Biased self-perception in an elite epistemic community: High-status lobbyists are most likely to overrate their success

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Abstract

In the realm of self-assessment, overconfidence is the default. Overconfidence helps individuals reach higher status within social groups by making them seem more competent to others regardless of their objective ability. For this reason, the widespread self-serving bias may be especially prevalent within elite communities, particularly among their most status-oriented members. Based on this premise, we explore the possibility that lobbyists in the U.S. misperceive and exaggerate their success. Using models that 1) control for legislative outcome when predicting self-assessed policy success, and 2) compare the self-assessed policy success of lobbyists on specific proposals against the average success reported by all lobbyists working on the same side of an issue, we identify systematic tendencies to overrate lobbyists' own achievements. Lobbyists who earn more money, reside in Washington, D.C., have congressional experience, and engage in a broader range of activities are more likely than other lobbyists to inflate their success relative to other lobbyists. Public interest group lobbyists tend to underestimate their policy success. We conclude that political elites are victim to the same biases as others when evaluating self and performance, and these biases may be largely status-driven.

Keywords: interest groups, elites, lobbying, overconfidence, policy influence, measurement, misperception

Conditionally accepted at *Nature Human Behaviour*

European Research Council
Established by the European Commission

Credit-claiming is such a natural part of politics that governmental institutions are likely built around it (Mayhew, 1974). Yet, claiming success is not the same thing as achieving the success one claims. Multiple meta-analyses across different domains show that self-assessment is often poorly correlated with objective measures of outcome success (Davis et al., 2006; Falchikov & Boud, 1989; Mabe & West, 1982). The phenomenon of overconfidence[1] may be even more prevalent in elite occupations (Baekgaard, Christensen, Dahlmann, Mathiasen, & Petersen, 2017), where people are highly motivated to present themselves as successful (Anderson, Brion, Moore, & Kennedy, 2012). One broader concern, especially in our current political environment, is how claiming undeserved credit may ultimately reduce elite accountability to the public (Cruz & Schneider, 2017).

Elite over-estimates of success may further obscure our view of certain political activities, like lobbying, where demonstrating unambiguous effects is notoriously difficult. Estimates of return on investment in lobbying remain imprecise (Hill, Kelly, Lockhart, & Van Ness, 2013; Kim, 2008), and we have do not have a clear understanding of what ultimately makes lobbyists successful or effective (Bernhagen, Dür, & Marshall, 2014; McKay, 2012; Baumgartner & Leech, 1998; Baumgartner, Berry, Hojnacki, Leech, & Kimball, 2009; Baron, 2006). Given measurement difficulties, one approach to assessing the success of lobbyists is simply to ask them (Egdell & Thomson, 1999; Heinz, Laumann, Nelson, & Salisbury, 1993). In view of the tendency toward overconfidence and inflated self-assessment, this approach presents both problem and opportunity. The problem is straightforward—self-assessment estimates of lobbyist success may be biased. The opportunities are more subtle, but important nonetheless. If self-assessments are biased, are there systematic differences in these biases? If so, what can we learn about elite behavior by examining systematic differences?

Drawing on literature from psychology, we seek to describe and potentially help account for the prevalence of lobbyists' overconfidence. The psychology literature contains numerous examples

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[1]We employ overconfidence to suggest that overconfident individuals are not as good at a task as they believe themselves to be (or say they are). Because our study examines postdiction, or self-assessments of prior performance, it may be more accurate to refer to this phenomenon as a self-serving bias in attribution of outcomes. For the sake of succinctness, however, we use the term overconfidence throughout, as seen in prior studies of postdiction (Finn, 2008; Nevid, Cheney, & Thompson, 2015; Weinstein & Roediger, 2010)

of attribution bias, and more specifically, motivated overconfidence, that can help better explain this phenomenon (Dunning, Heath, & Suls, 2004). Glenberg, Wilkinson, and Epstein (1982) describe overconfidence as the illusion of knowing. There is a real and quantifiable difference between humans' perceptions of having successfully completed a task and actually completing a task successfully. Moreover, some individuals are more likely than others to overrate their own performance (Anderson et al., 2012). We examine the literature in greater detail and examine which individual differences might predict overconfidence in lobbying success.

Defining overconfidence

In this study, we look at two key outcomes: the divergence between lobbyists' self-assessed success on a wide variety of policy proposals and their actual legislative outcomes, and the difference between the self-assessment and the relative perceived success of other lobbyists working toward the same policy outcome. What we examine is not perfectly aligned to many operationalizations of overconfidence within the psychology literature, but fits within the same family of ego-centric bias. The consistent element across all operationalizations is that overconfident people think they, or certain attributes of themselves or their behavior, are better than what they really are (Moore & Healy, 2008).

The most common form of overconfidence examined in the research literature is overestimation — "of one's actual ability, performance, level of control, or chance of success," (Moore & Healy, 2008). While our outcomes of interest are conceptually in accord with this form, our measurement approach differs. In lab-based studies, overconfidence is typically measured by people's assessments of their performance (when they did not know their actual performance) relative to their actual performance. Our measurement focuses on self-assessments of lobbyists' contributions to a known policy outcome. We believe this phenomenon can be fit under the broad umbrella of overconfidence as it describes lobbyists who think they are better at their jobs than evidence would suggest.

Sources of overconfidence

Individuals tend to overestimate their own success and ability (Alicke & Govorun, 2005; Dunning et al., 2004), and are overconfident in their abilities in the workplace (Haun, Zeringue, & Foley, 2000). This tendency is problematic considering the utility of accurate self-perception in assessing one's goals (Ehrlinger & Dunning, 2003), one's choice of projects (Camerer & Lovallo, 1999), or the strategies most likely to lead to success (Neale & Bazerman, 1985).

While there is some evidence that epistemic communities may be more accurate than others in their self-assessment ratings (Dunning, 2011), lobbyists also have a professional incentive for being perceived as important or integral to the final outcome. A contract lobbyist makes pitches to prospective clients based on her relationships, skills, access, and past successes. An in-house lobbyist secures job recognition and promotion based on his successes. Trade associations, unions, and citizen groups tout policy successes in their efforts to attract and renew dues-paying members. For lobbyists and the groups they represent, admitting failure may threaten their livelihood more than failure itself. (Of course, inflating success is not the only possible response to these pressures. Lobbyists may formulate differing definitions of success (Leech, 2010) or shift to more favorable criteria in how they evaluate themselves.)

Scholars have offered three possible accounts for why overconfidence is so widespread. The first suggests that psychological benefits, such as enhanced self-esteem (Alicke, 1985), motivate overconfidence (Dunning, Leuenberger, & Sherman, 1995; Kunda, 1987). The second account holds that cognitive biases preclude accurate self-judgments. Individuals may be unable to evaluate themselves fairly due to basic processes of judgment. For instance, biased estimates of prior performance may appear because individuals are more likely to have intended to succeed in the first place (Miller & Ross, 1975), because they lack adequate meta-knowledge (Russo & Schoemaker, 1992) needed to understand their competence (Kruger & Dunning, 1999), or because individuals characterize success in different ways (Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989). Additionally, people may have trouble adjusting assessments of performance after they receive feedback (Ross, Lepper, & Hubbard, 1975).

However, a compelling third account of overconfidence has recently emerged. This growing line of research posits that overconfidence is widespread due to its ability to confer social (rather than psychological) benefits (Anderson et al., 2012; Kennedy, Anderson, & Moore, 2013). Viewing themselves with unwarranted positivity can help individuals persuade others to likewise perceive them as more competent. This view of overconfidence holds that individuals are motivated by desire for external social status — importance, power, and respect among peers — in addition to internal benefits. Social status, particularly in elite careers such as lobbying, provides access to greater professional and personal resources. Anderson et al. (2012) show that overconfidence helps individuals reach higher status within social groups by making them seem more competent to others regardless of their objective ability. Further, the authors find that desire for status predicts greater overconfidence. Follow-up work shows that individuals are not punished by others when revealed to be overconfident, suggesting that the benefits outweigh any social costs (Kennedy et al., 2013).

The above literature suggests two key sources of overconfidence: personal characteristics and professional activities. Regarding personal traits, the literature suggests a reciprocal relationship between status and perception: overconfident individuals are more likely to attain an elevated standing, and higher standing tends to produce greater overconfidence (Anderson et al., 2012). Likewise, it may then be the case that those without status markers are less likely to be overconfident (Josephs, Sellers, Newman, & Mehta, 2006).

Research on identity suggests that certain personal characteristics may lead to greater overestimation of success. If a component of one's self-concept is salient, an individual often takes on the relevant stereotype (D'Acunto, 2015). For example, because the stereotypes of those who reside in Washington D.C. (LaPira & Thomas, 2017), and those with high incomes (Johannesen-Schmidt & Eagly, 2002) are successful, individuals holding these stations may be more overconfident about their professional success. Our first hypothesis, then, is that lobbyists of higher status will tend to be more overconfident.

Regarding professional activities, various activities lobbyists can undertake in the job, such as

fundraising, contacting federal agencies, and trying to sway public opinion may contribute further to feelings of efficacy. For instance, activities that involve less accurate or less timely feedback may lead to greater overconfidence (Lazear, 2016; Russo & Schoemaker, 1992). Because individuals who have examples of effortful and varied activities cognitively available to them may be more likely to associate their activities with success (Ross & Sicoly, 1979), lobbyists who have more effortful and varied examples of their own lobbying activities cognitively available may be more likely to overrate their own success. A similar effect is described in management research, as seen in the worker who conflates busyness with performance (Williamson & Johnston, 1988). An enlarged job description may also instill feelings of efficacy (Parker, 1998), which in turn inflates perceived influence on the policy process. Our second hypothesis, then, that engaging in lobbying activities that extend beyond the basic function of contacting Members of Congress tends to lead such lobbyists to be overconfident.

Research Design

We evaluate overconfidence in two different ways, by 1) examining both a lobbyist's subjective rating of his or her success while controlling for legislative outcome, and by 2) comparing a lobbyist's subjective rating of his or her success with the those ratings of all lobbyists working on the same side of the issue. In other words, one measure examines whether a lobbyist's perception of his success is in line with whether the sought outcomes were achieved (irrespective of how others on the same side of issue rate their own success) and the other measure examines if a lobbyist's perception of success is in line with others who worked on the same side (irrespective of coding for outcomes).

We test our theory using data from interviews with 776 lobbyists[2] conducted by Heinz, Laumann, Nelson and Salisbury (1993) supplemented with our own research on the 77 policy proposals about which the investigators queried lobbyists. The Heinz, et al. (1993) project, known as the basis for the *Hollow Core* book, was funded by the American Bar Foundation and National Science

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[2]These lobbyists were 87% male, with an average age of 46.14, SD = 11.31.

Foundation and uses the largest sample of lobbyists ever interviewed or surveyed by scholars. In particular we are interested in the lobbyists' actions and views on up to five policy proposals each.

Lobbyists were given a list, developed from news stories, of 22 prominent policy proposals in each of four policy domains—agriculture, health, energy, or labor—for a total of 77 proposals (some issues crossed multiple domains). The subjects were asked to identify up to five issues on which they worked closely. Respondents were asked their client or organization's position (for, against, or ambivalent/no position), and what actions they took (identifying the issue, contacting Congress, contacting federal agencies, appealing to public opinion). Most importantly for our purposes, on each of these five issues lobbyists were also asked, "Given your client/organization's objectives, would you say your client/organization achieved all, most, about half, few, or none of its objectives?" The authors called this their success measure and used it to draw conclusions about the "success" of different kinds of lobbyists and groups.[3] We depart from Heinz et al. (1993) by labeling this measure *perceived success*, for reasons we discuss in the next section.

Dependent Variables: Perceived Success and Relative Perceived Success

In the analyses that follow, we examine two dependent variables, *perceived success* and *relative perceived success*. *Perceived success* is a five-point ordered measure of the portion of the lobbyist's objectives that the lobbyist says he or she achieved on a particular policy proposal, ranging from "none" to "all" (M = 3.23, SD = 1.42) (Heinz et al., 1993). In addition to using this measure directly as a dependent variable, we also use it to construct the relative perceived success variable.

To gauge the lobbyist's sense of his or her relative success, we use the *perceived success* score and subtract the average reported success level achieved by all lobbyists advocating on the same side of the issue. The resulting variable, *relative perceived success*, varies from -3.75 to 3.27, and we standardize it by shifting it upward (by 3.75) to make all responses positive and then dividing by the range (7.02) to produce a variable bounded by 0 and 1 (M = 0.53, SD = 0.16). High values of

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[3]Specifically, Heinz et al. (1993, p. 349) found that lobbyists with more years in government, lobbyists who represented trade associations, lobbyists who knew more "notable" lobbyists, and economic liberals were more likely to say they had achieved more of their client or organization's objectives. (The square of years in government had a *negative* effect on perceived success, however.)

relative perceived success indicate that the lobbyist thinks his or her client/organization was much more successful than other organizations whose lobbyists worked on the same side of the issue, and low values indicate the lobbyist reported less success than others on the same side of the issue.

Explanatory Variables and Hypotheses

We examine two possible sources of overconfidence—lobbyist activities (elements of what they do, such as distributing PAC contributions, contacting a federal agency, or trying to sway public opinion) and lobbyist traits (elements of who they are, such as their income, the type of group they work for, and whether they live in or near Washington, D.C.).

Legislative outcome

To measure overestimates of success and the correlates of overconfidence, we first need to effectively control for legislative outcome. When *perceived success* is the dependent variable, we do this by including measures of the success or failure of the lobbyist in securing the sought outcome. We include two dummy variables—*Outcome: Success* (M = .42, SD = .49) and *Outcome: Failure* (M = .35, SD = .48)—that allow us to account for what happened in the legislative process. The omitted category contains cases in which the lobbyist would not say definitively whether their client/organization was for or against the proposal (including "neither," "both," and "it depends"; 21% of cases), because without a definitive answer of which side of an issue the lobbyist was on, we cannot evaluate if they were successful or not.

Admittedly, success is a difficult concept to measure, especially when it comes to public policy (Burstein, 2014). In our coding we adhered strictly to the wording of the proposal given to lobbyists and government officials by Heinz et al. (1993). This language often provides the outcome (e.g., "House approves HR 4962, upgrading and expanding CHAP-Child Health Assurance Program") or at least the bill number or agency working on it, along with the month and year. We used the annual Congressional Quarterly (CQ) Almanac to identify whether the proposal, as it was proposed in the month and year given, had become law by the time of the interviews. Those proposals that did not

go far enough or were not major enough to be discussed in the CQ Almanac were researched in newspapers archived by Lexis-Nexis or in scholarly papers. A full list of these proposals, along with our coding of *outcome* and justification of this coding, appear in the appendix.

Table 1 provides *prima facie* evidence that these variables successfully capture the role played by outcomes in self-assessments (though it also suggests that there is additional variance to be explained above and beyond success).

This analysis of outcomes also helps validate our second dependent variable, *relative perceived success*. Given that legislative outcomes are associated with self-evaluations (r = .37), examining the distance between an individual lobbyist's self-evaluation and the average self-evaluation rating of all other legislators on the same side of the issue allows us to examine which lobbyists see themselves as better (or worse) than consensus opinion.

Table 1: Lobbyist Self-Perceived Success, by Legislative Outcome

	Legislative outcome		
Self-perceived success	Preferred outcome: realized (42%)	Preferred outcome: not realized (35%)	Other (23%)
None	7%	28%	15%
Few	10%	24%	23%
Half	14%	16%	28%
Most	33%	16%	21%
All	36%	16%	12%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Notes: N = 3,251. Cell entries are percent in each self assessment category across legislative outcome. The Other category contains cases in which the lobbyist would not say definitively whether their client/organization was for or against the proposal.

Lobbyist activities

We now turn to factors that explain self-assessment after controlling for legislative outcome. First we consider the activities lobbyists engage in as they pursue policy goals. Lobbyists who choose their own issue have an extra stake in being seen as successful, and are personally invested in the outcome. Further, because lobbyists who have examples of effortful and varied activities

cognitively available to them may be more likely to associate their activities with success, we suspect that lobbyists who employ tactics beyond contacting Congress, such as contacting an agency,[4] may tend to overrate their success. The same logic, that going "above and beyond" results in better perceived outcomes, also applies to engaging public opinion and engaging in fundraising and PAC decision-making.

Identifying the issue for one's employer (M = .64, SD = .48), contacting agencies (M = .46, SD = .50), and appealing to public opinion (M = .40, SD = .49) were measured dichotomously. Fundraising was measured on a 5-point scale, from "never" to "regularly." We also employ a dichotomous measure for whether a lobbyist said that he or she participated in a PAC's decision-making (M = .40, SD = .49).

Lobbyist characteristics

Our theory that status considerations affect self-assessed success ratings among lobbyists suggests that some lobbyists consider themselves more successful than others. For this reason, we expect that lobbyists with higher annual incomes tend to exhibit overconfidence. Similarly, we speculate that those who have worked in Congress believe they have experience and connections that allow them to get more and longer meetings with key Capitol Hill personnel and to be more persuasive in those meetings. Likewise, lobbyists who live in the Washington, D.C., area are likely to see themselves as more central to federal policy-making, and if so, this may increase both psychological and social demands to inflate perceptions of their success. (We know D.C. lobbyists spend more time on federal policy: 55% of those residing in D.C. spent more than half their time on federal government policy, whereas only 10% of those residing outside of D.C spent more than 50% of their time on federal policy). Similarly, lobbyists were asked to place themselves along a five-point scale between these two extremes: "My work is so highly specialized that it demands I concentrate on one issue," or "My work is such that I can handle a range of issues in my field." The social benefits of overconfidence are likely to be particularly helpful for generalists, especially if

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[4]We consider contacting an agency an additional strategy, rather than a substitute strategy, because 87 percent of the lobbyists that contact an agency also contact Congress.

"contacting the right person" is central to the story of their process expertise.

Conversely, we believe those working for public interest groups tend to underrate their success. The objectives of public interest groups—saving the environment, ending hunger, equality for women—may naturally be more difficult to achieve than the goals of other lobbyists, such as increasing the allowable chickens per hour an inspector may legally inspect. Perhaps more importantly in our analysis of overconfidence, though, related to strategies for mustering support from members and donors, public interest groups frequently emphasize a position of outsiders taking on powerful opponents in bed with government (Walker, 1991).[5] Lobbyists working for these organisations may internalize an underdog identity, which would bias their perception of their own efficacy against too much success.[6] Likewise, public interest lobbying is considered by many to be a lower-status job in Washington. If our theory is correct that status is an important part of self-evaluation of success, then those with these lower-status, "underdog" jobs should exhibit less overconfidence than others.

The variables for Washington residence (M = .67, SD = .47), congressional experience (M = .17, SD = .38), and public interest group status (M = .19, SD = .39) are measured dichotomously. The level of specialization is measured on a 5-point scale, where higher values represent more generalized practice (M = 4.00, SD = 1.11). Income was originally measured on a 20-point scale (M = 8.82, SD = 3.85), ranging from under \$10,000 to over \$500,000. (We recode each respondent to the midpoint of their answer category to create a linear scale for income, which we then rescale 0-1 to aid comparison against other variables. Results are consistent with alternative codings of income.) All explanatory variables are recoded to range from 0-1 for ease of comparison.

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[5]To the extent that public interest groups are disproportionately membership based organizations, this is also broadly consistent with Jordan and Maloney (1998) and their focus on the importance of "supply side" activities tapping and creating interest group compatible dispositions.

[6]We thank an anonymous review for making this point about public interest groups and suggesting the Walker (1991) and Jordan and Maloney (1998) citations.

Analysis

We fitted a series of ordered logit (*perceived success*) and OLS (*relative perceived success*) regression models to assess our hypotheses.[7] We used an alpha level of .05 for all statistical tests. The unit of analysis is the lobbyist-issue. We first present separate models for lobbyists activities and activities, and then estimate an additional model that includes both sets of predictors. The average lobbyist discussed 4.1 issues, and with 776 lobbyists, the maximum possible sample size is 3,212 (all models presented have fewer than this because of missing data).

Lobbyists' activities and traits both contribute to distorted perceptions of lobbyists' success. Table 2 presents our perceived success model. As we would expect from the results presented previously above in Table 1, the regression results in model 1 in Table 2 clearly show that legislative outcome is predictive of self-assessment. However, as the additional models show, what the lobbyist claims to do and who they are are also important to how respondents rate their success. The activities model shows that lobbyists who engaged in a broader range of activities on an issue report greater success. Lobbyists who contacted a federal agency (usually in addition to contacting Congress) and those who identified the issue for their client reported greater success. However, those who appealed to public opinion, engaged in fundraising, or participated in PAC decisions did not perceive themselves to be more successful.

The results regarding lobbyist characteristics are even more telling. As expected, higher income is associated with greater perceptions of success. In addition to higher income earners, lobbyists who have experience working in Congress and lobbyists who live in the D.C. area are also more likely to rate their own success higher. The level of speciality also seems to matter — being a generalist is associated with greater self-perceived success. Finally, those who work for public interest groups rate their success lower than other lobbyists.[8]

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[7]Data distribution was assumed to be normal but this was not formally tested. See Figure A1 in the appendix.

[8]As an additional means of testing the robustness of these results, we consider what happens when the lobbyist reports that his client or organization achieved *all* of its objectives (*perceived success* = 5 on the 5-point scale), even though the lobbyist's stated preference is the opposite of the legislative outcome (7.4 percent of our sample). Using logistic regression (Appendix Table A1), we find that extreme overconfidence is predicted by higher income, having appealed to public opinion on the issue, and living in Washington, D.C. Likewise, underconfidence occurs when *perceived success* = 0 and yet the lobbyist's preferred outcome is realized (3.9 percent of our sample). We find that extreme

Table 2: Lobbyists' Self-Perceived Success, by Legislative Outcome, Activities, and Characteristics

	(1) Outcome	(2) Activities	(3) Traits	(4) All
Preferred outcome: realized	1.19***	1.11***	1.19***	1.12***
	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)
Preferred outcome: not realized	-0.32***	-0.41***	-0.34***	-0.40***
	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)
Identify issue		0.23**		0.19*
		(0.08)		(0.08)
Contact agency		0.33***		0.25**
		(0.08)		(0.08)
Influence public opinion		0.06		0.08
		(0.08)		(0.08)
Fundraise		0.10		0.05
		(0.13)		(0.13)
PAC decisions		0.17		0.09
		(0.09)		(0.09)
Income			0.94**	0.85**
			(0.29)	(0.29)
Congressional experience			0.23*	0.21*
			(0.10)	(0.10)
Generalized practice			0.38**	0.35*
			(0.14)	(0.14)
Lives DC area			0.23**	0.17*
			(0.08)	(0.08)
Public interest group			-0.39***	-0.31**
			(0.10)	(0.10)
MacFadden's Pseudo-R2	.05	.05	.05	.06
N	2898	2882	2687	2677

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Ordered logit models clustered by respondent. Dependent variable is *Perceived success*. All variables measured on 0-1 scale.

Logit coefficients are difficult to interpret directly. To ease interpretation of these results and to get a better sense of the magnitude of effects, we present some predicted probabilities across key independent variables of interest (holding all other variables at their means). The outcome we are

underconfidence is negatively correlated with income and with congressional experience.

examining is the predicted probability of a lobbyist answering the perceived success question either as having met either "most" or "all" of their goals. For lobbyists who did not realize their preferred outcome, this quantity is 31%, but this increases by 36 percentage points, to 66%, for those who did[9]. While the effects of other variables are smaller, they are still notable. For example, going from the 66th percentile to the 99th percentile of income results in an increase of 15 percentage points. Lobbyists who have the most generalized practice (compared to those who the most specialized practice) are 8 percentage more likely to report having met at least "most" of their goals. Lobbyists in who live in the DC area and lobbyists with Congressional experience are each 5% more likely to report having met "all" or "most" of their goals. Finally, the effect of being a public interest lobbyist is negative – they are 11% less likely to say they have met "all" or "most" of their goals.

Next, as an alternative modelling strategy, we model the relative perceived success of a lobbyist. As described above, we calculate the difference between an individual lobbyist's self-assessment and the mean self-assessment for all lobbyists working on the same side of the issue. These results, presented in Table **??**, show that the same predictors are associated with overconfidence—the activities of identifying the issue and contacting agencies, and the personal characteristics of income, congressional experience, Washington residence, more generalized practice, and public interest group status.[10]

Finally, to further ascertain that these findings demonstrate systematic overconfidence rather than accurate self-assessment, we checked whether our legislative outcome variables are associated with the same lobbyist activities and characteristics as our measures of overconfidence. We did so by conducting a multivaraiate probit regression (a form of Seemingly Unrelated Regression that accounts for correlated outcome measures) for the success and failure outcomes. Only contacting agencies positively predicts both relative perceived success and preferred legislative outcome realization. Moreover, two variables are significant in the opposite direction for preferred legislative outcome realization than they are for relative perceived success: public interest group status

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[9]Rounding accounts for the small discrepancy here.

[10]As further robustness checks for the primary relative perceived success model, we also considered alternative modeling tactics, including using tobit (which enforces upper and lower bounds on the dependent variable) rather than OLS and using fixed effects for the issue or group. Our results are robust to these alternative modelling strategies.

Table 3: Lobbyists' Relative Perceived Success, by Activities and Characteristics

	(1) Activities	(2) Traits	(3) All
Identify issue	0.02**		0.02**
	(0.01)		(0.01)
Contact agency	0.03***		0.02**
	(0.01)		(0.01)
Influence public opinion	0.01		0.00
	(0.01)		(0.01)
Fundraise	0.01		0.01
	(0.01)		(0.01)
PAC decisions	0.01		0.01
	(0.01)		(0.01)
Income		0.06**	0.05*
		(0.02)	(0.02)
Congressional experience		0.02*	0.02*
		(0.01)	(0.01)
Lives DC area		0.02**	0.02*
		(0.01)	(0.01)
Generalized practice		0.03*	0.03*
		(0.01)	(0.01)
Public interest group		-0.03**	-0.02*
		(0.01)	(0.01)
Constant	0.48***	0.46***	0.42***
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)
R2	.02	.02	.03
N	2881	2686	2676

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. OLS models. Dependent variable is *Relative perceived success*. All variables measured on 0-1 scale.

is negatively associated with actual failure, and living in D.C. is negatively associated with actual success.[11] These results are included in the appendix (Table A2). In sum, these analyses further strengthen our interpretation that the results presented Tables 2 and 3 reflect sources of overconfidence

[11]These results are robust to modeling the outcome on a 3-pt. scale with cases in which the lobbyist would not say definitively whether their client/organization was for or against the proposal at the midpoint, using ordered logit.

Conclusion

Lobbyists often overrate their ability to achieve goals for their clients or organizations. Moreover, this tendency toward overconfidence can be reliably predicted by variables describing the lobbyist's traits and activities—and these same variables do not explain success when success is measured objectively.

In particular, greater income for the lobbyist, having congressional experience, and living in the Washington area are all associated with a tendency to report higher levels of success – either directly or relative to other lobbyists working on the same side of the same issue. We think that these variables describe individuals more likely to consider themselves an important part of the policymaking process in Washington. In the other direction, we find that lobbyists working for public interest groups are more likely to underrate their success, supporting the conclusion that public interest lobbyists' goals are more difficult to reach than those of private interest groups.

In this specific case of why income is positively associated with perceptions of success, there are two possibilities. First, as would be consistent with our theoretical expectations, lobbyists simply believe they are more successful because they earn more (which in turn provides social benefits that aid the lobbyist's quest for new clients and projects). Alternatively (and more charitably), lobbyists might actually be more successful than those who earn less. However, the results discussed above and presented in the appendix do not show a positive association between income and success.

A professional lobbyist might counter that his or her goals surrounding a particular policy proposal extend beyond securing the preferred outcome: the lobbyist may be building relationships over the long term (Leech, 2010), for example. But even in such cases, the number of people who claim that they achieve all of their goals even when their preferred outcome does not occur is compelling evidence that overconfidence is involved. It is also worth noting that self-assessments were given in the context of academic research with the promise of anonymity, which should provide less incentive to brag than would communication with clients, peers, or others in the lobbyist's professional orbit.

Research relying on interest groups' own assessment of success may skew inferences if some

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lobbyists are systematically more likely than others to be overconfident. Accordingly, future work should use measures of policy success that are not subject to attribution bias (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). Our measure of *side success*—the average perceived success of lobbyists working on the same side of an issue—is a feasible and sensible alternative to individually self-perceived success measures. It is more strongly correlated with our wholly exogenous measure of the actual policy outcome (r = .63) than is the individual self-perceived success measure (r = .37). Such triangulation is recommended as a way of addressing the thorny problem of measuring interest group influence (Dür, 2008). Further, because *side success* is continuous, it better reflects the compromises and achievements, short of full policy success, that very often describe policy outcomes (Mahoney, 2007; Baumgartner et al., 2009). Recently, more sophisticated methods of measuring interest group success have been developed, especially using spatial methods (Klüver, 2013; Bernhagen et al., 2014), but the data-gathering and analysis burden of these techniques is high.

In addition to the methodological contribution of this research, our findings add to our understanding of the psychology of political elites, which is under-studied relative to the influence of political elites over national affairs. By comparing self-assessments against the views of others on the same side of the issue, we see that self-serving bias is common, particularly among higher-status elites. This conclusion joins initial work on elected officials and perceptual bias (Baekgaard et al., 2017) in suggesting that political elites are just as susceptible, if not more so, to the same biases as others when evaluating self and performance.

Our findings also contribute to a growing body of literature in which high social status is associated with greater overconfidence (Anderson et al., 2012; D'Acunto, 2015; Josephs et al., 2006; Kennedy et al., 2013). Overconfidence within epistemic communities may be especially likely when these communities are geographically concentrated and many members are extremely well paid. This conjecture should be examined more broadly. Specifically in lobbying, these possibilities could be examined in communities such as American state capitals, other national capitals, and the homes of international organizations and institutions (e.g., Brussels as home to the European Union and NATO). In addition, these findings could easily extend beyond political domains to other

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communities, such as finance (New York, London), medical specialties (e.g., Houston for cardiology), and technology (Silicon Valley). We hope that future research will examine these questions both within politics and in other fields.

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