiana via the matched e-mail addresses. The cooperation rates (The American Association for Public Opinion Research 2016) were high at 82.8 percent for all four measures—Cooperation Rates 1-4.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>The AAPOR Cooperation Rates (CRs) differ from response rates. Response rates simply measure how many responses a survey receives divided by the number of surveys distributed, regardless of whether or not the recipient is eligible to participate in the survey or if the eligibility to participate is unknown. CRs measure the rates at which *valid* respondents participate in a survey. CRs remove from the

Evidence of the validity and trustworthiness of the sampling mechanism and the survey instrument are provided in Table 1, which displays the percentage of support for the top four candidates obtained from my survey, a public opinion poll administered two weeks before my survey and the final vote totals for the candidates on Election Day. Despite some slippage, the level of final support for the candidates did not deviate too sharply from the survey.

**Table 1: Voter Choice by Candidate**

Candidate (Alphabetically)	Survey Instrument (Oct 12-17)	Public Opinion Poll (Sept. 27-30)	Election Day (Oct. 24)
Angelle <sup>a</sup>	8	15	19
Dardenne	19	14	15
Edwards	24	24	40
Vitter	22	24	23
Undecided/Other	26	18	3
N	169	800	—
Margin of Error	±7.54	±3.46	—

<sup>a</sup> Although the support expressed for Angelle in my survey is apparently lower than the media poll cited in the survey, given the margins of error on the two polls, it cannot be ruled out that the support level in the two polls were actually closer together.

### ***Measuring Self-Deception***

In order to create the conditions for activating self-deception in voters, I relied on data from three points the survey:

1) Response to the question, “Regardless of whom you plan to vote for in the upcoming election for Louisiana Governor, which of the following candidates do you think will win?”;

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calculation individuals who were sent the survey but who are ineligible to participate or their eligibility to participate is undetermined (see Disposition Code 3.1 in the Calculator).

(2) Presentation of a news report in *The Advocate*, one of the state's largest newsarticles, containing findings from a public opinion poll that found *all candidates except Edwards and Vitter had very low levels of support* (Crisp 2015); and

(3) Response to the question, "Regardless of whom you plan to vote for in the upcoming election for Louisiana Governor, in light of this new information, which of the following candidates do you think will win?"

If the respondent identified a candidate in question 3 who was not one of the leading candidates (i.e., Edwards or Vitter), they were identified as self-deceived, consistent with the four definitional criteria used by Gur and Sackeim (1979) and Starek and Keating (1991). For example, consistent with the first criterion for self-deception, self-deceived voters held two contradictory beliefs—one about who they believed was going to win the election (number 3 above) versus the information about who was likely to win conveyed clearly in the news article (number 2 above).

Classifying respondents as self-deceived requires the assumption that they believed the information contained in the news article, an assumption I make for two reasons. First, Tsfati (2001) found that people tend to trust pre-election polls. Second, nearly 40 percent of the respondents to my survey said they would be more likely to trust the story if it came from the state's largest newsarticles, which this story did. I therefore assume, for the purposes of this study, that the respondents believed the information contained in the report.

Second, the two contradictory beliefs about the election poll and the voter's subsequent assessment were likely held simultaneously. The news report and the assessment of who the respondent thought was likely to win were assessed within minutes of each other. Thus, the second criterion of self-deception is also satisfied.

The third criterion for self-deception is that one of the beliefs must be suppressed. Relatedly, the fourth criterion is that the act that determines which belief is active and which belief is latent is a motivated act. For this study, I assumed that the belief in the public opinion poll is suppressed, what Yanal (2007) calls "inactivated," while

the belief they express subsequently is “activated.” This suppression of the public opinion poll belief satisfies criterion 3. We know voters are motivated reasoners (Kim, Taber, and Lodge 2010), and that they practice “selective attention” (VonHippel and Trivers 2011, 9), devoting their attention to information “they would prefer to be true.” Given this, it is safe to assume voters responding to the survey consciously hold onto their own belief about the election instead of one presented to them that contradicts their belief from the report on the opinion poll. Thus, since the suppression of belief in the polling information is motivated, criterion 4 is met as well.

To summarize, the voters whose responses to question 3 differ from the information presented in question 2 above are shown to hold two contradictory beliefs (that two different candidates will win the election); those beliefs are held simultaneously (within minutes); the voter is likely unaware they believe the poll, although I assume they do; and they suppress belief in the polling information through a motivated act. Having met all four criteria for self-deception, it is clear that voters are indeed self-deceived if they offer a response to question 3 that is contradictory to the information presented in question 2. Because voters meet all four established criteria for self-deception through this series of survey questions, my measure of self-deception is facially valid.

### **Variables**

In order to understand the role of self-deception in voter behavior, I examine the antecedents and consequences of self-deception by estimating two logit regression models. In all instances, the variable *Self-Deceived* is a dichotomous variable, with a value of 1 indicating the voter is self-deceived according to the aforementioned criteria, and a value of 0 indicating otherwise.

First, to test the *Confidence Hypothesis*, *Self-Deceived* is the dependent variable and the regressor of interest is *Confidence in Selection*, which is measured by the following survey question: “On a scale of 1-100, where 1 is extremely unlikely and 100 is extremely likely, how likely do you think it is that the following candidate will win?”

I also include in the model a variety of controls for the respondent's sex, age, race, party identification, candidate choice, attention to the campaign, self-reported likelihood of voting and level of support for the preferred candidate.

I then test the *Turnout Hypothesis* by regressing *Self-Deceived* and various control variables on *Voted*, which is a dichotomous variable taking the value of 1 if the respondent voted in the gubernatorial election and 0 otherwise. Values for *Voted* were taken from official state voter files after the election and matched to the appropriate respondent. This alleviated two potential problems for the study. First, it did not require me to go back to respondents a second time for follow-up. Having to follow-up with prior participants could have led to an unacceptable attrition rate. Second, relying on state records rather than self-reported turnout rules out the possibility of social desirability bias (Holtgraves 2004, Silver, Anderson, and Abramson 1986), and gives the measure greater validity. I control for *Male*, *Age*, *White*, and *Republican* as well as the attitudinal-behavioral variables *Prefer Likely Winner*, *Following Campaign*, and magnitude variables *Likelihood of Winning* and *Support for Preferred Candidate*.

## Results

Model 1 in Table 2 shows the results of the *Confidence Hypothesis* predicting self-deception. Using both common electoral characteristics, such as party identification, along with electoral attitudes and beliefs in the context of the campaign, several factors significantly predict self-deception. *Confidence in Selection*, my predictor of primary interest, explains self-deception with a statistical significance, although the sign on the coefficient is the opposite of my theoretical expectation ( $\beta = -0.06$ ). Of the control variables, only *Age* reached statistical significance, although *Republican* approached, but did not reach, significance at the .10 level.

**Table 2: Self-Deception and Voter Participation**

	Self-Deceived	Voted
Confidence in Selection	-.06*** (0.02)	—
Self-Deceived	—	.65 (.98)
Prefers Likely Winner	.16 (.83)	17.89 (4,543.57)
Support for Preferred Candidate	.02 (.01)	.01 (.02)
Male	1.18 (.80)	-19.00 (4,543.57)
Age	.07** (.03)	.01 (.04)
White	-.97 (1.51)	— <sup>a</sup>
Republican	1.19 (.79)	-19.27 (4,543.57)
Following Campaign	-.26 (.49)	.41 (.64)
Constant	-.90 (2.13)	19.25 (4,543.57)

The dependent variables are dichotomous, with 1=Self-Deceived and Voted, respectively. Entries are logit regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Results of two-tailed tests of significance are as follows \*  $p < .1$  \*\*  $p < .05$  \*\*\*  $p < .01$ . <sup>a</sup>Omitted for perfect prediction

My theoretical prediction was that *Confidence in Selection* would positively predict *Self-Deception*, but the reverse is true in this case. At least three possible explanations for the unexpected direction of the effects of *Confidence in Selection* are plausible. First, it is possible that the theories of self-deception in a competitive environment developed by Starek

and Keating (1991) may apply more to the candidates themselves than to voters. Indeed, the theories developed in previous competition-based studies focused on athletes rather than the observers, however involved in the process the observers may have been. Another possible explanation is that voters who are more confident in their predictions are also the most knowledgeable about the election and are less biased in their analysis of the contest. Third, given the small magnitude of the negative coefficient, it is possible that a larger sample would yield the expected results.

Model 2 reports the results of the *Turnout Hypothesis* test. None of the independent variables explained whether a respondent voted with any traditional level of confidence. Considering the null effects of self-deception, two explanations may account for the lack of statistical significance. First, the number of observations was small. Second, my methodology was to sample only likely voters. The greatest predictor of future behavior is past behavior, so it is possible that the failure of this model to explain turnout results from this normative (rather than statistical) autocorrelation. Larger samples collecting participants from among registered voters rather than likely voters may serve as opportunities to find significance on turnout in future studies.

### **Conclusion**

Much work in the political science literature has been devoted to explaining the behavior of voters. Equal attention in psychology has been dedicated to debate the concept of self-deception. Yet, to date, no study has attempted to link the two. This article begins the important process of linking the two fields of study. I began this article with an expectation that voters' political self-confidence would predict self-deception, and that their self-deception would in turn influence the voters' behavior in an election.

Employing a survey to induce self-deception during a real-world election campaign provided mixed results for my expectations. Electoral attributes and beliefs indeed did influence self-deceptive behavior in voters but not in the expected ways. Furthermore, self-deceived voters displayed different beliefs about the election than non-self-deceived voters but, again, in the direction opposite of my

expectations. However, self-deception exhibited no influence on the ultimate decision to vote by respondents in the sample.

This article opens a new line of inquiry for analysts of voter behavior. For decades, scholars have attempted to understand the behavior of voters through the lenses of psychology; this has been a fruitful line of inquiry. However, at least one psychological concept remained untested before this article: The concept of self-deception. With the inquiry into the influence of self-deception on voter behavior comes a greater, more comprehensive understanding of the psyche of voters.

Although it expands our understanding of voter behavior in a meaningful way, this article has several limitations. First, the scope of the study is limited in both size and space. The online survey returned a small number of full participants. Although the small sample size is moderated by the robust sampling methodology, studies using larger samples would be welcomed contributions. Furthermore, this study was restricted to a single electoral contest in a single state's off-year election. Thus, generalizing these results beyond Louisiana voters is unadvisable. Meaningful expansion could be accomplished with time-series studies and samples from more than one state.

A second caveat is the type of participants and participation this article examines. This study limits its analysis to the self-deception of voters. This limitation likely explains the theoretically inconsistent findings. It seems reasonable, then, to expand the study of self-deception in political science to the actual competitors in the electoral arena: The candidates. The study is also limited to a single form of participation: Voting. Although voting is the most common mechanism for democratic participation, it is not the only form. Future analyses should include other forms of participation such as donating money, displaying a yard sign, or actively campaigning for a candidate as other avenues of approach for understanding self-deception in voters.

Third, voters have an inflated sense of political efficacy; they believe their individual vote is more valuable than it actually is. Further drawing on this theory of inflated political efficacy, an equally valid

alternative turnout hypothesis is plausible: *Voters who believe their vote carries more weight than it actually does will be more likely to turnout.* However, the current survey did not measure a voter's belief about the value of their vote, precluding a test of this alternative turnout hypothesis.

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