Are Right-Wing Populists and Right-Wing Populist Parties in America Buoyed by Mass Self-Deception?

Owen Herbert

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Are Right-wing Populists and Right-wing Populist Parties in America Buoyed by Mass Self-Deception?

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Abstract

The recent rise of right-wing populist candidates and parties in America and around the globe has (unsurprisingly) been associated with a concomitant growth in scholarship on the causes of individuals voting for right-wing populist candidates and joining the movements with which those candidates associate. Much of the scholarship in this area appeals to economics or culture as reasons why individuals side with right-wing populists or right-wing populist parties and movements. This thesis will begin by examining the significant literature in those two areas. Then, I will raise two questions that the literature has scarcely addressed: (1) What is the psychological phenomenon/belief-formation process motivating an individual's voting for a right-wing populist candidate or joining a right-wing populist movement? (2) Why, despite the wealth of evidence that suggests that right-wing populists in power do not heed the concerns of their constituencies, do individuals continue to lend their support to them? I conjecture that recourse can be made to a psychological phenomenon that interested those such as Sigmund Freud and Jean-Paul Sartre and continues to interest psychologists and philosophers alike in the present day—self-deception—to get at answers to these two questions. To give a brief account of self-deception, when individuals engage in it, they believe a false proposition or belief, even against the preponderance of evidence available to them at the time suggesting that the contrary proposition is true. Drawing upon the account of self-deception provided by Alfred Mele (2001) in *Self-Deception Unmasked*, I demonstrate how self-deception is a plausible phenomenon that perhaps lies beneath individuals voting for right-wing populist candidates or joining right-wing populist parties and movements for purported 'economic' or 'cultural' reasons. The paper concludes by suggesting that despite the ease with which individuals can deceive themselves, because of the nature of self-deception and what we must assume when we assert that one deceives themselves, there remains hope that we can move beyond it.

**Keywords:** Self-Deception, Right-wing Populism, Populism
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# Table of Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................................................................ ii

Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................................................... iii

Introduction .......................................................................................................................................................... 1

The Cultural Thesis for Joining and Voting for Right-wing Populist Movements and Parties .................................................. 2

The Economic Thesis for Joining and Voting for Right-wing Populist Movements and Parties .......................................................... 7

The Psychological Phenomenon for Which Existing Scholarship has Failed to Account .... 13

The Nature of Self-Deception .......................................................................................................................... 15

Applying Mele’s (2001) Theory to Adherents of Right-wing Populist Candidates & Parties ........................................................................ 20

Conclusion .......................................................................................................................................................... 25
**Introduction**

The burgeoning of right-wing populist candidates and parties around the globe has naturally led pundits, politicians, and citizens to posit a whole host of explanations regarding factors that have driven individuals to cast a ballot for a right-wing populist or to associate with a party or movement that identifies with right-wing populism. Indeed, in the wake of right-wing populist Donald Trump’s stunning victory over Hillary Clinton in 2016, these explanations were abound.¹ Some made recourse to economic explanations and pointed to increasing economic insecurity and inequality, unfettered globalization, exposure to trade from foreign countries, and neoliberalism’s consequences (namely, the 2008 financial crisis) as plausible reasons for why individuals would ever choose to vote for Trump. Others suggested that Trump garnered the support he did because many disgruntled white people viewed him as the one who would defend their interests over and against initiatives amongst many groups and institutions seeking to de-emphasize their concerns or their "heritage" and privilege the concerns of traditionally marginalized groups, or they suggested that he benefited electorally from discontented voters who felt as though their cherished values were losing ground and that their social status was in decline. Regardless of the preferred explanation, we can confidently say that many voters cast their ballot for Trump because they sought a revival (whether that revival be real or perceived) in their lives that they did not believe other establishment politicians could deliver on.

But Trump did not deliver (Luban, 2021). However, despite his shortcomings, despite his inability to deliver, an overwhelming majority of Republicans continued to lend their support to him (*Presidential Approval Ratings -- Donald Trump*, n.d.). What are we to make of this? Is

¹ Though I will frequently speak in the thesis about “right-wing populist candidates” or “right-wing populist parties and movements,” I will be heavily focused on Trump, the movement and party with which he associates, and how self-deception functions in the minds of many who support him.
there perhaps a phenomenon that will help us explain why this happened? I believe that there is.

In this thesis, I will examine the significant literature that argues that individuals lent their support to Trump for either cultural or economic reasons. Then, I will call attention to areas the literature I examine has scarcely addressed: (1) What is the psychological phenomenon/belief-formation process motivating an individual's voting for a right-wing populist candidate like Donald Trump? (2) Why do individuals continue to lend their support to Trump and candidates and parties like him, despite their failure to address their concerns satisfactorily? I will conjecture that self-deception, an irrational belief-formation process, can help us get at answers to these two questions. Following that, I will utilize Alfred Mele's (2001) account of self-deception in Self-Deception Unmasked to show how self-deception is a plausible explanation that explains the unrelenting support among some for a right-wing populist like Donald Trump.

**The Cultural Thesis for Joining and Voting for Right-wing Populist Movements and Parties**

Sides et al. (2017) argue that Donald Trump and other significant figures once present in American political life, namely, George Wallace and Pat Buchanan engender something they coin as a "dormant political power" that does wonders for their electoral prospects (p. 13): white consciousness; that is, a heightened awareness of those things that are perceived to be harmful or beneficial to the white racial group as a whole, an awareness of how they stand in relation to the world in the present, and an awareness of the group's history and how a variety of institutions have addressed their group (p. 4). But how, according to Sides et al. (2017), do the figures mentioned above (especially Trump) promote the development of white consciousness among a portion of the electorate? They do so by making "appeals to physical, material, and cultural threats to whites" (p. 2); they claim, as former President Trump once did, that the media is
"trying to take away our history and our heritage" (Thomsen, 2017). Such appeals, of course, cannot lead to anything else but sentiments amongst some that their group, their group's heritage, and their group's future prospects are in danger, and it also engenders the development of "ingroup identity," for "ingroup identity tends to arise from isolation, deprivation, and discrimination" (p. 4). A strong sense of it, as Sides et al. (2017) show, leads some who are intensely concerned about the future of white ingroup identity to, for example, vote for a right-wing populist like Donald Trump in hopes that he will be crucial in fostering the perpetuation of the ingroup or, at the very least, act as a bulwark against those who "threaten" it (p. 14).

Consistent with Sides et al.'s (2016) notion that whites who identify strongly with their racial group are drawn to figures such as Donald Trump, who make appeals about the apparent "threats" that whites face in America today, Blascovich et al. (2016) posit something quite similar: "Whites high in ethnic identification reported marginally greater positivity towards Trump." Moreover, Blascovich et al. (2016) argue, not only are white Americans who identify with their racial group firmly attached to its preservation and perpetuation, but they are also concerned with its standing relative to other groups. If they sense that another racial group besides their own is advancing or their own is diminishing relative to other groups, they will seek to correct it. And according to Blascovich et al. (2016), that correction could take the form of overt discrimination toward outgroups, or (more likely), it could take the form of a vote for a right-wing populist like Donald Trump.

Margalit (2019), unlike Sides et al. (2017) and Blascovich et al. (2016) who assert that an intense preoccupation on the part of some white people regarding how their racial group fares in


2 The expression “ingroup identity” is synonymous with “white consciousness.”
3 Indeed, “ingroup identity” need not burgeon only from actual isolation, deprivation, and discrimination, but may also develop from perceived isolation, deprivation, and discrimination.
society is what leads to their voting for a right-wing populist candidate, argues the following: in the final analysis, students of populism ought to view various cultural concerns and grievances, rather than economic concerns and grievances, as the more satisfactory explanation for why people join right-wing populist movements and vote for their candidates (p. 153). Outright appeals to economic insecurities as the fundamental reason why people vote for right-wing populists, Margalit (2019) argues, are dubious for two crucial reasons. First, proponents of the economic insecurity explanation overlook the idea that "cultural concerns and grievances shape people’s beliefs about economic change and its adverse impact on their standing" (p. 165). Margalit (2019), via an experiment, illuminates this point. Here stated is its most important finding:

I found that when individuals, particularly the less educated, were exposed to a set of four questions designed to trigger preoccupation with cultural change—for example, whether or not they agree with the statement “our traditional way of life is getting lost”—they expressed a substantially more negative view about the impact of trade than a control group that wasn’t exposed to the treatment. (p. 166)

Second, such explanations conflate "outcome significance," that is, the degree to which a given factor did or did not impact an electoral outcome, and "explanatory significance," that is, the degree to which a factor accurately explains why the electorate supported the candidate that they did (p. 153). To give an example of this conflation at work, a proponent of the economic insecurity explanation might (correctly!) conclude that in a close election, feelings of economic insecurity amongst a small portion of the electorate played a crucial role in determining the outcome of the election (making it, then, a factor that has high outcome significance) (p. 153). However, from this reasonable conclusion, the same proponents make the error of asserting that
this is a great deal of explanatory significance; hence, it adequately explains why the electorate voted in the way they did (pp. 155, 158).

Gidron & Hall (2017) argue that a decline in subjective social status, that is, "the level of social respect of esteem people believe is accorded to them within the social order" (p. 5), is associated with a concomitant rise in support (particularly among white working-class men) for right-wing populists. Moreover, Gidron & Hall (2017) argue that one's subjective social status is primarily determined "both by material circumstances and by prevailing cultural beliefs about what is most valued in society (p. 6). Put another way, economic conditions and culture influence one's perception of where they stand concerning other people and institutions.

Given these two determiners and reflecting on economic and cultural changes over the last few decades, more or less, it is reasonable to say that the changes have hardly been conducive to an increase in subjective social status among working-class individuals. Economic development, for example, over the past few decades has hardly been in their favor; as Gidron & Hall (2017) point out, there has been "the gradual disappearance of low-skilled decent jobs, understood as well-paid positions with some job security of the sort once associated with factory work" (p. 7), and rapid development of technology which has bode well for highly-educated professionals, and disfavored workers with no post-secondary, or hardly any post-secondary, education: "Technological progress has raised the demand for highly skilled employees and the wage premium to education, relegating many lower-skilled workers to jobs that offer poorer pay and less security than those going to their more highly educated counterparts" (p. 7).

Furthermore, the evolution of culture, Gidron & Hall (2017) argue, has hardly been favorable to working-class individuals, for it not only has had the effect of lowering their subjective social status, but it has carried with it the consequence of a wealth of new economic grievances on the
part of those whom we might say get 'left behind' as a result of the de-emphasis on their own issues:

The growing prominence of cultural frameworks emphasizing gender equality, for instance, encouraged more women to enter the workforce; and cultural trends that have raised the social prestige associated with urban life have drawn firms offering good jobs and employees seeking them away from smaller cities and the countryside, intensifying the regional economic disparities that may have fed cultural resentment and support for right populism. (p. 22)

Ultimately, Gidron & Hall (2017) conjecture, the unfavorable economic and cultural developments for working-class people, which lower their subjective social status, do nothing less than create ripe conditions for a right-wing populist to make appeals to them; appeals, for example, that are "anti-immigrant, racially tinged and anti-Muslim" (p. 7) and serve the purpose of speaking to those who feel that their social status is under attack. And, Gidron & Hall (2017) argue, by pledging to those with a low subjective social status that they (i.e., the right-wing populist) will protect, even enhance, it, right-wing populists garner the support necessary to win elections (p. 10).

Norris & Inglehart (2019), in *Cultural Backlash*, appeal to the notion that given the "intergenerational value shift among Western publics" (p. 32) in the aftermath of World War II, which included, but were certainly not limited to, "same-sex marriage, women in leadership roles, multicultural diversity in cities, and, in the US, an African-American President" (p. 35), those who adhere to traditional, more conservative, values and once felt a sense of security in knowing that their values were, for the most part, the values of their society, now feel as if their core values are being stomped out in favor of new ones (p. 43)—that they are "strangers in their
own land" (p. 34). And Norris & Inglehart (2019) argue that it is the seismic shift in commonly-held values, along with the concomitant presence of "media frames [that] reinforce latent authoritarian values, [and whip] fear of 'others' (p. 49), that plants the seed for a conservative, even authoritarian, reaction to manifest (p. 43). It is from this reaction—this backlash—that right-wing candidates begin to make appeals to these disillusioned individuals regarding how they will, for example, 'save America' or 'prevent leftists from seizing control of all social institutions in society,' ultimately leading to their successfully courting voters in elections or successfully getting individuals to mobilize for them in civil society.

**The Economic Thesis for Joining and Voting for Right-wing Populist Movements and Parties**

Rodrik (2018) argues that nations which find themselves in the "advanced stages of globalization" (p. 2) are ripe for a populist candidate (whether they be on the left or the right) to enter electoral politics and woo voters into voting for them. Globalization, Rodrik (2018) argues, creates fertile grounds from which a populist can sprout because it exacerbates "economic anxiety and distributional struggles" (p. 2). It leads, for example, to the proliferation of free trade agreements such as NAFTA, which, though it produced modest effects for the paradigmatic U.S. worker, hit blue-collar workers, workers without a high school diploma, and protected sectors of the U.S. economy that saw the protections they once enjoyed get eliminated by NAFTA particularly hard: "a high-school dropout in heavily NAFTA-impacted locales had eight percentage points slower wage growth over 1990–2000 compared with a similar worker not affected by NAFTA trade;" "wage growth in the most protected industries that lost their

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4 Though not the focus of my discussion here, but nevertheless still interesting to note, Rodrik (2018) maintains that a left-wing populist like Bernie Sanders used globalization as a springboard to “mobilize along income/social class lines” (p. 2).
protection fell 17 percentage points relative to industries that were unprotected initially" (Hakobyan & McLaren, 2016; Rodrik, 2018). Moreover, the lack of social insurance programs to compensate those suffering losses from free trade agreements only further entrenched them in economic peril (p. 6).

However, Rodrik (2018) argues that it was not merely the advent of free trade agreements like NAFTA that gave rise to economic insecurity and widespread discontent among blue-collar American workers, an additional factor was at work: the 2008 financial crisis brought about by the growth of financial liberalization and on-going financial liberalization (p. 10). Drawing upon recent work by Furceri et al. (2017), Rodrik (2018) brings attention to the finding that "capital-account liberalization leads to statistically significant and long-lasting declines in the labor share of income" (p. 10). The fallout from the financial crisis of 2008 and the recent strides toward financial liberalization on the part of policymakers in the U.S., along with, as I alluded to earlier, "imports (especially from China) and trade agreements (with Mexico, Asian countries) were politically salient issues, around which large number of voters could be mobilized" in 2016. (p. 16). This is because these issues, Rodrik (2018) argues, and the willingness on the part of Trump to emphasize "ethno-national/cultural cleavages" (p. 2) provided him with the ability to make a case that appealed to disaffected workers, particularly workers in the American south (p. 2); it allowed him to assert, for example, that a recent influx of immigrants (notwithstanding whether the influx is real or perceived) is the manifestation of globalization's nasty effects (p. 2).

Autor et al. (2019), like Rodrik (2018), find that greater exposure to import competition leads to a disproportionate rise in the likelihood of electing a Republican to Congress or the

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5 “A capital account liberalization is a decision by a country’s government to move from a closed capital account regime, where capital may not move freely in and out of the country, to an open capital account system in which capital can enter and leave at will” (Henry, 2007, p. 1).
Presidency (pp. 0, 46). The reduction of barriers to imports, which, of course, clears the way for
greater import competition, carries with it highly undesirable consequences for those
communities most affected by rising imports: higher exit of plants and other firms that employ
members of a community, more significant contractions in employment, lower incomes for
affected workers, and non-participation in the labor force, to name a few (p. 2). In turn, and
echoing Rodrik (2018), Autor et al. (2019) assert that these developments in communities make
trade both a salient political issue that policymakers must address and an issue that populist
candidates like Donald Trump exploit for electoral gain (pp. 46, 47).

However, exposure to import competition does not merely confer electoral benefits upon
right-wing populists like Donald Trump. Autor et al. (2019) show that such exposure also leads
to more significant viewership of Fox News amongst individuals residing in regions most
affected by it. Examining Nielsen Media data, they find that areas impacted by import
competition saw not only a diminished market share for mainstream news outlets like CNN and
MSNBC but also an "increase in the relative demand for television news with a conservative
political slant" (p. 25), namely, Fox News. Indeed, armed with this information, we would not be
unreasonable to assert that because greater exposure to import competition leads to more
significant viewership of Fox News and because Fox News routinely not only supports
Republican congressional and presidential candidates (p. 8) but parrots their talking points, it is a
catalyst that, ultimately, generates long-term support for GOP candidates.

Pastor & Veronesi (2018) depart from Rodrik (2018) and Autor et al. (2019) on the
notion that the growth of imports into America from foreign nations is a force that leads,
eventually, to one's voting for right-wing populists and, making recourse to an economic model,
offer an explanation of their own for why individuals draw toward right-wing populist candidates
and movements: "support for populism should be stronger in the country with higher inequality, more financial development, and a lower trade balance" (p. 3). It should be stronger, Pastor & Veronesi (2018) argue, because when the three factors mentioned above are present and because voters "dislike inequality" (p. 1), when economic "output grows, the marginal utility of consumption declines, and U.S. agents are increasingly willing to sacrifice consumption in exchange for more equality. In that sense, equality is a luxury good. When output grows large enough, the median voter prefers autarky and the populist wins the U.S. election. In a growing economy, the populist thus eventually gets elected" (p. 3). Indeed, Pastor & Veronesi (2018) hazard that the movement on the part of voters toward a right-wing populist is rational, given their preference for equality, which a right-wing populist promises to provide them (p. 33). However, with the preponderance of evidence available to voters which suggests that right-wing populists (think Donald Trump) do not deliver on greater equality for all but instead deliver on what the GOP has always delivered since the end of the twentieth century, namely, policies in the interest of capital, can it reasonably be said that this is a rational move for voters to make? It appears as though it is not.

Azmanova (2018) argues that populism, particularly the new, distinct kind of right-wing populism ascendant in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, "is a structured and enduring mobilization of social forces against two features of the established order: (a) the style of policy-making—technocratic rule bereft of political leadership, and (b) its content—neoliberal global economic competition without regard for the social consequences of economic policy" (p. 403). Azmanova (2018) argues that this new kind of populism has emerged precisely because public officials, from the so-called "roaring '90s" and on, clustered around a pole of ideas, the

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6 A luxury good is a good for which demand increases more than what is proportional as income rises, so that expenditures on the good become a greater proportion of overall spending.
"Opportunity pole," and took favorably to neoliberal policies that include, among other things, free trade, cosmopolitanism, and deregulation (p. 404). They eschewed, Azmanova (2018) argues, the "Risk pole," a pole of ideas that advocated for greater protectionism and expressed skepticism towards neoliberal policies (p. 404). Moreover, according to Azmanova (2018), public officials deemed this set of policies to be, in a sense, "without alternative and therefore not a matter of ideological contestation" (p. 404) and, hence, "denied the forces mobilizing around the Risk pole validity as political actors" (p. 406), and shunned them as ignorant populists unknowledgeable about economics.

Sandel (2018) advances similar sentiments as Azmanova (2018) regarding why right-wing populists garner a great deal of support. "The right-wing populism ascendant today," Sandel (2018) argues, "is a symptom of the failure of progressive politics" (p. 354). The assertion that right-wing populism is the consequence of a failure of "progressive" politics is questionable, given what progressive politicians, activists, and citizens demand, namely, a redress of social and economic ills that have plagued American life for quite some time. However, Sandel's (2018) subsequent remarks on the metamorphosis of the Democratic Party from the 1980s onward provide what I believe to be a better insight into who and what it is he actually believes is the cause of growing right-wing populism: "The Democratic Party has become a party of a technocratic liberalism more congenial to the professional classes than to the blue-collar and middle-class voters who once constituted its base" (p. 354). Moreover, Sandel (2018) argues, the Democratic Party "embraced a market-driven version of globalization and welcomed the growing financialization of the economy" (p. 355). All of this is to say, for Sandel (2018), like Azmanova (2018), right-wing populists found electoral success when liberal and center-left
parties abandoned a working-class base and, concomitantly, abandoned their plight and embraced neoliberalism (p. 355).

Lastly, Guiso et al. (2017) argue that on the demand side of populism, that is, the causes for one's voting for a right-wing populist, "economic variables are significant determinants of increased voter preference for populist parties. Lower income, financial distress and higher economic insecurity from exposure to globalization and competition of immigrants drive the populist vote" (p. 4). Regarding lower income being a catalyst for voting for a right-wing populist, Guiso et al. (2017) assert that poorer individuals, unlike wealthier individuals, are willing to take the gamble on voting for a right-wing populist in hopes that they will do something that mainstream parties could not, namely, lift them out of the dire straits in which they find themselves (p. 11). As for a higher perception of job insecurity being a catalyst to vote for a right-wing populist, Guiso et al. (2017) argue that this perception grows with the advent of foreign competition, and, following the insights of Autor et al. (2019), Algan et al. (2017), and Rodrik (2018), they argue that it spurs individuals to seek refuge in a right-wing populist party that promises to save their jobs (p. 11). Furthermore, Guiso et al. (2017) maintain that both a lower trust in traditional status-quo politics to be sustainable and a higher perception of sustainability of populist parties (whether they be on the right or left) are two factors that drive the intention to vote for a populist (p. 11). However, in regards to this latter point, namely, that right-wing populism thrives off a perception amongst individuals that their movement or their candidate will answer their most pressing needs, we might ask the following question: what is the belief formation process at work here which allows such a perception (leaving aside, for now, questions regarding whether that perception is accurate or not) to manifest? A discussion of this
process will be touched on in the next section and will take center stage in the section that follows thereafter.

The Psychological Phenomenon for Which Existing Scholarship has Failed to Account

We have now seen a variety of explanations for the driving forces behind individuals' voting and joining right-wing populist parties—explanations that, put simply, make recourse to either culture or economics. I have offered critiques of some explanations where I think them to be warranted, but I have not (and do not plan to in this paper) launched a full-scale attack on either the cultural or economic theses. Instead, what I intend to do now and in the coming pages is to call attention to something that the research I have presented in this paper has overlooked, something that goes deeper than mere explanations that appeal to cultural or economic reasons, and show why it stands to be a plausible explanation. Namely, a psychological phenomenon and a belief-formation process that I conjecture to be present when an individual in America votes for or joins a right-wing populist party—self-deception. To give a (very) cursory account of self-deception for now, when individuals engage in self-deception, when they deceive themselves, they believe a false proposition or belief, even against the preponderance of evidence available to them at the time suggesting that the contrary proposition or belief is true.

I think self-deception, rather than any other psychological or belief-formation process, is an apt phenomenon to which we might appeal in our inquiry for this reason, a reason that I appealed to in discussing Pastor & Veronesi's (2018) article: American right-wing populists, particularly ones that hold positions of power, boast endlessly about how they will inaugurate the departure from standard GOP dogma on economic and cultural issues and usher in what Daniel Luban has called a "new working-class conservatism eager to use government to serve the common good" (Luban, 2021). Nevertheless, time and again, right-wing populists in power never deliver; they
never deliver on the economically progressive agenda that many of their voters crave and have
(up until very recently) largely failed to deliver on cultural issues important to their voters
(Luban, 2021). Yet, despite their many failings in delivering policy, voters still flock to them—they continue to believe that right-wing populists will do something for them, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Thus, given this, and given what I have said about self-deception above, it is evident why self-deception is the phenomenon in which we ought to be interested.

Moreover, though I said earlier that scholars who have researched the causes for why voters vote for or join populist parties have overlooked psychological phenomena or belief-formation processes in their scholarship, this does not mean that they have not given it any consideration. Indeed, scholars of populism (including some whose work I discussed above) have, albeit in passing, made comments highlighting the need for more research on this area: Hawkins et al. (2017) insist that the little research done on why individuals vote for or join right-wing populist parties (or populist parties more generally) hardly even begins to get at "the cognitive processes that lead people to join populist forces" (p. 314). Pastor & Veronesi (2018) hint at the notion that "many forces outside the model, economic and non-economic, must have played a role [in one's voting for a right-wing populist]" (p. 33), and Margalit (2019), in unambiguous terms, asserts that an inquiry into belief-formation processes specifically of voters who vote for or join right-wing populist parties is necessary:

Thus, an important avenue for research on populism is to investigate the way people form their beliefs about the impact of aforementioned issues that are often the targets of populist anger, such as globalization, immigration, and EU integration. What do people know about those issues, what information and news
sources do they rely upon in forming their beliefs, and what factors underlie their sense of being harmed by these changes? Addressing these questions is central to explaining the broad support base of populism. (pp. 166-167)

And though scholars of populism have, to date, only hinted at the need to examine the psychological phenomena or belief-formation processes behind one's voting for or joining a right-wing populist party, very recent scholarship in psychology has attempted to make the explicit connection between self-deception and populism more broadly. For instance, Miglietta et al. (2023), from a study that involved 785 Italian adults, concluded that "self-deception drove populist attitudes" (p. 1) held by many of those whom they examined. I bring attention to these quotes to show that the inquiry I am undertaking builds on previous literature and not one that proceeds wholly disconnected from the literature which precedes my inquiry. Now, largely drawing upon the account of self-deception adumbrated by Alfred Mele (2001) in *Self-Deception Unmasked*, I will examine the phenomenon of self-deception itself and then hazard some guesses as to how we might apply his theory to those individuals who vote for right-wing populist parties or join them.

### The Nature of Self-Deception

I have already touched upon earlier what self-deception entails one doing, namely, believing a false belief or proposition against the preponderance of evidence that suggests the contrary, but let us now discuss the questions surrounding the phenomenon: How do self-deceived individuals proceed in forming beliefs that will then satisfy a desire? Why do individuals deceive themselves? Why might they not? What are the biasing factors at play in the process of self-deception?
To answer the first question: When individuals deceive themselves, they attempt to satisfy a desire or wish, but how they arrive at satisfaction when they are self-deceived differs from how they would arrive at satisfaction when they are not deceiving themselves. When individuals are deceiving themselves, they have a wish or a desire. However, instead of working to achieve the goal and then achieving the goal, they circumvent the action necessary to achieve the goal and achievement of the goal itself to arrive at belief and, ultimately, satisfaction. This belief-formation process contrasts with how non-self-deceived individuals attempt to satisfy a desire or wish. When non-self-deceived individuals attempt to satisfy a desire or wish, they proceed from that desire or wish, and then they act in the world on that wish or desire. Following that, they achieve the goal and then believe they have achieved it. Finally, after they believe the goal to be achieved, they arrive at satisfaction.

However, the abovementioned explication is a rather simplistic take on how self-deceived individuals form beliefs. Mele (2001) offers a slightly different but more comprehensive view of what happens when individuals deceive themselves. In forming beliefs, Mele (2001) argues that individuals lean towards making the least costly error rather than adopting the belief that is most likely to be true. An example will help flesh this idea out: suppose that an individual wants to know whether they are strong (p) or not strong (not-p). Depending upon which is true, they could make two errors: they could falsely believe that they are not strong, or they could falsely believe that they are strong. With this in mind, consider the following: which error would cause more problems if they made it? Here, since falsely believing that they are not strong would be more costly (because they would feel poorly about themselves, perhaps), and since falsely believing that they are strong would make them feel pretty good, they would choose to believe (p) falsely. Furthermore, one way an individual can minimize the likelihood of making the focal error (i.e.,
the most costly error) is hypothesis selection, whereby they assume (again, using the above example) $p$ and then, automatically, biasing factors (which we will examine shortly) kick in to help reaffirm $p$.

As for the second and third questions: individuals may deceive themselves (and often do it unknowingly) for several reasons. Here are three: they do it to preserve their self-esteem (Mele, 2001, p. 3), or they do it to cope with the anxiety that they experience in everyday life (Galeotti, 2015, p. 893). Furthermore, individuals may also deceive themselves (knowingly or unknowingly) to preserve their happiness. Indeed, a body of evidence on self-deception exists which suggests that self-deceived individuals are happier than non-self-deceived individuals, and self-deception plays a fundamental role in bringing this result about (Taylor, 1989; Alloy & Abramson, 1979; Taylor & Brown, 1988) because it is a process which can facilitate the discarding of particularly unpleasant, or inconvenient, information (Cowen, 2005; Mele, 2001). Thus, given this, though we might be quick to malign self-deception (because it is a deviation from a rational belief-formation process) as something terrible, we should not take up this view so quickly—it might carry some worth.

However (and this answer gets to the third question specifically), individuals do not try to satisfy most, if not all, of their desires through self-deception because if they did so, they would never really ever achieve their ends. Also, if individuals always resorted to satisfying their deceives through self-deception, they would become quite far removed from reality, which would spell danger for anyone who seeks to lead a satisfying life free from deception. Moreover, Mele (2001), as we have seen, makes recourse to the idea of a costly error to explain why even when a desire is present in both cases, individuals deceive themselves in one case but not the other in this way: if, in one case, they have a desire that $p$, but the cost of mistakenly believing $p$
to be true is very high (i.e., its cost carries with it grave consequences), then they perhaps will not deceive themselves and arrive at the belief that \( p \). Instead, they will carefully weigh all of the relevant evidence before them and avoid hastily settling on a given belief (p. 43).

Now, what are the biasing factors that are at play in self-deception? Mele (2001), drawing upon the psychological literature that addresses the phenomenon, indicates that there are three types of so-called "cold" biasing factors, that is, factors that lead to an individual's deceiving themselves, despite their having no motivation, no intention, ever to do so (p. 28).\(^7\) They are as follows: first, there is the vividness of information. Here, vivid data (i.e., data that is interesting to us or has imagery-provoking power) disproportionately influences the formation of beliefs (p. 28). An example of the aforementioned cold biasing factor at work would be when, after seeing three other people wearing neon orange shirts in five minutes, an individual is led toward the belief (through no intention or motivation of their own) that a significant percentage (40% or so) of, say, the people in the town in which they reside regularly wears neon orange shirts, but, in reality, only approximately 5% of the population regularly does so. In this case, since the neon orange shirts were more noticeable than the ones that are not nearly as eye-popping, they came to falsely believe that a significant percentage of their community regularly wears neon orange shirts when that is not true. A second cold biasing factor, according to Mele, is availability. Here, people are influenced by the "relative availability" (pp. 28-29) of information. An example of this cold biasing factor at work is this: an individual arrives at the belief that more people use Samsung smartphones than iPhones because almost everyone in our immediate orbit has a Samsung smartphone. Lastly, according to Mele, a cold biasing factor is confirmation bias (p. 29). With confirmation bias, people search more often for confirming than disconfirming

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\(^7\) Though “cold” biasing factors can bias our beliefs without any wish or desire, they can be triggered by them. For example, a desire can increase the vividness of data favorable to what aligns with the desire (Mele, 2001, p. 29).
evidence and more readily recognize the former. For instance, suppose a person believes that people with red hair are more intelligent than people with blonde hair. In that case, if confirmation bias is present, whenever that person finds an intelligent redhead, they place much more emphasis on this piece of evidence, which, in turn, reaffirms their hypothesis (i.e., their original belief).

But, Mele (2001) maintains, in addition to the "cold" biasing factors that give rise to self-deception, there also exist four types of what we might call "hot" biasing factors—factors that support an individual's intentionally trying to deceive themselves into believing a particular proposition or belief because they have a desire for that proposition or belief (p. 25). One way in which a desire can bias our processing of evidence for or against a given hypothesis is via negative misinterpretation, whereby an individual, desiring $p$, misinterprets as not counting against $p$ data that, in the absence of the desire, would be recognized to count against $p$ (p. 26).

An example of negative misinterpretation at work would be when an individual, desiring to see their sports team do well ($x$), thinks that the overwhelming evidence that suggests that they will not win the championship does not indeed count against $x$, even though it does. A second way a desire can bias our processing of evidence for or against a given hypothesis is via positive misinterpretation (p. 26). Here, desiring $p$ may lead a person to interpret as supporting $p$ evidence that we would recognize to count against $p$ in the absence of the desire. For instance, if the father of a young soccer player takes his son's (seemingly perpetual) struggles on the pitch as an indication that he will one day play in the MLS, then the father is engaged in positive misinterpretation if he desires that his son one day play in the MLS.

Another way a desire can bias our processing of evidence for or against a given hypothesis is via selective focusing or attending (pp. 26-27). Here, desiring $p$ may lead an
individual to fail to focus on evidence against \( p \) and instead focus on evidence that suggests that \( p \) is true. For example, a scout for the Boston Red Sox, with a desire to have John Doe one day join the club, selectively focuses on the times when he makes great plays and avoids the instances where he commits errors in the outfield. Lastly, a way in which a desire can bias the processing of evidence for or against a given hypothesis is via selective evidence-gathering (p. 27). In this case, a desire for \( p \) may lead a person to overlook readily available evidence for not-\( p \) and find evidence for \( p \) that is not easily attainable. For example, a person guilty of selective evidence-gathering will overlook indications that their spouse is cheating on them and try hard to gather evidence that suggests they are faithful, even if it is not easily accessible. Nevertheless, merely explicating Mele's (2001) theory of self-deception is of little use to us here if we cannot plausibly apply it to individuals who lend their support to right-wing populist candidates and parties. Let us now examine how we can do as such.

**Applying Mele's (2001) Theory to Adherents of Right-wing Populist Candidates & Parties**

As it pertains to the vividness of information, we would be correct in asserting that right-wing populist candidates and parties *themselves* produce it and, in so doing, ensure that individuals' beliefs are disproportionately influenced by such information. "Vivid data," to be precise, is a broad term that can capture several things. For our purposes, we will say that it includes particularly crude and vulgar language and images and videos that are especially stark, even graphic. Indeed, Donald Trump, America's most notorious right-wing populist, is certainly not shy to make use of, to use Brubaker's (2017) words, "a low rather than high style" (p. 366), and resort to using "slang, swearing" to portray himself as being separated from the politically correct elite that employs sophisticated jargon regularly (Moffitt & Tormey, 2013, p. 392). Previously, he has proclaimed that President Biden "understood how to kiss Barack Obama's
ass,” called Senator Mitt Romney "a pompous ass" (Mann, 2019), and suggested that Democrats were "defrauding the public with ridiculous bullshit" (Frazin, 2019).

Moreover, aside from Trump's own rhetoric, his campaign has produced particularly graphic videos intended to arouse the passions and make specific images and soundbites linger in the minds of individuals. Take, for example, a campaign ad produced by the Trump campaign in 2020 that bears the ominous title of "Abolished." The clip, which attempts to depict an America where Democrats have abolished the police, begins with one's 911 call being answered with a recording: "Due to defunding of the police department, we're sorry, but no one is here to take your call. If you're calling to report a rape, please press 1, to report a murder, press 2.

Additionally, as the answering machine speaks, clips of burning buildings, break-ins, and violent confrontations are shown (Donald J Trump, 2020). Undoubtedly, at least in individuals who do not have an eye for this kind of manipulation, such language and imagery will occupy more of their attention than duller data, perhaps leading to their forming an erroneous belief—to their deceiving themselves—that Trump is, to draw upon our examples that highlight Trump's vulgar rhetoric, a man of the ordinary people who ought to be given full support over and against other politicians, even despite much evidence that points to the contrary of that very belief.

Turning now to the cold biasing factor of availability, I should begin by drawing attention to a quote by Norris & Ingelhart (2019) which, while not speaking directly to individuals supporting right-wing populists and right-wing populist parties as a consequence of the conditions, accurately depicts some of the very conditions necessary for the availability heuristic to kick-in and lead individuals to deceive themselves about right-wing populist like Trump:

They may also feel that they reflect the 'real' majority in America – especially if they live in isolated communities where friends, family, and neighbors share
similar values, if they get much of their political information from conservative media bubbles like Fox TV and like-minded Facebook groups, and if opinion-leaders willing to champion and articulate socially transgressive opinions. (p. 48)

Indeed, social circumstances and the media individuals consume certainly (especially if they align) can expedite the process of self-deception, as they easily make information available. However, we must be sure not to overlook another kind of place where the biasing factor of availability manifests—social media platforms. Undoubtedly, armed with the information that platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Twitter, and Instagram have in place extensive algorithms designed to learn about users' preferences so that they can maximize user engagement by predicting the content a user may find interesting (Kim, 2017, pp. 148-149), the ease with which right-wing populists and the party apparatus with which they associate might exploit this biasing factor becomes apparent; they must merely upload their propaganda to social media, and the algorithms will take care of the rest, directing it toward those users who have demonstrated even the slightest preference for their content, ultimately leading to the onset of mass self-deception.

Finally, let us examine the role of confirmation bias in individuals who might succumb to the right-wing populists like Donald Trump who promise much, but deliver little. Indeed, for this cold biasing factor, we might recourse to the fact that a desire can influence the hypothesis (i.e., the original belief) that initially occurs to an individual (Mele, 2001, p. 32), which, in turn, can engender confirmation bias. In demonstrating how confirmation bias might (and likely has) functioned in practice, I believe we can draw upon Norris & Ingelhart (2019) again. Suppose, for example, that a socially conservative individual, feeling as though their core norms and beliefs are losing their "hegemonic status" (p. 44), proceeds from the desire to preserve their beliefs and values that pertain to Christianity. This desire, then, might lead them to form the hypothesis that
someone such as Donald Trump (who, at best, pays lip service to the notion of defending Christian values in society) does indeed do as such. From this, the individual will seek confirming evidence and de-emphasize the disconfirming evidence. They will place much weight on Trump's holding a bible outside of a church, his choosing the devout Christian Mike Pence to be his running mate, proclaiming that he defends Christianity, and, ultimately, lend their support to him and completely disregard the overwhelming evidence that suggests that Trump is not acting as a bulwark against increasing secularization in America (Smith, 2021). Now, how ought we to apply the "hot" biasing factors?

Regarding the first of the four, negative misinterpretation, I would argue that this biasing factor was in full effect upon the discovery that in a phone call between former President Trump and Ukrainian President Zelensky, Trump had inquired into whether Zelensky could review debunked allegations of corruption by now-President Joe Biden and his son, Hunter Biden. In the call, Trump expressed the following:

There’s a lot of talk about Biden’s son, that Biden stopped the prosecution and a lot of people want to find out about that so whatever you can do with the Attorney General would be great. Biden went around bragging that he stopped the prosecution so if you can look into it. (O'Key, 2019)

Clearly (and I make a note of this point because it will be returned to shortly), Joe Biden is referred to in this small excerpt. Despite this fact, though, only 4 in 10 Republicans believed that Trump had even mentioned Biden in the call (Monmouth, 2019). Certainly, we can chalk this shocking poll up to mere ignorance regarding the contents of the phone call; indeed, we might even go so far as to say that it is the best explanation for this result. However, I nevertheless think it is reasonable to deduce from this result that a small portion of Republicans, because they
had a desire to see Trump succeed or a desire not to see him falter, misinterpreted something that most individuals, not under the spell of a similar desire, would count as data that shows the Trump was interested in Joe Biden (at least to an extent) in this call.

For the second of the four hot biasing factors, positive misinterpretation, we can find it on full display in the relatively unusual responses emanating from the supporters and cronies of Donald Trump in the wake of insults that any rational individual would consider offensive. Indeed, not infrequently, when Trump asserted that Mexico was not "sending their best...they're sending people that have lots of problems" (Global News, 2016), or, against then-presidential candidate Carly Fiorina, said, "Look at that face. Would anybody vote for that? Can you imagine that, the face of our next president? I mean, she's a woman, and I'm not supposed to say bad things, but really, folks, come on. Are we serious?" (Lange & Klawans, n.d.), or asked in a now-deleted Twitter post, "If Hillary Clinton can't satisfy her husband, what makes her think she can satisfy America?" (Lange & Klawans, n.d.), the response from those sympathetic to him was not one of disgust, condemnation, or one that suggests that he is so morally corrupt that he is unfit to hold public office; instead, it was one of approval—he "tells it like it is." According to these individuals, he deserves support because he is honest and says things (such as the abovementioned) that no other politician is willing to say. Thus, from all this, we might reasonably say that at least for some who are pro-Trump, the comments are positively misinterpreted as counting in favor of Trump and not counted as items that would be counted against Trump, or, for that matter, anyone.

Now, taking the hot biasing factors of selective focusing and selective evidence-gathering together, we can hardly say how exactly supporters of someone like Donald Trump selectively focus on some information to neglect other information or how they selectively gather evidence
that supports their worldview (as this would require an examination of how these supporters proceed in their everyday lives). However, the utilization of these hot biasing factors is undoubtedly not something that only supporters of his do. Indeed, political information consistent with an individual’s ideology or political affiliation is more likely to be believed, regardless of its veracity, and more likely to be focused upon in a sea of information regarding a particular topic (Garrett & Weeks, 2013). Armed with this information, we would be reasonable to say that self-deception is something that plagues a great many partisans and not just adherents of right-wing populism, and it is something that can happen quite easily, given that partisans often deceive themselves on matters about the party or candidate with which they identify.

**Conclusion**

I have now conjectured how we might apply Mele's (2001) model of self-deception to explain enduring support for a right-wing populist like Donald Trump. Now, though, I think it is reasonable to take up one final question: if self-deception is the psychological phenomenon, the belief-formation process, that is at work, should we worry about the future of American political life being dominated by right-wing populists who can play on the many ways in which individuals can deceive themselves? Indeed, especially when we consider that one can deceive themselves without ever having any intention of doing so, there is reason to suspect that those who can appeal to the irrational will find great success. However, there is also reason to suspect that given the nature of self-deception and what we must assume when we assert that one deceives themselves, it can be quashed.

Tamar Gendler (2007), for example, has gone to lengths to show that one's deceiving themselves is an endeavor that is difficult for them to sustain because it is precarious. Precarious because, as she argues, at any point, a self-deceived individual can be presented with a parallel
case, that is, a case that exhibits similar features to their own, and reflection upon it can lead to their realizing that they are deceiving themselves in their own lives, leading to their discarding the false beliefs they held (p. 243). Moreover, Gendler (2007) argues that sustaining self-deception is quite tricky in the face of overwhelming evidence suggesting the contrary belief or proposition is true, as even self-deceived individuals do not wish to have their beliefs be wholly incompatible with the facts of the world in which they reside (p. 244). Nevertheless, aside from the fact that self-deception is an unstable phenomenon, a crucial assumption is made when we speak of individuals being self-deceived. Donald Davidson (1982) has called attention to this fact: "For the irrational is not merely the nonrational, which lies outside the ambit of the rational; irrationality is a failure within the house of reason" (p. 289). Put another way, when we assert that someone is self-deceived and, hence, is being irrational, we cannot say that they are nonrational, that is, that they are a being that cannot reason at all; rather, we must necessarily assume a backdrop of rationality because to say they are irrational is to say that they have merely deviated from reason—thus, they can be put back on the right track.

The two facts regarding the instability of self-deception highlighted by Gendler (2007) and the crucial fact regarding what we assume when someone engages in irrational behavior (like self-deception) stressed by Davidson (1982) all point to something encouraging, namely, that self-deceived individuals are rational beings who can be brought back into the fold of reality once more—they can, to varying degrees, be reached by rational argument. How we might begin to expose these self-deceived individuals to rational argument (or rationality more generally) I will not address in detail here. Perhaps, though, we might begin by recommending greater citizen participation in public life so that the once self-deceived individuals can transform into
Rousseau's (2011) band of peasants who exhibit good sense and judgment and do not permit themselves to engage in self-deception (p. 224).
References


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AOOlOMLaFho


