Entertaining Beliefs in Economic Mobility

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Abstract

Americans have long believed in upward mobility and the narrative of the American Dream. Even in the face of rising income inequality and substantial empirical evidence that economic mobility has declined in recent decades, many Americans remain convinced of the prospects for upward mobility. What explains this disconnect? I argue that their media diets play an important role in explaining this puzzle. Specifically, contemporary Americans are watching a record number of entertainment TV programs that emphasize "rags-to-riches" narratives. I demonstrate that such shows have become a ubiquitous part of the media landscape over the last two decades. Online and lab-in-the-field experiments as well as national surveys show that exposure to these programs increases viewers' beliefs in the American Dream and promotes internal attributions of wealth. Media exemplars present in what Americans leisurely consume everyday can powerfully distort economic perceptions and have important implications for public preferences for redistribution.

Introduction

The promise of upward economic mobility is fundamental to national identity in the United States. In a land free of a feudal past, Americans were "apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their hands" (de Tocqueville 1835, p.206), believing that if they worked hard, their economic circumstances would improve. This belief that hard work guarantees success is such a cornerstone of the American ethos that it has become known as the American Dream (Hartz 1955; Lipset 1997; McCloskey and Zaller 1984).

In recent decades, however, Americans have seen a simultaneous increase in income inequality and decrease in economic mobility (Chetty et al. 2017; Piketty 2014; Stiglitz 2012). Absolute intergenerational mobility rates—the fraction of children who earn more than their parents—have fallen by more than 40% (Chetty et al. 2017). In this age of intensifying class stratification, concerns about the fading American Dream have certainly dominated public discourse. Politicians from Joe Biden to Donald Trump have argued that the American Dream needs to be restored (Biden 2020; Trump 2020).

Nevertheless, many Americans continue to view the United States as the land of opportunity and believe that people can achieve upward mobility through hard work. Recent polls, for instance, show that around 70% of American adults hold such beliefs (Gallup Organization 2019; see also George Washington University Battleground Poll 2018). Even in the midst of a pandemic, more than half of Americans remain optimistic (YouGov 2020). Academic studies also show that Americans substantially overestimate the extent to which people actually experience upward economic mobility (e.g., Davidai and Gilovich 2018; Kraus and Tan 2015). Why do Americans' beliefs in economic mobility persist despite the raft of empirical evidence to the contrary? More importantly, why do some Americans retain this belief in upward mobility more than others?

I argue that the contemporary media environment provides an important and overlooked part of the answer. An excellent body of political communication scholarship makes it clear that only a small subpopulation makes it their hobby to devote much time to news consumption. Most citizens instead consume an astounding amount of entertainment media (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Flaxman, Goel and Rao 2016; Prior 2007). In the past two decades, this overlooked part of the media landscape has featured many entertainment programs that offer powerful exemplars of real-life Americans succeeding because of their hard work and talent. Shows that illustrate an ordinary person on a trajectory

of upward economic mobility—what I broadly term "rags-to-riches" programs[1]—are among the most popular on television. One such show, *America's Got Talent*, often attracts a prime-time audience seven times larger than that of Fox News (Elber 2018). Another show, *American Idol*, used to attract contestant vote totals that exceeded those of a typical American presidential election (Schwarz 2015). Such popularity matters because this segment of reality TV shares a meritocratic narrative. When millions of Americans sit down every evening and watch these programs, they continue to see evidence that economic mobility—the American Dream—is alive and well.

In this article, I investigate whether and to what extent these rags-to-riches TV programs affect perceptions of economic mobility and attributions people make about wealth and poverty. Using comprehensive Nielsen ratings data and original content analysis, I first demonstrate that these programs have exploded in popularity in recent years and that they propagate a narrative emphasizing that hard work produces economic success. Using several original experiments conducted both online and in a lab-in-the-field setting, I assess the causal effect of these programs on beliefs in the American Dream. I find strong evidence of such effects, especially among self-identified Republicans who already believe in rugged individualism. Findings from an original national survey are also consistent with the experimental evidence. I find that exposure to rags-to-riches programs increases perceptions of economic mobility and promotes beliefs that economic success can be attributed to internal, rather than structural, factors. These effects are substantively important: regularly watching six or more rags-to-riches TV shows like *Shark Tank* is as powerful as having immigrant parents in shaping beliefs in upward mobility. In contrast, neither local economic context nor personal economic insecurity explains much of the variation in beliefs in upward mobility.

I conclude by discussing the implications of the post-broadcast media environment for the study of public opinion. Despite the astounding amount of entertainment media consumption, it is still mostly viewed as a force that simply dilutes news media effects (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013). But when so-called non-political media consistently offers positive and vivid exemplars of upward mobility to citizens who mostly opt out of consuming counternarratives from the news, it can powerfully distort mass economic perceptions. Further, this evidence offers a new explanation to the scholarly debate about why rising inequality has failed to spur public demand for redistribution (Bonica et al. 2013; Nor-

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[1]Rags-to-riches stories do not exclusively refer to situations in which a person rises from poverty to wealth. I use this term—a common archetype in literature and popular culture—to broadly refer to various trajectories of upward economic mobility and to refer to any situation in which a person rises from obscurity to fame and celebrity.

ton and Ariely 2011; Kenworthy and McCall 2008). By affecting beliefs in economic mobility—which are well-known to legitimize free-market capitalism (Piketty 1995)—the rags-to-riches narratives that prevail in the contemporary media environment exert a conservative influence over American politics in this new Gilded Age.

Media Exemplars and Perceptions of Economic Mobility

Where do beliefs in upward economic mobility come from? Canonical writers from Alexis de Tocqueville (1835) to Werner Sombart (1906) have proposed that widespread belief in economic mobility is a reason why Americans lack class consciousness and tolerate wealth disparities, but we rarely attempt to explain variations in these sentiments. Literature has pointed to path-dependent historical factors, such as the Protestant work ethic or waves of frontier settlement (Kluegel and Smith 1986; McCloskey and Zaller 1984; Verba and Orren 1985), but these cannot explain why many Americans continue to believe in the prospect of upward mobility, despite the vastly changed economic reality, nor why some believe in it more than others (Wolak and Peterson 2020).

Understanding perceptions of upward economic mobility[2] requires dissecting the economic information that people regularly consume and the types of exemplars it provides. Building on long-standing public opinion scholarship that considers mass media to be the primary driver of sociotropic economic perceptions (Mutz 1998; Soroka 2014), I consider how individual-level variations in perceptions of economic mobility are a function of exposure to mass media and the exemplars they offer. To keep my hypotheses parsimonious, I follow the conventional conceptualization in which the news and entertainment media are the two main building blocks of the mass media system. I consider the extent to which these two types of media are relevant to understanding beliefs in the American Dream, paying particular attention to the types of accessible exemplars each provides.

In sync with the news media's well-known tendency to over-report negative economic information (Soroka 2006) and the worsening economic realities of the new Gilded Age, it is no surprise that the news media typically offer information about downward economic mobility. The news media have devoted considerable attention to rising income inequality, with a consistent focus on highlighting the

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[2]I focus on sociotropic perceptions because citizens' economic perceptions about collectives—as opposed to egotropic perceptions—play a central role in shaping political attitudes (Feldman 1984; Kinder and Kiewiet 1981)

diminishing prospects of upward mobility for the American working and middle classes (Diermeier et al. 2017; Eshbaugh-Soha and McGauvran 2018; McCall 2013). Indeed, as seen in Figure 1, sentiments in news coverage about economic mobility in America have been predominantly negative over the last two decades. In theory, these patterns should have heightened citizens' concerns about the prospects for upward mobility, yet we still observe sustained beliefs in economic mobility.

Figure 1: **The Sentiment Analysis of News Coverage on Economic Mobility (2000-2019)**
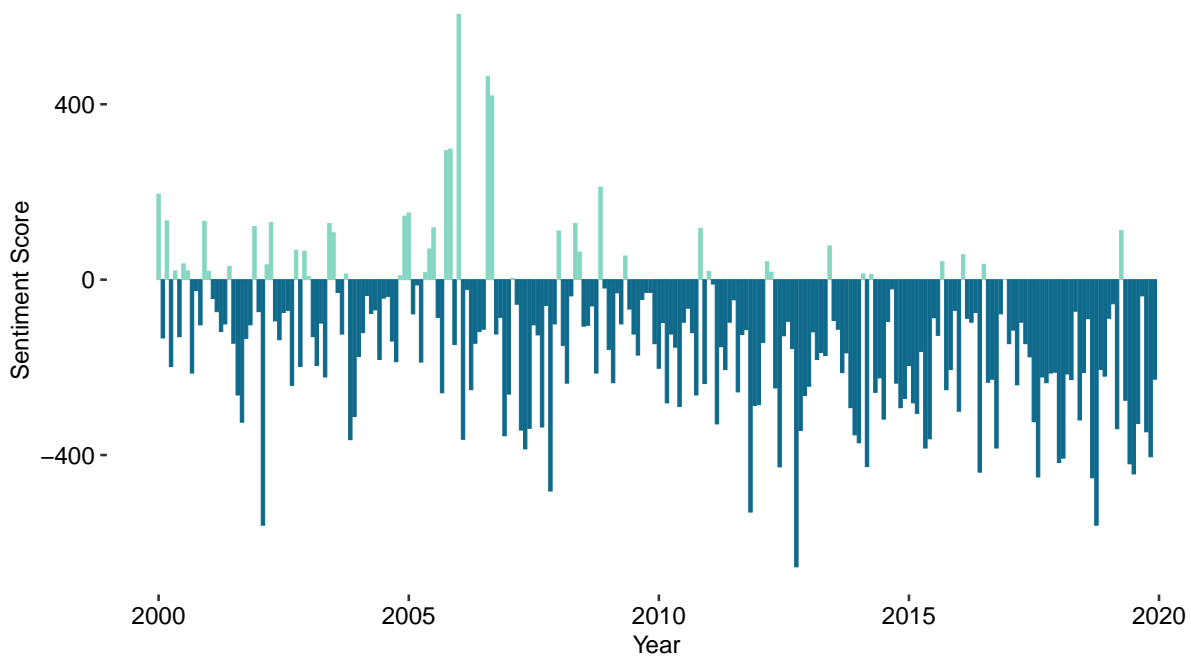
Note: The sentiment score is calculated using the Bing Lexicon that categorizes words in a binary fashion into positive and negative categories. Values below zero indicate negative sentiment. The corpus consists of a total of 9,341 *New York Times* articles that contain the phrases related to economic mobility (i.e. upward mobility, land of opportunity, self-made success). See Appendix C for details.

In the meantime, entertainment media—whose purpose is to "entertain" people—tends to offer uplifting exemplars of people who achieve upward economic mobility, ones that are more vivid and accessible than real-world examples (Busselle and Shrum 2003). This idea indeed has a long scholarly lineage. For instance, Harold Lasswell's (1936) seminal book *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* asserts that Hollywood films hammer messages of upward mobility into citizens' brains. Explaining the paradox of why most low-income African Americans believe they can achieve the American Dream, Jennifer Hochschild (1996) claims that "(television) shows with black male leads" are devoted to "portraying the attractions and ignoring the dark side of the American dream" (p. 136). Similar speculations can be found across myriad qualitative cultural and sociological studies that explore the

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links among American popular culture, belief in the American Dream, and the absence of class conflict in America (Murray and Ouellette 2004; Pines 1993).

Although entertainment media is a much-overlooked source of economic information, decades of work on cultivation theory suggests that entertainment media exert at least as much influence as the news media on politically relevant attitudes. Many of our attitudes about political issues—ranging from crime to social welfare—are shaped by exposure to entertainment television (e.g, Holbrook and Hill 2005; Morgan and Shanahan 2010). Further, through their narrative presentations of information, viewers experience the phenomenon of "transportation," a cognitive and emotional experience in which viewers immerse themselves in a story (Green, Brock and Kaufman 2004). Such narrative persuasion in entertainment media is much more powerful than rhetorical persuasion via political messages, as people are less likely to develop a counterargument or critically scrutinize such a message (Jones and Paris 2018).[3] Indeed, a growing body of natural and field experimental evidence finds that entertainment media powerfully alter the dynamics of electoral processes (Durante, Pinotti and Tesei 2019; Xiong Forthcoming) and change the important social outcomes ranging from school enrollment rates to eating habits and White supremacist activities (Jensen and Oster 2009; Ang 2020; Paluck et al. 2015).[4]

Taken together, these theories tell us that both news and entertainment media have power to shape perceptions of economic mobility, with each type pushing them in opposite directions. The net impact of media exposure, therefore, depends on the overall composition of media consumption. I contend that the effect of the narrative of upward mobility from entertainment media is powerful, given that most Americans choose to avoid news and spend an enormous amount of time watching entertainment media instead. This imbalanced exposure to entertainment media may explain individual variations in upwardly distorted perceptions of economic mobility. To test this, I develop empirically falsifiable hypotheses that specify which type of entertainment media matters for perceptions of upward economic mobility. Rather than leaving entertainment media unarticulated as a concept, I propose that three components—the presence of everyday American, visible financial gains, and narrative emphasis on meritocracy—comprise the rags-to-riches narrative that dominates parts of the entertainment media.

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[3]Several survey experimental studies have also demonstrated that non-political media influence real-world political attitudes (Mulligan and Habel 2011; Mutz and Nir 2010.)

[4]The "entertainment-education" initiatives that weave educational messages into short entertainment programs have been widely used in public health interventions (Singhal et al. 2003) and found to be more effective, for instance, at reducing inter-group prejudice than traditional methods (Murrar and Brauer 2018; Paluck 2009).

Rags-to-riches programs, a subset of reality television, have three distinctive components that I hypothesize shape viewers' beliefs about upward economic mobility. First, they feature everyday American citizens, not hired actors or celebrities. Successful entertainment content requires relatable characters and believable storylines, elements that even children can list (Moyer-Gusé 2008). Featuring ordinary Americans dramatizes the representation of reality and offers a convenient point of identification for the viewer. Watching a working-class janitor or waitress become a celebrity overnight or earn most of a year's income in one month suggests that these things can happen to anyone, not just to those from wealthy families or who have a post-secondary education. These glorified everymen can serve as a social reference group and provide viewers with more relatable vicarious experiences (Reiss and Wiltz 2004).

Second, these rags-to-riches shows generate and dramatize economic benefits such as a million-dollar prize, a lucrative contract, a coveted job, or a brand-new house. Entertainment media writ large are dominated by positive and upbeat stories, but these rags-to-riches shows in particular emphasize the visible economic benefits obtained by those who take part. The economic component is important because a general level of optimism toward life is conceptually different from holding an optimistic view of the US as the land of economic opportunity.

Third, rags-to-riches shows tend to emphasize that economic outcomes are determined by hard work and merit by portraying their beneficiaries as deserving. The notion of meritocracy is deeply embedded in the American Dream, and these programs tend to highlight people's humble backgrounds and economic hardships in order to lionize their later success. Contestants routinely speak of how they were not born with privileges and how they never gave up on their dreams, even while holding a minimum-wage job, facing soaring medical bills, or receiving rejection after rejection from investors.[5] Indeed, a frequent folk hypothesis is that these programs "reignited Horatio Alger's imagination in the modern world" (Cromewell 2015) and promoted "the national myth of meritocracy" (Anzuoni 2016).

Defining these three components of the rags-to-riches narrative is methodologically important for this systematic study of their effects on perceptions of economic mobility. Many previous studies have examined the effects of a single TV program or a few similarly themed episodes (e.g., Butler, Koopman

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[5]Several examples are: "I think I am living proof of the American dream. My parents emigrated here with $100 in their pocket from Guyana, and look at me now. I just got a deal from Mark Cuban on Shark Tank." (Krystal Persaud, *Shark Tank*); "I can't be cleaning pools forever. [...] I've literally been climbing a mountain to get my voice heard, and today is the day to reach the top." (Blaise Raccuglia, *The Voice*). See more quotes in Appendix D.

and Zimbardo 1995; Lenart and McGraw 1989). But their net impact has been unclear because different programs, or different episodes of the same program, typically contain various, sometimes competing, types of messages and plot lines. This problem has long plagued research on the effect of non-political media. In the next section, I establish the premise of this study by using detailed Nielsen ratings data, a comprehensive online entertainment media database, and original content analyses to demonstrate that rags-to-riches programs have become a ubiquitous part of the American media landscape over the last two decades.

The Rise of "Rags-to-Riches" Entertainment Programs

Ranging from *American Idol* to *Shark Tank*, TV programs that feature real-life, everyday Americans—widely referred to as reality TV shows—have been a ratings juggernaut that has dominated the American media market during the past two decades (DeVolld 2016; Livingstone 2017). These observations can be empirically confirmed. Using 102,523 TV programs—including those on popular streaming services such as Netflix—released between 1960 and 2017 (*N*=102,523) as recorded in *IMDb*,[6] I find a clear surge in the number of reality/games shows starting in early 2000. By around 2008, one in five newly released TV programs was a reality show (See Appendix B, Figure 1). The cheaper production costs of reality shows featuring ordinary Americans also contributed to the increasing supply, leading many critics to declare that we are living in the golden age of reality TV (Rosa 2019; Yahr, Moore and Chow 2015).[7] In the meantime, the relative share of news programs has remained stable. While the absolute amount of news programming has increased in recent decades, the relative share of such programming in the overall media supply has not increased (Van Aelst et al. 2017). This decreasing share of news programming means that it is now easier to consume media while avoiding political news altogether (Prior 2007).

Granted, not all reality TV shows broadcast narratives of upward mobility. Those that feature stories about the undeserving rich would not have the same implications for real-world phenomena as the ones that feature ordinary hard-working Americans (Condon and Wichowsky 2020). But, with the

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[6] This database, one of the most comprehensive media databases, contains information about programs' release years, their genres, and many other characteristics.

[7] Indeed, there were 750 reality programs were aired on prime-time cable in 2015 (VanDerWerff 2016) alone, and most Americans are watching reality TV show even when they think that there's too much of it (Shevenock 2018). The pandemic also led to the increase in reality TV viewership across networks and channels (Aurther 2020; Jones 2020).

exception of *Desperate Housewives* in the 2004-2006 and 2007-2008 TV seasons, all the reality shows that were among the 10 most watched programs from 2000 to 2017 had a competitive format that featured a narrative of the American Dream (See Appendix B, Table 1). *American Idol*, for instance, was the most watched program for eight consecutive seasons, from 2003 to 2011. None of the 10 most watched TV shows over the last two decades was a news program; in stark contrast, *60 Minutes* (CBS) was a top-10 show from 1977 to 2000.[8]

To better establish that the rags-to-riches narrative is widespread, I conducted a content analysis focusing on the three components I argue are essential to cultivating beliefs in upward mobility: whether the TV program featured (1) ordinary Americans (2) working hard to (3) achieve considerable economic benefits. First, I coded whether a program featured everyday Americans—such as small business owners, home-based cooks, amateur singers, food-truck owners, and so forth—or celebrities and expert professionals. Second, I coded the degree of economic benefits contestants received from winning. Recognitions and prizes with clear implications for contestants' career and business prospects (e.g., a recording deal, a business contract, or a million-dollar cash prize) were coded as significant benefits. Booby prizes, bragging rights or a paid date night were coded as trivial benefits. Finally, I indicated the extent of hard work and effort that each show required in order to win. Programs that were clearly merit-based and dramatize the process of working hard—ranging from *Shark Tank* (ABC) to *MasterChef* (FOX)—were coded as "a lot of effort," while dating shows or trivia quiz shows were coded as "not much effort."

I matched Nielsen ratings data from September 2015 to August 2017 with the *Encyclopedia of Television Shows 1925–2016* (Terrace 2012, 2017) and the *TV Tango.com* database to identify TV shows that are classified as reality/game shows. Of the 8,701 entries of non-fictional entertainment shows that aired between 2015 and 2017, Nielsen identified 3,362 as reality/game shows. I narrowed this list to shows that had a competitive format, because the ideology of meritocracy and the self-made person is closely tied to competition and amplified in the face of unequal outcomes (McNaMee and Miller Jr 2014). (See Appendix A, which summarizes the results of the content analysis for each element). About 71.3% of the competitive reality/game shows that aired between 2015 and 2017 had all three elements of the rags-to-riches narrative, while only 1.8% had none of these elements.

Such programs not only offer a powerful lesson about hard work leading to success; they also broad-

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[8] See https://www.cbsnews.com/news/60-minutes-milestones/

cast this message to a huge audience. Nielsen ratings data suggest that the most popular shows have all three elements. Eight of the 10 top-rated programs that attracted more than four million regular viewers featured a rags-to-riches narrative. To put their popularity in perspective, consider that Fox News attracts three million prime-time viewers on average while seasonal average audiences for the popular rags-to-riches reality shows *America's Got Talent* and *The Voice* are usually over 10 million (Concha 2019; Porter 2019; Throne 2019). Even in the midst of a pandemic that witnessed a surge in news viewership, another new competitive reality TV program, *Lego Masters* (FOX), attracted a larger audience than any of the cable TV news programs (Pucci 2020). The remaining question is: do the contents of rags-to-riches TV affect public economic perceptions?

The Impact of Rags-to-Riches TV on Beliefs in Upward Mobility

Experimental Evidence

Figure 2: **The mobile media laboratory**
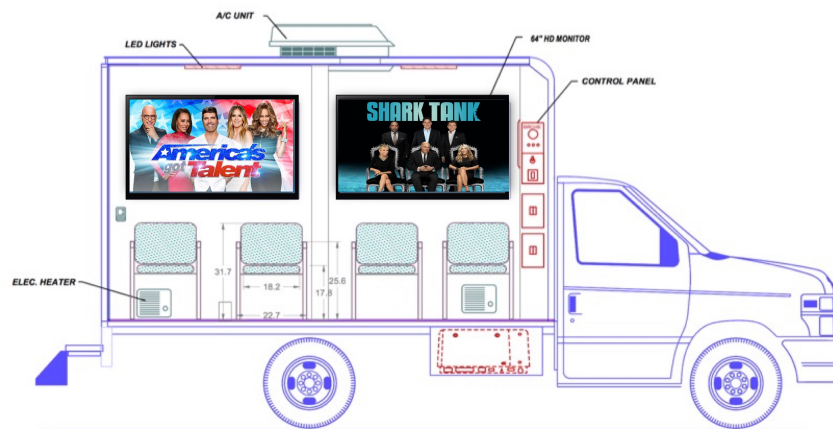
Having established the prevalence of rags-to-riches programming, I turn now to whether such programming actually shapes citizens' perceptions of economic mobility. To explore the causal effects of rags-to-riches entertainment media, I conducted online and lab-in-the-field experiments, which took place in October 2016 and in July-September 2018 respectively. I recruited 763 respondents online through Amazon's Mechanical Turk and 203 respondents offline in suburban New Jersey and Pennsylvania. To obtain enough partisanship variation in the sample, Bucks, Lehigh, Northampton, and Salem

Electronic copy available at: https://ssrn.com/abstract=3838127

counties were chosen based on their 2016 presidential election results.[9] For the lab-in-the-field experiments, I used a mobile media laboratory as shown in Figure 2. The vehicle—a big box truck—had two separate rooms, each equipped with a TV screen and a chair. I drove to non-political events that attract local residents of various ages, such as farmers' markets, flea markets, and summer festivals. A team of field assistants and I recruited participants on site. They were told that they would be watching entertainment media and asked to share their thoughts in exchange for $10 in cash compensation (See Appendix I).[10]

Although the setting and time of the data collection varied, all respondents were asked a similar set of questions about their general attitudes about the American Dream.[11] Respondents indicated the extent to which they agreed with each of four statements: (1) "Anyone who works hard has a fair chance to succeed and live a comfortable life.;" (2) "It is possible to start out poor in this country, work hard and become well-off;" (3) "United States is no longer the land of opportunity;" and (4) "Most people who want to get ahead can make it if they're willing to work hard." Respondents indicated the extent to which they agreed with each statement. I averaged these four questions into one index—*Beliefs in Economic Mobility* (Cronbach α= 0.75)—that ranged from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating more optimistic views about the prospect of economic mobility. To increase the efficiency of the experimental design by further accounting for pre-existing tendencies to believe in upward economic mobility, this survey included partisan identification, a system justification scale, and an optimism scale. These characteristics were expected to enhance the likelihood of believing in upward economic mobility after being exposed to experimental stimuli.

Treatments

Given that the purpose of this experiment was to test the effects of media content that was typical of a broad genre, rather than the effects of any one show, I constructed four treatments using different rags-to-riches TV shows: *Shark Tank*, *America's Got Talent*, *American Ninja Warrior*, and *Toy Box*. These four shows were chosen after I conducted a pilot test using 14 different TV shows that featured ordinary Americans achieving economic gains. (See Appendix J).

The *Shark Tank* treatment featured two young entrepreneurs who were pitching their start-up busi-

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[9]47.8%, 45.9%, 50.0%, and 55.6% of the total county votes, respectively, were cast for Donald Trump.

[10]Because of the nature of lab-in-the-field experiments that recruit respondents on site—with some expressing reluctance while others participating out of curiosity—the survey was intentionally designed to be short.

[11]IRB Protocol 828418.

ness product to a panel of judges who were business investors. They explained how they developed the idea of caffeinated, chewable coffee pouches in their dorm room, and how they put effort into boosting sales by contacting professional athletes. At the end of the treatment video, they got a successful business deal. The *America's Got Talent* treatment was about a young female singer-songwriter who was deaf. After telling the story of her arduous journey as a singer without full hearing, she broke into a song that she had written. At the end of her performance, the entire audience cheered and one of the judges hit a golden buzzer, which sent the contestant into the next round's live show. *The American Ninja Warrior* treatment featured a young married male contestant competing for a one-million-dollar award. In a brief biographical sketch, he was featured with his newborn baby and told how he would be able to pay for a high-quality education for his son if he won. The treatment video ended with him finishing an obstacle course in record-breaking time. The *Toy Box* treatment showed an elderly female toymaker pitching a multilingual doll she invented to representatives of major toy-making companies. She explained how she spent years developing this toy and faced many financial challenges in the process. The video ended with her doll being endorsed and chosen by the judges.

Although these shows had different formats and contestants, the treatments—all edited to last less than five minutes—highlighted very similar storylines of upward economic mobility. To ensure that the treatment effects were driven by an upward economic mobility message rather than the particularities of reality TV shows, I included a control media treatment that lacked a narrative of economic mobility. The control treatment contained scenes from *Cesar 911*, a reality TV show that featured a young woman seeking advice about her dog's aggressive behavior. The dog behavior authority evaluated her pet, and equipped the dog owner with knowledge and tools to address the aggression. The control treatment ended with a well-behaved dog and a satisfied owner. The control treatment was chosen primarily because the quality of life of the ordinary American featured on the show improved without any visible financial gains. Manipulation checks successfully demonstrated that the experimental treatments did convey the components I hypothesized were necessary for a belief in upward economic mobility.[12]

Results

My experiment shows that exposure to rags-to-riches entertainment media increases people's beliefs in upward economic mobility. As shown in Table 1, in the full-sample models with covariates (Columns 1 and 5), watching a rags-to-riches program, even just for five minutes, makes people ap-

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[12]See Appendix K for full manipulation check results.

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proximately 5.5 to 6.8 percentage points more likely to believe in the prospect of upward economic mobility. To put this into context, in the control condition for the lab-in-the-field sample, the partisan gap in belief in the American Dream is 10.87 percentage points. In other words, the treatment effect is substantial: more than half the size of the gap between Democrats and Republicans. A general level of optimism and the system justification scale were all positively correlated with a post-treatment belief in economic mobility. But the main treatment effects remained similar even after controlling for those covariates.

Table 1: The effect of rags-to-riches TV on belief in economic mobility

	DV = Beliefs in Economic Mobility							
	MTurk Sample				Lab-in-the-field Sample			
	All	Rep	Dem	Interaction Model	All	Rep	Dem	Interaction Model
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Rags-to-Riches TV Treatment	0.055***	0.150***	0.011	0.010	0.068**	0.085+	0.061	0.066+
	(0.011)	(0.020)	(0.017)	(0.016)	(0.025)	(0.047)	(0.037)	(0.035)
Republican	0.036*				0.047			
	(0.015)				(0.038)			
Democrat	−0.015				−0.057+			
	(0.012)				(0.034)			
Optimism Index	0.025***	0.032**	0.020*	0.024***	0.048**	0.019	0.064*	0.049*
	(0.006)	(0.012)	(0.009)	(0.007)	(0.018)	(0.030)	(0.028)	(0.021)
System Justification Scale	0.090***	0.071***	0.092***	0.086***	0.101***	0.085**	0.142***	0.121***
	(0.007)	(0.013)	(0.010)	(0.008)	(0.018)	(0.031)	(0.028)	(0.022)
Rep (vs Dem)				−0.017				0.075
				(0.020)				(0.046)
Rags-to-Riches TV x Rep (vs Dem)				0.140***				0.035
				(0.028)				(0.063)
Constant	0.187***	0.211***	0.203***	0.208***	0.193*	0.403*	−0.037	0.082
	(0.024)	(0.051)	(0.034)	(0.028)	(0.084)	(0.152)	(0.127)	(0.099)
Observations	763	161	348	509	203	50	109	159
R^2	0.326	0.443	0.250	0.364	0.311	0.274	0.333	0.348

Note: Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients with associated standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is coded to range from 0 to 1, with 1 indicating stronger beliefs in economic mobility. Columns 5-8 included survey date/location fixed effects. + p< 0.1, * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001

I also find heterogeneous treatment effects by Party ID. The effects of rags-to-riches TV are statistically significant among Republicans, albeit weakly in the lab-in-the-field sample (Columns 2 and 6), but not among Democrats (Columns 3 and 7). To formally test this difference, Columns 4 and 8 show the results of the interaction model. Note that the small size of the lab-in-the-field sample prevents the precise estimation of interaction term. Given that the "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" dictum is closely associated with Republican ideology, this suggests that the treatment video resonates more strongly among those who already believe in the importance of economic individualism. As additional evidence for this mechanism, I find that the treatment effects are larger among those who tend to defend and rationalize existing social systems (Appendix K)[13]—a pattern consistent with existing evidence that Democrats tend to score consistently lower on system justification than Republicans

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[13]Similarly, Stavrositu (2014) finds that watching competition-based TV cultivates system-justifying beliefs and life satisfaction.

(Jost, Banaji and Nosek 2004).[14]

It is worth noting that I conducted a conservative test: while my participants only watched a single five-minute clip of rags-to-riches entertainment media, Nielsen ratings data confirm that many Americans choose to watch these programs for more than an hour every evening. The experimental findings here provide causal evidence on how media exemplars of upward mobility in entertainment media shape beliefs in the American Dream. When survey participants are forced to consume pessimistic, news-like economic information on declining economic mobility, they become more supportive of redistribution (Alesina, Stantcheva and Teso 2018)—a pattern not found across different observational data (Ashok, Kuziemko and Washington 2016; Kenworthy and McCall 2008). The effects of rags-to-riches media found here can shed light on this discrepancy. Indeed, in supplementary lab-in-the-field experiments, I find that the meritocratic narrative in rags-to-riches TV programs promotes the idea that rich people have more because of their hard work, dampens public support for redistribution, and increases their tolerance of income inequality (See Appendix L).

Granted, there is no reason to believe that those who participated in the lab-in-the-field experiments as well as MTurk respondents were truly representative of the general adult population in America. Households in Quakertown, PA, for instance, have a slightly lower median annual income ($54,068) than the national average ($60,336), and it is a racially homogeneous suburban town where 86.5% of residents are White. Compared to the national representative sample, MTurk subjects are notably younger and much less likely to own a house (Berinsky, Huber and Lenz 2012). To investigate whether the effects of rags-to-riches TV are observable among the general population, I next turn to national surveys.

Observational Evidence

I designed a national survey that Survey Sampling International (SSI) administered to 3,004 US residents in August 2018.[15] I present full details of the survey in Appendix E and summarize key elements here. My goals in this step were to demonstrate that the effects of rags-to-riches entertainment media are observable among the general population and that these effects can be distinguished from those of

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[14]Because of the logistical challenges of lab-in-the-field experiments and time constraints, I did not collect demographic variables.

[15]SSI, now known as Dynata, used targeted recruitment to ensure that the survey sample closely matched US Census benchmarks for education, income, age, gender, geography, and race/ethnicity.

exposure to any reality TV program regardless of its narrative. This step also contextualizes the media effects by testing the extent to which people's real-world economic context and personal economic experiences shape perceptions of economic mobility.

Key variables

The key outcomes of interest are (1) beliefs in economic mobility and (2) attributions of economic success. I used instruments similar to those in the previous experiments to create an index—*Beliefs in Economic Mobility* (Cronbach α = 0.86)—that ranged from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating more optimistic views about the prospect of economic mobility. The survey also included a battery of questions about why some people get further ahead than others. Respondents were given a list of eight explanations, half of which were internal factors (ambition, self-determination, hard work, and talent) and half of which were external factors (family wealth, well-educated parents, technological changes and automation, and politicians' failure to implement good policies). I averaged these four questions into two indices—*Internal Attribution* and *External Attribution*—(Cronbach α = 0.71, 0.63) that ranged from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating beliefs that economic success is a result of those factors.

I measured media consumption of rags-to-riches programming at the show level (see Dilliplane, Goldman and Mutz 2013 for measurement validation). Respondents were shown a list of 30 TV programs, which included 12 rags-to-riches reality programs, eight reality/game shows that featured celebrities or ordinary Americans who were not competing for economic benefits, and 10 sports programs. They were asked to mark all programs that they have regularly watched. The 12 rags-to-riches programs were selected based on three criteria. First, they all illustrated the three components I argue are essential to affecting beliefs in upward mobility: they featured (1) ordinary Americans (2) working hard to (3) achieve considerable economic benefits. Second, the size of their two-year average audience, according to Nielsen ratings data, was larger than one million. Third, these shows all aired in 2018.

For ease of interpretation, the key independent variable, rags-to-riches media consumption, is constructed as a categorical variable, with the cutoff group line based on quintile values (see Appendix F for the analysis with media consumption as a continuous variable). The baseline category is those who watch zero rags-to-riches programs. Occasional viewers are coded as those who watch one or two rags-to-riches programs. Frequent viewers are coded as those who watch three to five programs. Those who

watch six or more are coded as heavy viewers.

The other programs were included to address alternative hypotheses and spurious relationships. I included 10 popular sports programs because past studies have argued that sports exemplify meritocracy, and that sports fandom is linked to internal attributions for economic success (Thorson and Serazio 2018). The eight non-meritocratic reality/game programs on the list featured celebrities, or spotlighted ordinary people who were not necessarily hard working and were not perceived to have gained economic benefits. These were included to address the possibility that people who like to watch reality programs, regardless of their content and overarching narrative, have unobservable differences that make them more likely than non-viewers to believe in the prospect of upward economic mobility. The survey design also included many alternatives to rags-to-riches media consumption that, according to existing theories and studies, can affect sociotropic perceptions of economic mobility. Consistent with the high Nielsen ratings of the programs included in the survey, 72% of survey respondents watched one or more rags-to-riches TV programs. There was no partisan difference in the number of rags-to-riches programs people regularly consumed (p=0.735).

Results

I examine how Americans' rags-to-riches media consumption relates to their beliefs in upward mobility and the extent to which people think that internal, rather than structural, factors are attributed to economic success. Columns (1), (3), and (5) of Table 2 present a parsimonious model with no covariates; Columns (2), (4), and (6) include other individual-level covariates and county-level economic contexts that may contribute to sociotropic perceptions of economic mobility.

The controls include the total count of sports programs and other entertainment shows that respondents regularly watch, in addition to the following covariates: age, gender, race, income, employment status, party ID, Protestant, religious attendance, marital status, political interest, and state fixed effects. To account for personal economic experiences that are frequently linked with the American Dream, the model also includes respondents' perceptions about their own intergenerational mobility experiences, whether either of their parents was an immigrant, and personal economic insecurity. A general level of optimism about life was also included. To take geographic context into consideration, the model included county-level absolute intergenerational mobility rates and the Gini index of income inequality.

Table 2: **The correlation between rags-to-riches TV and belief in upward mobility as well as attributions of economic success**

	Belief in Economic Mobility		Internal Attribution		External Attribution	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Occasional Viewer (1-2 Programs)	0.019	0.013	0.006	0.013	−0.004	−0.007
	(0.012)	(0.011)	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.009)	(0.009)
Frequent Viewer (3-5 Programs)	0.047***	0.032**	0.008	0.017[+]	0.009	0.005
	(0.012)	(0.011)	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.009)	(0.010)
Heavy Viewer (6+ Programs)	0.076***	0.040*	0.052***	0.052***	0.039***	0.014
	(0.013)	(0.016)	(0.011)	(0.014)	(0.011)	(0.013)
Controls Included:						
Other media consumption	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y
Demographics	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y
Personal economic context	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y
County-level economic context	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y
State fixed effect	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y
Observations	3,004	2,998	3,004	2,998	3,004	2,998
R^2	0.013	0.239	0.008	0.143	0.006	0.110

Note: Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients with associated standard errors in parentheses. + $p < 0.1$, * $p<0.05$; ** $p<0.01$; *** $p<0.001$

The top three rows in Columns 1 and 2 show the difference in the probability of believing in upward mobility for occasional, frequent, and heavy viewers compared to those who do not watch any rags-to-riches TV programs. The gap between non-viewers and occasional viewers was only 1.3 percentage points, and was not statistically significant. The gaps between non-viewers and frequent viewers and between non-viewers and heavy viewers, however, were both statistically significant. Those who regularly watch more than six rags-to-riches programs, for instance, were 4 percentage points more likely to believe in the American Dream. Heavy viewers were also more likely than non-viewers to attribute economic success to internal factors. The relationship between exposure to rags-to-riches programs and external attribution was less robust; as Column 6 shows, rags-to-riches media exposure had no explanatory power when I added an array of control variables. In addition, I find that the effects of rags-to-riches TV programs are stronger among those who are less interested in politics (Appendix F).

To better contextualize the explanatory power of rags-to-riches entertainment media against other factors, Figure 3 shows the predicted change in beliefs in upward mobility from a one-SD change in key variables from the regression model reported in Table 1 Column (2). Partisanship clearly matters: being a self-identified Republican is the biggest predictor of beliefs in economic mobility (See also Alesina, Stantcheva and Teso 2018; Manza and Brooks 2021). Respondents who perceive their life as better than that of their parents and those who have immigrant parents were more likely to believe in the American Dream. This is consistent with existing theories on how upwardly mobile individuals learn from their

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Figure 3: **The predicted change in beliefs in upward mobility**

Impact of Standard Deviation Change
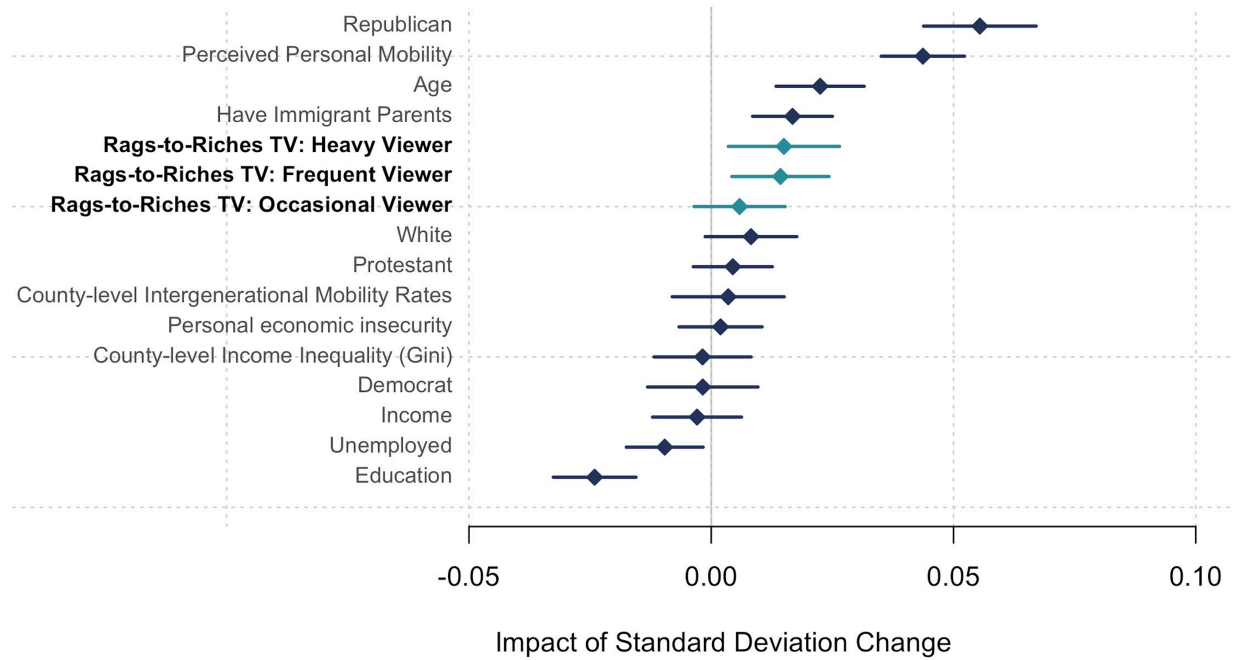
Note: The figure shows predicted change in beliefs in upward mobility from a one-SD change in each of key variables from the model reported in Table 1 Column 2. The full model is reported in Appendix F.

own experiences and update their economic beliefs about redistributive politics (Piketty 1995). The generational divide in beliefs in the American Dream is worth noting as well. Older people—who watch much more television than young adults—are more optimistic. This may reflect the fact that one's chances of upward mobility are likely to be greater over a much longer time frame (Chambers, Swan and Heesacker 2015). It may also be a result of the economic disruption that millennials have experienced during their early years in the labour market. Those who went through a recession when young believe that success in life depends on luck more than on hard work (Giuliano and Spilimbergo 2014).

These all suggest that both macro-structural forces and personal experiences shape American economic beliefs. Yet it is noteworthy that rags-to-riches entertainment media consumption does play an important role. Indeed, regularly watching six or more TV programs like *America's Got Talent* is as powerful as having immigrant parents in shaping beliefs in economic mobility. Its relative predictive power is in stark contrast with the null effects of many other covariates—such as race and income— that have been reported as important in the previous literature (Hochschild 1996). Neither county-level intergenerational mobility rates nor local income inequality had much explanatory power. The

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pioneering study by Raj Chetty and his colleagues quantified the extent to which children born in the Deep South have starkly lower chances of achieving upward mobility than those from the coastal cities (Chetty et al. 2014). Yet such geographic variation in economic reality seems not to matter much in shaping beliefs in the American Dream. The main findings here are replicated with two nationally representative surveys.[16] Taken as a whole, these observational findings confirm that rags-to-riches entertainment media is correlated with beliefs in the prospect of upward economic mobility and that economic success is attributed to internal factors.

Discussion and Conclusion

What sustains beliefs in the prospect of upward economic mobility in America? Social science literature points to an extensive list of historical factors unique to the United States—such as the existence of the frontier or the Protestant work ethic—and concludes that belief in the American Dream is "just deeply embedded in American mythology...and myths last because they are dreams fulfilled in our imaginations" (Hanson and White 2011, p.7; see also Hochschild 1996; McCloskey and Zaller 1984).

I argue that perceptions of economic mobility must be understood alongside the media discourse and environment, just like any other sociotropic economic perceptions. Unlike much of political science scholarship, which assumes that the news media are the primary source of politically relevant information, I highlight that the media content that Americans watch the most—entertainment media— offers powerful exemplars of upward mobility and serves as an important source of information that affects people's beliefs in the American Dream. Although the findings here are cross-sectional evidence, trends over the last three decades suggest that people who watch a lot of television have become more optimistic about the American Dream (Appendix L).

The duration of entertainment media effects—the possibility that these media effects fade away after a short time—should be explored in future studies. In the meantime, the methodological advantages of focusing on shared rags-to-riches narratives are clear, because these messages remain the same across different episodes and programs. If anything, the sheer availability and popularity of these programs alleviate concerns about external validity. Even if the public's taste for shows that feature

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[16]Though they have a far less detailed information on entertainment media consumption, they do allow me to replicate the finding with nationally representative data.

ordinary Americans dissipates, the challenges of producing high-cost scripted shows in a fragmented media market have led to expectations that the vast majority of cable TV shows will continue featuring everyday Americans (Ralph Bunche Center 2015). For the same financial reasons, streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon, and HBO now produce their own reality programs that have a similar rags-to-riches narrative (e.g., *Making the Cut* and *Next in Fashion*).

My results underscore the overdue need to expand the scope of political communication and public opinion research beyond news. The mass media has long been known to influence citizens' sociotropic perceptions, but mainstream social science research usually equates mass media with news media. Despite dramatic changes in the media environment, the scholarly focus on news has remained intact. The most prominent works of political communication in recent years confirm a focus on traditionally defined "political" aspects. Scholars have richly documented the political consequences of dwindling news audiences (Prior 2007), partisan media (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Levendusky 2013), soft news (Baum 2011), social media (Settle 2018), and fake news (Guess, Nyhan and Reifler 2020), among other considerations.

Though behavioral evidence suggests that most Americans tune out the news (Flaxman, Goel and Rao 2016; Guess 2020), very little attention has been paid to the political content that is present in what they are watching instead. Entertainment media are still deemed worthy of studying only when they affect ostensibly political variables (Delli Carpini 2014). As long as economic perceptions are central to the study of politics, however, this category of non-political programs that affect such perceptions can no longer be dismissed. Furthermore, studying entertainment media consumption may provide answers to many questions about distortions and biases in public opinion. Widespread American misperceptions about the criminal justice system, for example, could be better understood if we account for the fact that America's most popular network TV shows have consistently been police procedurals such as *NCIS* (Byers and Johnson 2009).

My findings also shed light on the continuing debate about why the United States has largely failed to address the rising level of economic inequality. One critical part of the answer is institutional. Government policies that could have addressed the wealth disparity did not materialize because of legislative polarization, institutional features that bias policy outcomes toward the status quo, and a campaign finance system that allows unequal access, to name a few (for a summary, see Bonica et al. 2013). Yet it

is the public opinion part of the answer that has intrigued many. Scholars have been perplexed to find that citizens are generally moving away from more egalitarian policy preferences as the income gap widens (Ashok, Kuziemko and Washington 2016; Kenworthy and McCall 2008), a pattern that defies the predictions of the workhorse political economy model (Meltzer and Richard 1983).

To solve this puzzle, existing empirical research points out the misperceived level of inequality (Hauser and Norton 2017; Chambers, Swan and Heesacker 2015), system justification motivations (Trump 2018), lay perceptions of government costs and benefits (Porter 2020), and trust in government (Alesina, Stantcheva and Teso 2018), among many others. But across all these studies, scholars consistently refer to one dominant explanation as a "time-honored tradition" (McCall 2013, p. 56): the distinctiveness of the liberal individualism rooted in American political culture (see also Feldman 1984; Lipset 1997). The paradox is that though many agree that beliefs in upward mobility are central to understanding how Americans react to economic inequality, there has been no serious attempt to amass empirical evidence to determine which aspect of American culture affects such economic beliefs or the extent of that influence.

My findings here make it clear that rags-to-riches entertainment media are an important cultural force that promotes and perpetuates beliefs in upward mobility. The "puzzling" patterns in public attitudes toward redistribution are less so if we take into account the fact that Americans are reportedly watching four hours of television every day (Koblin 2016) and are receiving distorted information about upward mobility. Belief in economic mobility can powerfully legitimize wealth disparity (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Shariff, Wiwad and Aknin 2016), and scholars of class and inequality should recognize that non-political mass media cultivate foundational aspects of American politics, such as beliefs in economic freedom and individualism. If American exceptionalism includes persistent adherence to egalitarianism, self-determination, and laissez-faire economics, it is important to remember that the United States consumes more TV than any other developed economy (OECD 2013).

In the Gilded Age of the late 19th century, Americans read Horatio Alger's rags-to-riches dime novels. Today, their counterparts in the new Gilded Age are browsing through hundreds of channels saturated with rags-to-riches entertainment programs, and elected the former host of *The Apprentice* as the head of state. In this era of choice, entertainment media is what captivates hearts and minds. Its political consequences are anything but trivial.

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Online Appendix for

"Entertaining Beliefs in Economic Mobility"

List of Supplementary Materials

A. Content Analysis

I matched Nielsen ratings data from September 2015 to August 2017 with the Encyclopedia of Television Shows 1925–2016 (Terrace 2012, 2017) and the TV Tango.com database to identify TV shows that are classified as reality and game shows. Of the 8,701 entries of non-fictional entertainment shows that aired between 2015 and 2017, Nielsen identified 3,362 as reality and game shows. I narrowed this list to shows that have a competitive format, because the ideology of meritocracy and the self-made person is closely tied to competition and amplified in the face of unequal outcomes (McNaMee and Miller Jr 2014).

Coding Instructions

Here are coding instructions for the content analysis of competitive reality and game shows from 2015-2017 to quantify the prevalence of the shows that feature 1) ordinary Americans 2) gaining economic benefits 3) through hard work and efforts.

Category 1: ORDINARY PEOPLE?

Most of the plot summaries of TV programs mention the characteristics of contestants/participants when they are not ordinary Americans. (i.e. celebrities, professional athletes etc). References to just "contestants," "participants," "performers" usually mean ordinary people. Even when they feature celebrities, if people who participate/get money are ordinary citizens, then the program should be coded as 1 or 2 depending on their characteristics.

- 0 – No (i.e. celebrity/ celebrity families)

- 1 – Professionals (celebrity-chefs competing in cooking competitions, expert survivalists competing in survival shows, professional ballroom dancers)

- 2 – Everyday American (i.e. contestants, grandmothers, homeowners, aspiring models/singers, American families)

Category 2: ECONOMIC BENEFITS?

Economic benefits can mean cash prizes ($100,000), lucrative contracts (a contract for the new album, or a new job), general life improvements in terms of something of monetary value (i.e. a new house, renovated dining room/hotel facilities), or professional recognition (i.e. Great American Baking Show does not have any material "prize" for the winner; s/he just gets the honor of being the best baker in the country). Some of the examples that do not feature economic benefits are mostly competitive dating shows. *The Bachelor/Bachelorette* series, for instance, should be coded as 0.

- 0 – None (i.e. dating shows) / Economic benefits for others / Insignificant amount of economic benefits.
  - Prizes go to charity (most of the time, when celebrities compete in reality/game show, they donate prize money. There are cases when they pair up with a contestant, in which a contestant gets to keep his/her own money. In that case, the TV show should be coded from the perspective of an ordinary contestant)
  - Booby prizes or bragging rights (i.e. some trivia game shows give out random items as a "prize"; a winner of a cooking competition show gets a meal cooked by the loser as a prize)
  - Survivor shows that have no cash prize and focus on "personal inner growth" part of achievement
- 1 – Modest amount of economic benefits.
  - Trophies and recognitions without cash prize, but can increase their earning potentials i.e. being the best "bike" builder or the best baker can lead to more sales later, Great American Bake-Off
  - Modest cash prizes (i.e. when there is no reference to specific amount of money—mostly, pop quiz shows give out a modest amount of cash)
  - Cash prizes that have no clear implications for contestants' job/career/business prospects
  - A luxury vacation or free trip
- 2– Significant amount of economic benefits.
  - Prizes/recognitions that have clear implications for contestants' job/career/business prospects (i.e. recoding deal, coveted job, a contestant's own TV show, a contract, business investment)

2

– Cash prizes more than one million dollar, regardless of its implications for business prospects

Category 3: HARD WORK/EFFORT?

- 0 – It requires not much effort.

    – Dating shows (people put a similar level of energy into dating in their real lives)
    – Trivia/guessing games on the street, pop quiz shows where contestants were recruited on site

- 1 – It requires some effort. (i.e. Quiz shows that require some knowledge.)

- 2 – It requires hard work/a lot of effort.

    – Most of the merit-based competition/game shows will be in this category; i.e. The Voice, American Idol, Jeopardy
    – Most of the survival competition shows or shows that require extraordinary physical strength such as American Ninja Warrior
    – The process of preparing for the competition is shown / dramatized.
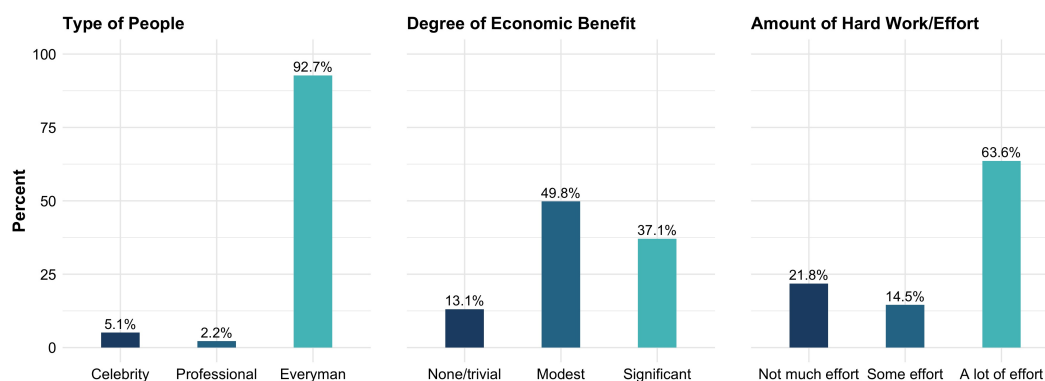
Figure A1. Content analysis results of reality/game programs aired 2015-2017. *Note*: 275 competitive reality/game TV shows were coded for three attributes: type of people (contestants), the degree of economic benefit, and the amount of hard work and effort as opposed to luck required to win. Each attribute has three categories. The panels show the distribution of programs classified into each category. See Appendix A for details.

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Table A1. Full Coding Results for a Random Subset of Competitive Reality/Game Shows

Cohen's Kappa (unweighted) for the first category (Ordinary people): 0.936
Cohen's Kappa (unweighted) for the second category (Economic benefit): 0.91
Cohen's Kappa (unweighted) for the third category (hard work): 0.835

Originator	Program Name	Type	Ordinary		Benefit		Hard Work	
			Coder 1	Coder 2	Coder 1	Coder 2	Coder 1	Coder 2
ABC	$100,000 PYRAMID, THE	QG	1	1	1	1	1	1
ABC	500 QUESTIONS	QG	1	1	1	1	1	1
DISCOVERY CHANNEL	ALASKAN BUSH PEOPLE	DO	1	1	0	0	2	2
CBS	AMAZING RACE	PV	1	1	1	1	3	3
NBC	AMERICA'S GOT TALENT	PV	1	1	1	1	2	2
FOX	AMERICAN GRIT	PV	1	1	1	1	3	3
FOX	AMERICAN IDOL	GV	1	1	1	1	2	2
NBC	AMERICAN NINJA WARRIOR	PV	1	1	1	1	3	3
NBC	APPRENTICE	PV	1	1	1	1	2	2
ABC	BACHELOR IN PARADISE	PV	1	1	0	0	0	0
ABC	BACHELOR, THE	PV	1	1	0	0	0	0
ABC	BACHELOR:AFTER FINAL ROSE	PV	1	1	0	0	0	0
ABC	BACHELORETTE, THE	PV	1	1	0	0	0	0
ABC	BACHELORETTE:AFTER ROSE	PV	1	1	0	0	0	0
ABC	BACHELORETTE:MEN TELL ALL	PV	1	1	0	0	0	0
UNI	BANDA 2, LA SUN	GV	1	1	1	1	2	2
UNI	BANDA, LA SUN	GV	1	1	1	1	2	2
ABC	BATTLEBOTS	PV	1	1	1	1	2	2
ABC	BATTLEBOTS: GEARS AWAKEN	PV	1	1	1	1	2	2
FOX	BEAT SHAZAM	QG	1	1	1	1	1	1
ABC	BEYOND THE TANK	PV	1	1	1	1	2	1
CBS	BIG BROTHER	GV	1	1	1	1	1	1
NBC	BIGGEST LOSER	PV	1	1	1	1	2	3
ABC	BOY BAND	PV	1	1	1	1	2	2
TEL	C. CERRADO (Case Closed)	GV	1	1	0	0	0	0
NBC	CAUGHT ON CAMERA	GV	1	1	0	0	0	0
ABC	CELEBRITY FAMILY FEUD	QG	0	0	1	1	1	1
20TH TELEVISION	CELEBRTY NAME GAME	QG	1	1	1	1	1	1
TLC	COUNTING ON	DO	1	1	0	0	0	0
FOX	COUPLED	PV	1	1	0	0	0	0
UNI	DALE REPLAY	QG	1	1	1	1	1	1
ABC	DANCING WITH THE STARS	PV	0	0	1	1	2	2
DISCOVERY CHANNEL	DC: DUNGEON COVE (Deadliest Catch)	DO	1	1	1	0	3	3
CW	DOG WHISPERER 3	DO	1	1	0	0	0	0
CW	DOG WHISPERER 4	DO	1	1	0	0	0	0
ANIMAL PLANET	DR. DEE	DO	1	1	0	0	2	2
DISCOVERY CHANNEL	DUAL SURVIVAL	DO	1	1	0	0	3	3
FOX	F WORD, THE	PV	1	1	1	1	2	2
20TH TELEVISION	FAMILY FEUD (AT)	QG	1	1	1	1	1	1
NBC	FIRST DATES	PV	1	1	0	0	0	0
DISCOVERY CHANNEL	GOLD RUSH: DIRT AFTERSHOW	DO	1	1	1	0	2	3
DISCOVERY CHANNEL	GOLD RUSH: THE DIRT	DO	1	1	1	0	2	3
ABC	GONG SHOW, THE	QG	1	1	1	1	2	2
ABC	GREAT AMERICAN BAKING SHOW	PV	1	1	1	1	2	2
DISNEY CHANNEL	GREAT CHRISTMAS LIGHT FIG	GV	1	1	1	1	2	1
ABC	GREAT HOLIDAY BAKING SHOW	PV	1	1	1	1	2	2
ABC	GREAT XMAS LIGHT FIGHT-3	PV	1	1	1	1	2	2
FOX	HELL'S KITCHEN	PV	1	1	1	1	2	3
NBC	HOLLYWOOD GAME NIGHT	QG	1	1	1	1	1	1
FOX	HOME FREE	PV	1	1	1	1	2	2
FOX	HOTEL HELL	PV	1	1	1	1	2	2
CBS	HUNTED	GV	1	1	1	1	2	3
CBS	I GET THAT A LOT	GV	0	0	0	1	1	1
CBS TV DISTRIBUTION	JEOPARDY	QG	1	1	1	1	2	2
TLC	JILL & JESSA: COUNTING ON	DO	1	1	0	0	0	0
CW	JUST FOR LAUGHS	GV	1	1	0	0	0	0
FOX	KICKING & SCREAMING	GV	1	1	1	1	3	3
CBS	LET'S MAKE A DEAL 1	AP	1	1	1	1	1	1
CBS	LET'S MAKE A DEAL 2	AP	1	1	1	1	1	1
NBC	LITTLE BIG SHOTS	PV	1	1	0	0	2	2
FOX	LOVE CONNECTION	GV	1	1	0	0	0	0
BRAVO	MARIAHS WORLD	DO	0	0	0	0	0	0
FOX	MASTERCHEF	PV	1	1	1	1	2	2
FOX	MASTERCHEF CELEB SHOWDOWN	PV	0	0	1	1	2	2
FOX	MASTERCHEF JR-NY DAY 9P	PV	1	1	1	1	2	2
ABC	MATCH GAME	QG	1	1	1	1	1	1
DISCOVERY CHANNEL	MEN, WOMEN, WILD SPC	DO	1	1	0	0	3	3
DISNEY ABC DOMEST TV	MILLIONAIRE (AT)	QG	1	1	1	1	1	1
ANIMAL PLANET	MY CAT FROM HELL SNEAK PE	DO	1	1	0	0	0	1
ABC	MY DIET BETTER THAN YOURS	PV	1	1	1	1	2	3
FOX	MY KITCHEN RULES	PV	0	0	0	0	2	2
DISCOVERY CHANNEL	NAKED AND AFRAID: BARES	DO	1	1	0	0	3	3
NBC	NYE GAME NIGHT-ANDY COHEN	QG	1	0	1	1	1	1
UNI	PARODIANDO 3 SUN	GV	1	1	1	1	2	2
UNI	PEQUENOS GIGANTES USA MON	GV	1	1	1	1	2	2
CBS	PRICE IS RIGHT 1	AP	1	1	1	1	1	1
CBS	PRICE IS RIGHT 2	AP	1	1	1	1	1	1
UNI	REINA DE LA CANCION THU	GV	1	1	1	1	2	2
TLC	RETURN TO AMISH: COUNTDOW	DO	1	1	0	0	1	0
SONY PICTURES TV	RIGHT THIS MINUTE	GV	1	1	0	0	0	0
DISCOVERY CHANNEL	ROCKIN ROADSTERS	DO	0	0	0	0	2	2
NBC	RUNNING WILD: B. GRYLLS	PV	0	0	0	0	3	3
DISCOVERY CHANNEL	SACRED STEEL	DO	1	1	0	0	2	2
ABC	SHARK TANK	PV	1	1	1	1	2	2
FOX	SO YOU THINK CN DANCE	GV	1	1	1	1	2	2
NBC	SPARTAN:TEAM CHALLENGE	PV	1	1	1	1	3	3
ABC	STEVE HARVEY'S FUNDERDOME	QG	1	1	1	1	2	2
NBC	STRONG	PV	1	1	1	1	2	3
FOX	SUPERHUMAN	GV	1	1	1	1	2	2
CBS	SURVIVOR	GV	1	1	1	1	3	3
CBS	SURVIVOR REUNION	PV	1	1	1	1	3	3
CBS	SURVIVOR-SPECIAL	PV	1	1	1	1	3	3
ABC	TO TELL THE TRUTH	PV	1	1	1	1	0	1
ABC	TOY BOX, THE	PV	1	1	1	1	2	2
CBS	UNDERCOVER BOSS	GV	1	1	1	1	1	1
UNI	VA POR TI 2	GV	1	1	1	1	2	2
NBC	VOICE	PV	1	1	1	1	2	2
TEL	VOZ KIDS 4 SUN	PV	1	1	1	1	2	2
NBC	WALL	QG	1	1	1	1	1	1
CBS TV DISTRIBUTION	WHEEL OF FORTUNE	QG	1	1	1	1	1	1
NBC	WORLD OF DANCE	PV	1	1	1	1	2	2
FOX	YOU THE JURY	GV	1	1	0	0	1	1

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B. Media Data Descriptions

Internet Movie Database (IMDB)

The Internet Movie Database has information about year of programs' release as well as their genre among many others. I downloaded 102,523 TV programs registered in IMDb.com, which were released between 1960 and 2017. Using a release year comes with a caveat that a long-running TV show that has different seasons will be only recorded once in this data. IMDb typically records up to three relevant genres for each TV program, and I focused on Realty-TV/Game and News genre. I calculated the average proportion of each genre per year.
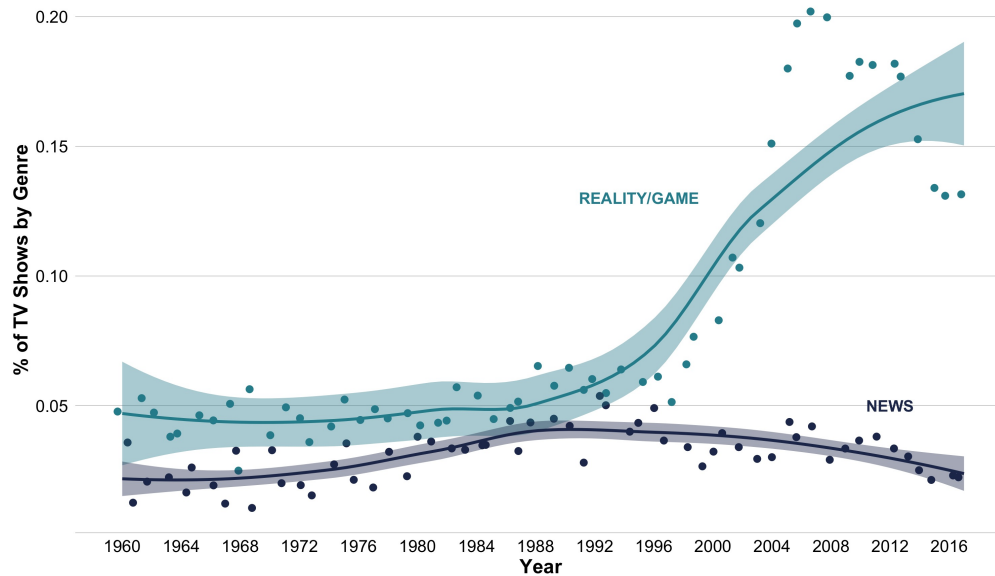

Figure B1. The relative share of news shows and reality/game shows over time (1960-2017). I assessed 102,523 TV programs released between 1960 and 2017 using the Internet Movie Database (IMDb.com), which typically lists up to three relevant genres for each TV program. I calculated the average proportion of each genre per year and plotted the relative share.

Comprehensive Nielsen Ratings Data 2015-2017

The Nielsen ratings data use a nationally representative sample of households to capture information about which TV programs people watch. Because the electronic meters automatically track what channel the televisions are tuned to, the Nielsen data are immune to the flaws of self-reported measures of media exposure and social desirability biases. Most importantly, the Nielsen data address the problem that national election surveys do not contain extensive questions about entertainment media consumption, hence serving as the most comprehensive data on American TV exposure to entertainment media. Nielsen ratings data come with their own genre categorizations, and unfortunately, they do not have a specific genre called "reality or game shows.'" I focused on 8 non-fictional genres in Nielsen data. This is not to argue that that fictional entertainment media does not matter for perceptions of economic mobility. However, in attempt to find a systematic way of studying shared rags-to-riches narratives across different TV programs, I focus on reality and game shows for their explicit focus on touting and celebrating ordinary individuals' economic successes. I particularly focus on 8 non-fictional entertainment categories—AP (Audience Participation), DO (Documentary, General), GV (General Variety), IA (Instructions, Advice), PV (Participation Variety), QG (Quiz-Give Away), QP (Quiz-Panel), and U (Unclassified)—that typically include reality TV shows and game shows that predominantly feature ordinary Americans. Note that the number of entries does not mean the number of programs, as one program can have multiple entries. For instance, a popular reality TV show, *Dancing with the Star*, has one entry that records its average weekly program ratings, in addition to ratings for special series such as the final or semi-final episode. I manually matched Nielsen's 8,701 entries with the corresponding entries in *Encyclopedia of Television Shows 1925–2016* and *TV Tango.com* database to identify the shows that are considered reality and game shows. TV Tango.com is an online database of entertainment media that has information about the genre of each TV program. It provides the most comprehensive compilation of TV information, and offers search results across ten different websites including IMDb.com, TV.com, TVguide.com, Amazon.com, iTunes, and Wikipedia.

Table B1. Top 10 Most Popular TV Program 2000-2017

Rank	Program	Rating	Rank	Program	Rating	Rank	Program	Rating
2000-2001			2001-2002			2002-2003		
1	Survivor (CBS)	17.4	1	Friends (NBC)	15	1	CSI: Crime Scene Investigation (CBS)	16.3
2	ER (NBC)	15	2	CSI: Crime Scene Investigation (CBS)	14.5	2	Friends (NBC)	13.9
3	Who Wants to Be a Millionaire — Wednesday (ABC)	13.7	3	ER (NBC)	14.2	3	Joe Millionaire (FOX)	13.3
4	Who Wants to Be a Millionaire — Tuesday (ABC)	13	4	Everybody Loves Raymond (CBS)	12.8	4	ER (NBC)	13.1
5	Friends (NBC)	12.6	5	Law Order (NBC)	12.6	5	American Idol — Tuesday (FOX)	12.6
5	Monday Night Football (ABC)	12.6	6	Survivor (CBS)	11.8	6	American Idol — Wednesday (FOX)	12.5
5	Everybody Loves Raymond (CBS)	12.6	7	Monday Night Football (ABC)	11.5	7	Survivor (Thailand Amazon) (CBS)	11.9
8	Who Wants to Be a Millionaire — Sunday (ABC)	12.4	8	The West Wing (NBC)	11.4	7	Everybody Loves Raymond (CBS)	11.9
9	Law Order (NBC)	12.3	9	Will Grace (NBC)	11	9	Law Order (NBC)	11.7
10	The Practice (ABC)	11.7	9	Leap of Faith (NBC)	11	10	Monday Night Football (ABC)	11.4
Rank	Program	Rating	Rank	Program	Rating	Rank	Program	Rating
2003-2004			2004-2005			2005-2006		
1	CSI: Crime Scene Investigation (CBS)	15.9	1	CSI: Crime Scene Investigation (CBS)	16.5	1	American Idol — Tuesday (FOX)	17.6
2	American Idol — Tuesday (FOX)	14.9	2	American Idol — Tuesday (FOX)	15.7	2	American Idol — Wednesday (FOX)	17.2
3	American Idol — Wednesday (FOX)	14.1	3	American Idol — Wednesday (FOX)	15.3	3	CSI: Crime Scene Investigation (CBS)	15.6
4	Friends (NBC)	13.6	4	Desperate Housewives (ABC)	14.5	4	Desperate Housewives (ABC)	13.8
5	The Apprentice (NBC)	13	5	CSI: Miami (CBS)	12.4	5	Grey's Anatomy (ABC)	12.5
6	ER (NBC)	12.9	6	Without a Trace (CBS)	12.3	6	Without a Trace (CBS)	12.3
7	Survivor (CBS)	12.3	7	Survivor (CBS)	12	7	Dancing with the Stars (ABC)	12
8	CSI: Miami (CBS)	11.9	8	Grey's Anatomy (ABC)	11.6	8	CSI: Miami (CBS)	11.8
9	Monday Night Football (ABC)	11.2	9	Everybody Loves Raymond (CBS)	11.2	9	Monday Night Football (ABC)	10.6
9	Everybody Loves Raymond (CBS)	11.2	10	Monday Night Football (ABC)	10.8	9	House (FOX)	10.6
Rank	Program	Rating	Rank	Program	Rating	Rank	Program	Rating
2006-2007			2007-2008			2008-2009		
1	American Idol — Wednesday (FOX)	17.3	1	American Idol — Tuesday (FOX)	16.1	1	American Idol — Wednesday (FOX)	15.1
2	American Idol — Tuesday (FOX)	16.8	2	American Idol — Wednesday (FOX)	15.9	2	American Idol — Tuesday (FOX)	14.6
3	Dancing with the Stars — Monday (ABC)	12.7	3	Dancing with the Stars — Monday (ABC)	14	3	Dancing with the Stars — Monday (ABC)	12.9
3	Dancing with the Stars — Tuesday (ABC)	12.7	4	Dancing with the Stars — Wednesday (ABC)	12.6	4	CSI: Crime Scene Investigation (CBS)	11.5
3	Dancing with the Stars — Wednesday (ABC)	12.7	5	Dancing with the Stars — Tuesday (ABC)	12.3	5	NCIS (CBS)	10.9
6	CSI: Crime Scene Investigation (CBS)	12.2	6	Desperate Housewives (ABC)	11.6	6	The Mentalist (CBS)	10.8
7	Grey's Anatomy (ABC)	12.1	7	CSI: Crime Scene Investigation (CBS)	10.6	7	Dancing with the Stars — Tuesday (ABC)	10.7
8	House (FOX)	11.1	8	House (FOX)	10.5	8	Sunday Night Football (NBC)	10
9	Desperate Housewives (ABC)	10.8	9	Grey's Anatomy (ABC)	10.4	9	Desperate Housewives (ABC)	9.9
10	CSI: Miami (CBS)	10.7	10	Sunday Night Football (NBC)	9.7	10	Grey's Anatomy (ABC)	9.6
Rank	Program	Rating	Rank	Program	Rating	Rank	Program	Rating
2009-2010			2010-2011			2011-2012		
1	American Idol — Tuesday (FOX)	13.7	1	American Idol — Wednesday (FOX)	14.5	1	Sunday Night Football (NBC)	12.4
2	American Idol — Wednesday (FOX)	13.3	2	Dancing with the Stars (ABC)	13.8	2	NCIS (CBS)	12.3
3	Dancing with the Stars (ABC)	12.6	3	American Idol — Thursday (FOX)	13.4	3	Dancing with the Stars (ABC)	12
4	NCIS (CBS)	11.5	4	Sunday Night Football (NBC)	12.7	4	American Idol — Wednesday (FOX)	11.8
5	Sunday Night Football (NBC)	11.3	4	NCIS (CBS)	11.8	5	American Idol — Thursday (FOX)	11
6	The Mentalist (CBS)	10.6	5	Dancing with the Stars — Results (ABC)	11.8	6	Dancing with the Stars — Results (ABC)	10.6
7	Dancing with the Stars — Results (ABC)	9.9	7	NCIS: Los Angeles (CBS)	10.1	7	NCIS: Los Angeles (CBS)	10.2
8	NCIS: Los Angeles (CBS)	9.8	8	The Mentalist (CBS)	9.6	8	The Big Bang Theory (CBS)	9.7
8	Undercover Boss (CBS)	9.8	9	Body of Proof (ABC)	9	9	The Mentalist (CBS)	9.3
10	CSI: Crime Scene Investigation (CBS)	9.7	10	Criminal Minds (CBS)	8.7	10	The Voice (NBC)	9.2
Rank	Program	Rating	Rank	Program	Rating	Rank	Program	Rating
2012-2013			2013-2014			2014-2015		
1	NCIS (CBS)	13.5	1	Sunday Night Football (NBC)	12.6	1	Sunday Night Football (NBC)	12.3
2	Sunday Night Football (NBC)	12.4	1	NCIS (CBS)	12.6	2	The Big Bang Theory (CBS)	11.6
3	The Big Bang Theory (CBS)	11.6	3	The Big Bang Theory (CBS)	12.3	2	NCIS (CBS)	11.6
4	NCIS: Los Angeles (CBS)	11	4	NCIS: Los Angeles (CBS)	10.3	4	NCIS: New Orleans (CBS)	11.3
5	Person of Interest (CBS)	10	5	Dancing with the Stars (ABC)	10	5	Empire (FOX)	10.9
6	Dancing with the Stars (ABC)	9.9	6	The Blacklist (NBC)	9.5	6	Thursday Night Football (CBS)	10.6
7	American Idol — Wednesday (FOX)	9.2	7	Person of Interest (CBS)	9	7	Dancing with the Stars (ABC)	9.7
7	Dancing with the Stars Results (ABC)	9.2	8	The Voice (NBC)	8.9	8	Criminal Minds (CBS)	9
9	American Idol — Thursday (FOX)	8.9	9	Blue Bloods (CBS)	8.8	8	Madam Secretary (CBS)	9
10	Two and a Half Men (CBS)	8.7	10	The Voice — Tuesday (NBC)	8.6	8	Scandal (ABC)	9
Rank	Program	Rating	Rank	Program	Rating			
2015-2016			2016-2017					
1	NCIS (CBS)	12.8	1	The Big Bang Theory (CBS)	11.5			
2	Sunday Night Football (NBC)	12.6	2	NCIS (CBS)	11.4			
3	The Big Bang Theory (CBS)	12.5	3	Sunday Night Football (NBC)	11.1			
4	Thursday Night Football (CBS)	10.6	4	Thursday Night Football (CBS/NBC)	9.6			
5	Empire (FOX)	10.2	4	Bull (CBS)	9.6			
6	NCIS: New Orleans (CBS)	9.4	6	This Is Us (NBC)	9.4			
7	Dancing with the Stars (ABC)	8.8	7	Blue Bloods (CBS)	8.9			
8	Blue Bloods (CBS)	8.4	8	NCIS: New Orleans (CBS)	8.5			
9	The Voice: Monday (NBC)	8.2	9	Dancing with the Stars (ABC)	8.1			
9	The X-Files (FOX)	8.2	10	NCIS: Los Angeles (CBS)	7.8			

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C. New York Times Coverage Sentiment Analysis

Using the New York Times API, I downloaded all the articles from 2000 to 2019 that contains the following phrases:

economic mobility; intergenerational mobility; social mobility; upward mobility; income mobility; socioeconomic mobility; class mobility; income ladder; economic ladder; social ladder; rags to riches; land of opportunity; American Dream; meritocracy; rugged individualism; self-made man; self-made woman; self-made success; Horatio Alger

To make sure that the articles about the United States, the articles do not contain the word "United States", "U.S." or "America" were excluded.

D. Quotes from Rags-to-Riches Reality TV Programs

"Thinking about our journey, I get emotional every time, when you're a mom that wants to show your kids that anything is possible. I mean I was a struggling mom to them and overnight my whole life changed. We are so thankful for our *Shark Tank* experience, and I think that Mom and I are proof that a grandma and a stay-at-home mom can become an overnight success. It truly is the American dream." — Gloria Hoffman, *Shark Tank*, Season 7

"I've been singing in the subway for roughly 37 years. That's the good thing...The low point is on a Monday or a Tuesday, you don't make that much. But people get paid on Thursdays and Fridays, and then make up for it...You know success is what you make it, but there's no better stage, there's no better place to be than right here." — Mike Young, *America's Got Talent,* Season 12

"I used to own 100% of nothing, and I'm living the American dream. I mean, I'm a Muslim first-generation American who is now pitching a vegan pork rind on *Shark Tank*. Like, if that's not the American dream, I don't know what is, you know?" — Samy Kobrosly, *Shark Tank*, Season 11

"I think I am living proof of the American dream. My parents emigrated here with $100 in their pocket from Guyana, and look at me now. I just got a deal from Mark Cuban on Shark Tank." — Krystal Persaud, *Shark Tank*, Season 11

"I am a very extreme contortionist dancer [...] I was actually homeless for two years before I got my apartment just dancing on the streets juts doing I had to it, but I dance, all 100%, 100%, I've never done anything like this, just to be right here. Dreams came true... I hope every kids that's watching us who wants to dance, who's ever been told that they can't do it, they got that just prove to them that you can do it." — Alonzo Jones (Turf), *America's Got Talent*, Season 7

"I have some of the most amazing people in the culinary world all taste my dish and say that it was fantastic and that they were impressed that I did my best with what limitations I have and I'm so touched that they all complimented me on my food and they believed in me so I feel like ecstatic you can overcome anything you want to overcome and get what you want to get and I'm gonna be the next MasterChef." — Christine Ha, *MasterChef*, Season 3

"I was diagnosed with lymphoma, blood cancer. I had blood transplants, blood transfusions, platelet transfusions, and chemotherapy. I lost my voice; I lost my hearing in one ear. During that time all I had really was my faith and my music. For me to go to being half dead to being on The Voice, I've never felt more alive than that. I'll be signing Don't Stop Believing by Journey. When I was in intensive care, I played this song over and over again. This song is the epitome of my life. Keep believing in yourself, keep believing in great things, and things will happen." — Rayshun LaMarr, *The Voice*, Season 14

"During the week I'm a pool technician; I service anywhere from 12 to 15 pools per day. I'll get my machine ready, vacuum the pool, check the chemicals. But I know there's more for my life. As a kid I loved to sing, especially in my grandparents' church. I started playing guitar and I knew that music was really starting to become a part of my life. I attended a leadership college because I knew that taking leadership courses was going to translate into bigger things for my life. So, I started my first ministry called Cliffside 360. It started with just me and my guitar and it has grown in two years to a hundred people faithfully coming, young and old from across the city, to worship God. And what better spot than on top of a mountain? Cliffside has done so much in my life but I'm ready to see what's next. As much as I enjoy my day-to-day job, I can't be cleaning pools forever. I know my goal is to be a Christian artist and being on this platform is pushing me in that direction. I've never had an opportunity like this in my life. I've literally been climbing a mountain to get my voice heard, and today is the day to reach the top." — Blaise Raccuglia, *The Voice*, Season 14

E. Observational Survey Methods and Details

To assess the impact of exposure to entertainment media on perceptions of economic mobility, I designed the Media & Culture Survey, which Survey Sampling International (SSI) administered to 3,004 US residents in August 2018. SSI used targeted recruitment to ensure that the survey sample closely matched US Census benchmarks for education, income, age, gender, geography, and race/ethnicity.

Survey Questionnaire

Q. Please tell us bit about yourself!

[OPTIMISM SCALE]
Q. To what extent do you agree/disagree with each of the following statements? [5 point MATRIX]
1) In uncertain times, I usually expect the best. 2) If something can go wrong for me it will. 3) I am always optimistic about my future. 4) I hardly ever expect things to go my way. 5) I rarely count on good things happening to me. 6) Overall, I expect more good things to happen to me than bad.

[PARTY ID]
Q. Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or something else?

If PARTY ID = 1 (Republican)
        Would you call yourself a... 1. Strong Republican 2. Not very strong Republican
If PARTY ID = 2 (Democrat)
        Would you call yourself a... 1. Strong Democrat 2. Not very strong Democrat
IF PARTY ID = 3, 4, 5 or refused (Independent, Another party, or No preference)   Do you think of yourself as closer to the... 1. Republican Party; 2. Democratic Party; 3. Neither

[IDEOLOGY] Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?
Extremely Liberal, Liberal, Slightly Liberal, Moderate, middle of the road, Slightly conservative, Conservative, Extremely Conservative, Haven't thought much about this

[RELIGION1] Do you go to religious services [every week, almost every week, once or twice a month, a few times a year, a few times a year, or never]?

[RELIGION2] What is your present religion, if any?
1) Protestant 2) Roman Catholic 3) Mormon 4) Eastern or Greek Orthodox 5) Jewish 6) Muslim 7) Buddhist 8) Hindu 9) Atheist 10) Agnostic 11) Nothing in particular 12) Something else

[HAVE IMMIGRANT PARENTS] Were both of your parents born in the United States? (Yes/No)

[INTERGENERATIONAL MOBILITY EXPERIENCES]
Q. Compared to your parents when they were the age you are now, do you think your own standard of living now is much better, somewhat better, about the same, somewhat worse, or much worse than theirs was?

[POLITICAL INTEREST] Some people seem to follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there's an election going on or not. Others aren't that interested. Would you say you follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, some of the time, only now and then, or hardly at all?

[PERSONAL ECONOMIC INSECURITY]
Q. Next is a list of things that some people worry about and others do not. Please indicate how worried you are about each of the following statements (Very worried; Somewhat worried; Not too worried; Not at all)

● That you won't be able to afford the health care services you and your family need?
● About not having enough money for retirement?
● About not being able to afford the cost of education for yourself or a family member

[EXPOSURE TO ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA] (Program-Level Measures)
Q. We would like to know which TV shows you enjoy. Below is the list of programs that many Americans watch. Please check all the program(s) you have regularly watched.

1) America's Got Talent (NBC) 2) Voice (NBC) 3) American Idol (FOX) 4) Survivor (CBS) 5) American Ninja Warrior (NBC) 6) Shark Tank (ABC) 7) Amazing Race (CBS) 8) MasterChef / MasterChef Junior (FOX) 9) BattleBots (ABC) 10) Hell's Kitchen (FOX) 11) So You Think You Can Dance (FOX) 12) World of Dance (NBC) 13) Love Hip Hop: Hollywood (VH1) 14) The Bachelor (ABC) 15) The Bachelorette (ABC) 16) Love Connection (FOX) 17) Celebrity Family Feud (ABC) 18) Keeping Up With the Kardashians (E!) 19) The Real Housewives (Bravo) 20) Jersey Shore: Family Vacation (MTV) 21) Fox NFL Sunday (FOX) 22) The NFL on CBS (CBS) 23) Sunday Night Football (NBC) 24) College Football Today (CBS) 25) MLB on Fox (FOX) 26) NASCAR on Fox (FOX) 27) NBA Saturday Primetime (ABC) 28) UFC Fight Night (FOX) 29) CBS Sports Spectacular (CBS) 30) College Basketball on CBS (CBS)

[PERCEPTIONS OF ECONOMIC MOBILITY]
Q. Please tell us the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements. [5 point MATRIX]
1) Anyone who works hard has a fair chance to succeed and live a comfortable life. 2) It is possible to start out poor in this country, work hard and become well-off. 3) The United States is no longer the land of opportunity. 4) Most people who want to get ahead can make it if they're willing to work hard.

[ATTRIBUTIONS OF SUCCESS]
Q. Why do you think that some people get ahead farther than others? Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with each of these explanations. Because...
1) Some people work harder than others; 2) Some people are more talented than others; 3) Some people are more ambitious and determined than others; 4) Some have a good education; 6) Technological changes and automation benefited some more than others; 7) Politicians have failed to implement good policies that advance equality of opportunity; 8) Some people have well-educated parents; 8) Some come from a wealthy family.

*Information on education, marital status, employment status, race, income, and region was given by SSI.

Table E1. Program-Level Entertainment Media Consumption Patterns

	% Regular Viewer		% Regular Viewer
America's Got Talent (NBC)	39.6	**Amazing Race (CBS)**	16.7
The NFL on CBS (CBS)	34.8	College Basketball on CBS (CBS)	16.1
Sunday Night Football (NBC)	34.0	NBA Saturday Primetime (ABC)	15.1
Fox NFL Sunday (FOX)	32.9	Keeping Up with Kardashians (E!)	14.8
Shark Tank (ABC)	30.8	NASCAR on Fox (FOX)	14.4
Hell's Kitchen (FOX)	26.7	Bachelor (ABC)	14.2
Voice (NBC)	26.4	Bachelorette (ABC)	13.5
American Idol (ABC)	25.9	Jersey Shore (MTV)	13.1
American Ninja Warrior (NBC)	25.2	The Real Housewives (BRAVO)	12.5
MasterChef (FOX)	24.8	UFC Fight Night (FOX)	11.5
Celebrity Family Feud (ABC)	22.9	**World of Dance (NBC)**	11.4
Survivor (CBS)	21.3	Love & Hip Hop: Hollywood (VH1)	11.1
MLB on Fox (FOX)	21.0	CBS Sports Spectacular (CBS)	10.7
College Football Today (CBS)	17.9	**BattleBots (ABC)**	8.9
So You Think You Can Dance (FOX)	17.2	Love Connection (FOX)	7.6

Note: Programs in bold contain a rags-to-riches narrative.

Consistent with the high Nielsen ratings of the programs included in the survey, 85% of respondents indicated that they regularly tuned into at least one of the 30 programs. The most-watched program is *America's Got Talent*, which attracted roughly 40% of survey respondents. Football games are widely popular as well, but it is worth pointing out that each of the different rags-to-riches programs attracts a good share of the audience. Other types of reality programs (e.g., dating shows, programs that promote the luxury lifestyles of quasi-celebrities) are less popular. While heavy television consumers watch a lot of entertainment programs in general—3% of survey respondents reported that they watch 20 or more programs, I find that 72% of survey respondents watch one or more rags-to-riches TV programs. Importantly, there was no partisan difference in the number of rags-to-riches programs people regularly consumed. Overall, the mean number of rags-to-riches programs was 2.80 and 2.84 for Republicans and Democrats, respectively, which is not statistically significantly different (p=0.735). In this era of hyper-polarization in which partisans have different preferences even on food, coffee, pet, and baby names, the absence of partisan self-selection into rags-to-riches programs is important and methodologically convenient. Demand for these shows largely stems from an innocuous demand for entertainment, and their political impacts are likely spillover effects.

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F. Full Regression Results

Table F1. The Impact of Watching Rags-to-Riches Programs

	Beliefs in Economic Mobility		Internal Attribution		External Attribution	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Occasional Viewer (1-2 Programs)	0.019	0.013	0.006	0.013	−0.004	−0.007
	(0.012)	(0.011)	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.009)	(0.009)
Frequent Viewer (3-5 Programs)	0.047***	0.032**	0.008	0.017+	0.009	0.005
	(0.012)	(0.011)	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.009)	(0.010)
Heavy Viewer (6+ Programs)	0.076***	0.040*	0.052***	0.052***	0.039***	0.014
	(0.013)	(0.016)	(0.011)	(0.014)	(0.011)	(0.013)
Other TV		0.001		−0.002		0.0003
		(0.003)		(0.003)		(0.003)
Sports TV		0.007**		0.006**		0.006***
		(0.002)		(0.002)		(0.002)
Republican		0.117***		0.026*		−0.029**
		(0.013)		(0.011)		(0.011)
Democrat		−0.003		−0.019+		0.027**
		(0.012)		(0.010)		(0.010)
Education		−0.022***		−0.003		0.010**
		(0.004)		(0.003)		(0.003)
Income		−0.002		−0.001		−0.002
		(0.003)		(0.003)		(0.002)
Married		0.016+		0.007		−0.003
		(0.009)		(0.008)		(0.007)
Female		0.011		0.010		0.001
		(0.009)		(0.008)		(0.008)
Age		0.001***		0.002***		0.001***
		(0.0003)		(0.0002)		(0.0002)
White		0.017+		0.022*		−0.003
		(0.010)		(0.009)		(0.008)
Unemployed		−0.032*		−0.011		0.011
		(0.014)		(0.012)		(0.011)
Political Interest		−0.007		0.013**		0.020***
		(0.005)		(0.004)		(0.004)
Attend Church		0.005+		−0.001		−0.005*
		(0.003)		(0.002)		(0.002)
Protestant		0.010		0.018*		−0.002
		(0.010)		(0.009)		(0.008)
Optimism index		0.057***		0.032***		0.009*
		(0.005)		(0.005)		(0.004)
Economic insecurity		0.002		0.019***		0.045***
		(0.005)		(0.005)		(0.005)
Perceived intergenerational mobility		0.036***		0.015***		−0.001
		(0.004)		(0.003)		(0.003)
Have immigrant parents		0.045***		0.022*		−0.002
		(0.011)		(0.010)		(0.010)
County-level absolute intergenerational mobility rates		0.001		−0.0001		0.001
		(0.001)		(0.001)		(0.001)
County-level Gini index		−0.016		−0.025		0.006
		(0.046)		(0.040)		(0.039)
Constant	0.649***	0.267**	0.756***	0.431***	0.709***	0.401***
	(0.008)	(0.085)	(0.007)	(0.075)	(0.006)	(0.072)
Observations	3,004	2,998	3,004	2,998	3,004	2,998
R²	0.013	0.239	0.008	0.143	0.006	0.110

Note: OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. State fixed effects are included. + p< 0.1, * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001

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Table F2. The Impact of Watching Rags-to-Riches Program (Using a Continuous Measure)

	Belief in Economic Mobility
Rags-to-Riches TV Consumption	0.006**
	(0.002)
Other TV	−0.001
	(0.003)
Sports TV	0.006**
	(0.002)
Republican	0.118***
	(0.012)
Democrat	−0.003
	(0.012)
Education	−0.022***
	(0.004)
Income	−0.002
	(0.003)
Married	0.017^+
	(0.009)
Female	0.011
	(0.009)
Age	0.001***
	(0.0003)
White	0.017^+
	(0.010)
Unemployed	−0.032*
	(0.014)
Political Interest	−0.006
	(0.005)
Attend Church	0.005^+
	(0.003)
Protestant	0.010
	(0.010)
Optimism Index	0.057***
	(0.005)
Economic insecurity	0.002
	(0.005)
Perceived intergenerational mobility	0.036***
	(0.004)
Have immigrant parents	0.045***
	(0.011)
County-level absolute intergenerational mobility rates	0.001
	(0.001)
County-level Gini index	−0.014
	(0.046)
Constant	0.275**
	(0.085)
Observations	2,998
R^2	0.239

Note: OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. State fixed effects are included. + p< 0.1, * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001

Table F3. The Impact of Watching Rags-to-Riches Programs By Level of Political Interest

	Beliefs in Economic Mobility		Internal Attribution		External Attribution	
	Low Interest	High Interest	Low Interest	High Interest	Low Interest	High Interest
Occasional Viewer (1-2 Programs)	0.010	0.013	0.018	0.009	−0.006	−0.004
	(0.014)	(0.018)	(0.012)	(0.015)	(0.012)	(0.015)
Frequent Viewer (3-5 Programs)	0.024	0.037*	0.028*	0.003	0.020	−0.016
	(0.015)	(0.018)	(0.013)	(0.016)	(0.013)	(0.015)
Heavy Viewer (6+ Programs)	0.054**	0.017	0.076***	0.021	0.037*	−0.010
	(0.021)	(0.025)	(0.019)	(0.021)	(0.018)	(0.021)
Other TV	−0.002	0.003	−0.007+	0.005	−0.002	0.003
	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Sports TV	0.008**	0.004	0.010***	0.002	0.008**	0.004+
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Republican	0.099***	0.126***	0.023+	0.032	−0.018	−0.034+
	(0.015)	(0.023)	(0.013)	(0.019)	(0.013)	(0.019)
Democrat	0.008	−0.024	−0.003	−0.034+	0.027*	0.040*
	(0.014)	(0.022)	(0.012)	(0.018)	(0.012)	(0.018)
Education	−0.028***	−0.016**	−0.007	−0.001	0.012**	0.004
	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Income	0.002	−0.008+	−0.001	−0.003	−0.003	−0.002
	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.003)	(0.004)
Married	0.016	0.013	0.012	−0.002	−0.009	−0.002
	(0.011)	(0.014)	(0.010)	(0.012)	(0.009)	(0.012)
Female	0.025*	−0.007	0.029**	−0.014	0.001	0.001
	(0.012)	(0.015)	(0.011)	(0.012)	(0.011)	(0.012)
Age	0.002***	0.0002	0.002***	0.002***	0.001***	0.001*
	(0.0004)	(0.0005)	(0.0003)	(0.0004)	(0.0003)	(0.0004)
White	0.011	0.029+	0.022+	0.016	−0.003	−0.016
	(0.013)	(0.016)	(0.012)	(0.013)	(0.011)	(0.013)
Unemployed	−0.019	−0.058*	−0.004	−0.039+	0.010	0.006
	(0.016)	(0.027)	(0.014)	(0.023)	(0.013)	(0.022)
Attend Church	0.002	0.005	−0.004	0.002	−0.008**	0.0002
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.003)	(0.004)
Protestant	0.032*	−0.010	0.041***	−0.011	0.010	−0.017
	(0.013)	(0.015)	(0.012)	(0.013)	(0.011)	(0.012)
Optimism index	0.060***	0.054***	0.037***	0.024***	0.008	0.011+
	(0.007)	(0.008)	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.007)
Economic insecurity	0.006	−0.008	0.029***	0.003	0.043***	0.046***
	(0.007)	(0.008)	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.007)
Perceived intergenerational mobility	0.028***	0.044***	0.014***	0.010*	−0.003	−0.004
	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.004)	(0.005)
Have immigrant parents	0.031*	0.074***	0.024+	0.025	−0.002	0.0005
	(0.014)	(0.019)	(0.013)	(0.016)	(0.012)	(0.016)
County-level absolute intergenerational mobility rates	0.002	−0.00000	0.001	−0.001	0.002	0.0001
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
County-level Gini index	0.069	−0.142*	0.015	−0.091	0.023	−0.037
	(0.060)	(0.072)	(0.054)	(0.061)	(0.051)	(0.060)
Constant	0.147	0.468***	0.324**	0.730***	0.371***	0.649***
	(0.109)	(0.139)	(0.099)	(0.117)	(0.094)	(0.116)
Observations	1,774	1,224	1,774	1,224	1,774	1,224
R^2	0.227	0.303	0.164	0.140	0.110	0.137

Note: OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. State fixed effects are included. + p< 0.1, * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001

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G. Replication Using 2016 ANES and ISCAP Survey

Additional data are the 2016 ANES and the ISCAP panel survey. The 2016 ANES uses both face-to-face interviews and an online survey, and the ISCAP is a population-based panel survey conducted between 2007 and 2016, recruited via GfK's Knowledge Panel. The major drawback of these data is that they have a limited battery of questions on entertainment media exposure and belief in economic mobility. The measures for key variables are far inferior to the ones used in the SSI survey I designed. With these caveats, I still use these additional data to see whether similar results are found using different data collected at different times. The dependent variable, *Belief in Economic Mobility*, is constructed as an index comprising two related questions (Cronbach's α= 0.63) in the ANES. The first item measured the perceived level of opportunity in America to get ahead, and the second measured the extent to which economic mobility has gotten easier or harder compared to 20 years ago. Since the two questions use different scales, they are standardized and recoded to range from 0 to 1. Wave 11 of the ISCAP survey (collected in October 2016) included one question that taps into retrospective perceptions of economic mobility, which was used as the dependent variable.

Both surveys contained only three questions about exposure to reality TV programs. The ANES asked about exposure to *The Voice*, *Dancing with the Stars*, and *Shark Tank*, and the ISCAP asked about exposure to *The Voice*, *Dancing with the Stars* and *American Idol*. For the ANES analysis, *Exposure to Rags-to-Riches Programs* is constructed as a measure that ranges from 0 (watches none of these programs) to 3 (watches all three of these programs). Of 4,271 pre-election respondents, 31.4% indicated that they watched at least one of these three programs regularly. In the ISCAP survey, only three earlier waves of the panel (collected between 2012 and 2014) measured media consumption. Of the 1,227 panelists who were surveyed again in 2016, 36.6% indicated that they tuned in to one of the three programs in at least one wave. Note that because this information is not collected in 2016 but was collected in earlier waves, *Exposure to Rags-to-Riches Programs* is coded to range from 0 to 1 here - just to serve as a rough proxy for people's entertainment media preference. For other predictors, I include a set of demographic variables such as partisan identification, ideology, race, education, gender, income, age, religion, employment status, and residency in metropolitan areas. I also include news media consumption (from a previous wave) and other variables that tap into sociotropic economic perceptions. The ISCAP survey also includes a system justification scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.67)—capturing people's general tendency to justify the status quo and believe that society is fair—which were also used as a covariate.

As before, belief in economic mobility is regressed on the count measure of exposure to rags-to-riches programs. Table **??** shows that the replication analyses largely support the hypothesis that more exposure to rags-to-riches programs is correlated with more optimistic perceptions of economic mobility in the United States. Given that these supplementary data contain unsatisfactory measures of key variables, it is noteworthy that the effects of exposure to rags-to-riches programs remain robust after controlling for other demographic variables, national economic perceptions and even a system justification scale that captures foundational psychological dispositions.

Table G1. The Effect of Exposure to Rags-to-Riches Programs on Belief in Economic Mobility

	Data: 2016 ANES			Data: 2016 ISCAP		
	(1) All	(2) Rep Only	(3) Dem Only	(4) All	(5) Rep Only	(6) Dem Only
Exposure to Rags-to-Riches Programs	0.012*	0.019**	0.006	0.045**	0.037	0.019
	(0.005)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.017)	(0.033)	(0.023)
Weights	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
R^2	0.126	0.131	0.127	0.181	0.231	0.209
Observations	3,291	1,342	1,530	1,180	346	594

Cell entries are weighted OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.[†]p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01

H. Heterogeneous Effects by Party ID in Survey Data

Across all three survey data, I find the main effects for the rags-to-riches television, which is reassuring. However, I find inconsistent heterogeneous effects by party ID. Using a nationally representative survey from 2016 ANES, I find that the effects are mainly driven by Republicans. Using another nationally representative survey that adopted a probability-based sampling (conducted by GfK) in 2016, the coefficients for the Rags-to-Riches TV consumption were larger for Republicans, but due to a reduced sample size (N=346), the standard errors were too large for it to be precisely estimated.

Table H1. 2016 ANES and ISCAP Results by Party ID

	DV = Beliefs in Economic Mobility							
	Data: 2016 ANES				Data: 2016 ISCAP			
	All	Rep	Dem	Ind	All	Rep	Dem	Ind
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Rags-to-Riches TV Consumption	0.012*	0.019**	0.006	0.010	0.045**	0.037	0.019	−0.101
	(0.005)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.015)	(0.017)	(0.033)	(0.023)	(0.120)
Weights	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Observations	3,291	1,342	1,530	419	1,180	346	594	34
R^2	0.126	0.131	0.127	0.162	0.181	0.231	0.209	0.613

Note: Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients with associated standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is coded to range from 0 to 1, with 1 indicating stronger beliefs in economic mobility. + $p< 0.1$, * $p<0.05$; ** $p<0.01$; *** $p<0.001$

Using an original survey I launched using SSI (now Dyanata) in 2018, I find that the effects were mostly driven by those who are self-identified as independents. An array of factors might explain these inconsistent results because the survey date, survey platform, and question wordings were all different. SSI data is not a national representative survey, and it has a higher proportion of independents compared to both 2016 ANES and 2016 ISCAP survey.

**Table H2. 2018 Media and Culture Survey Results by Party ID**

	DV = Beliefs in Economic Mobility			
	Data: 2018 SSI			
	All	Rep	Dem	Ind
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Occasional viewer	0.013	−0.012	0.005	0.070*
	(0.011)	(0.018)	(0.016)	(0.028)
Frequent viewer	0.032**	0.013	0.018	0.091**
	(0.011)	(0.018)	(0.017)	(0.032)
Heavy viewer	0.040*	0.001	0.031	0.119**
	(0.016)	(0.027)	(0.023)	(0.043)
Observations	2,998	1,019	1,489	490
R^2	0.239	0.198	0.187	0.322

Note: Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients with associated standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is coded to range from 0 to 1, with 1 indicating stronger beliefs in economic mobility. + $p< 0.1$, * $p<0.05$; ** $p<0.01$; *** $p<0.001$

I. Lab-in-the-Field Experiments Logistics

Since using an online survey experiment in this context cannot perfectly guarantee forced exposure, I included several attention checks when collecting data online, which involved questions that respondents could not correctly answer if they had not watched the treatment segments. A typical media lab on campus usually recruits undergraduate students. Though these lab experiments are still valuable in teaching us about psychological mechanisms at work regardless of the sample characteristics, recruiting non-student samples that are balanced in terms of partisan identification is a challenging task for researchers in a liberal, metropolitan city. To address this issue, I conducted lab-in-the-field survey experiments in suburban Pennsylvania and New Jersey between 2018 and 2019 using a mobile media laboratory, as shown below. As the random assignment was at the individual level, only one respondent was assigned to each room. As the vehicle could accommodate two respondents at a time, we prepared five folding chairs, headsets, and tablet PCs. We could accommodate a maximum of seven respondents simultaneously—two inside, and five outside.

Figure I1. The mobile media laboratory
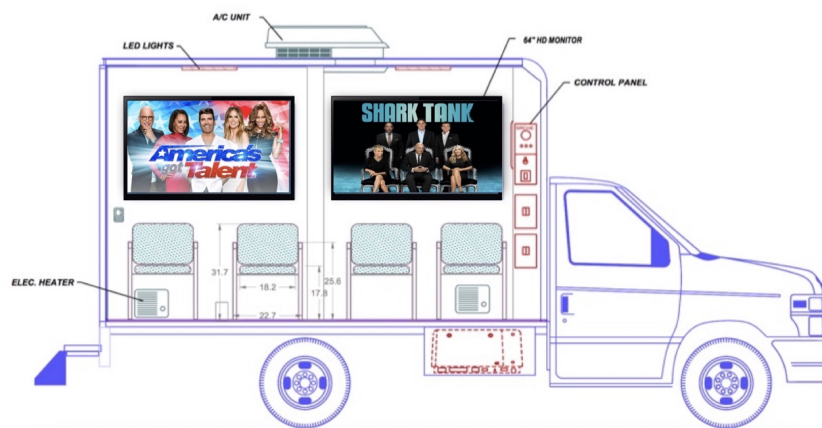
July 21, 2018 - Bethlehem Blueberry Festival, Burnside Plantation, 1461 Schoenersville Rd, Bethlehem, PA (Lehigh/Northampton County)

July 29, 2018 & August 5, 2018 & March 24, 2019 & March 30, 2019 - Quakertown Farmers Market and Flea Market, 201 Station Rd, Quakertown, PA 18951 (Bucks County)

September 29, 2018 - Cowtown Farmer's Market, 780 Harding Hwy, Pilesgrove, NJ 08098 (Salem County)

Electronic copy available at: https://ssrn.com/abstract=3838127

J. Pilot Experiments

Pre-Test Pilot Survey Questionnaire

You have just watched a short video segment of a popular TV show, [*Insert TV show name*]. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements. (1: Strongly Disagree - 5: Strongly Agree)

- The contestants on the show were ordinary Americans that I might meet in my everyday life.
- I can imagine someone I know being a contestant on the show.
- The winner on the show profited financially from being on it.
- If the winner on this show had financial difficulties, they probably don't anymore.
- The winner worked very hard and made a lot of effort.
- People from all walks of life and all kinds of backgrounds could succeed on this show if they worked hard enough.
- This program is a good example of how hard work pays off.
- Watching this program made me feel like this is a land of opportunity.

The List of 14 Pilot Test TV Shows
Amazing Race; America's Got Talent; American Grit; American Ninja Warrior ; Beat Shazam; Biggest Loser; Great Christmas Light Fight; Home Free; Shark Tank; MasterChef ; The Voice; Toy Box; Wheel of Fortune; 100,000 Pyramid

To develop appropriate experimental stimuli, I previously conducted a pilot test using 14 different TV shows that featured ordinary Americans achieving economic gains. All of the shows were edited to last less than 5 minutes (see the appendix for a full description). A group of 20 undergraduate students evaluated each show on 9 different questions that tap into three major conceptual dimensions: 1) whether the program featured ordinary Americans, 2) whether it showed them achieving clear economic gain, and 3) whether the economic gain was the result of hard work and effort. Based on the pilot test results, the four TV shows scoring the highest in all dimensions combined were selected as experimental stimuli (America's Got Talent, American Ninja Warrior, Shark Tank, and Toy Box) for the first round of survey experiment.

K. Experiment Questionnaire, Manipulation Checks, and Heterogeneous Effects

Questionnaire

[Mturk] This survey requires you to have audio on your computer to participate, as you will be watching a 5-minute video. You will proceed to the actual survey once you answer the following question correctly. Click the play button and listen carefully.

[Lab-in-the-field] The Institute for the Study of Citizens and Politics (ISCAP) a non-partisan research institute based in Philadelphia, is conducting research about entertainment media and American culture. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to watch a portion of one popular TV show and share your thoughts. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. This anonymous survey does not ask for any personally identifiable information. At the end of a 10 minute survey, you will get paid $10 in cash. Your survey will start once you click the "I agree" button below.

Q. Please choose the word you've just heard (Only included in Mturk survey)
1) Television 2) Fantasy 3) Entertainment 4) Drama 5) Soap Opera 6) Comedy
Please tell us a bit about yourself first!
Q. Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or something else?
    If PARTY ID = Republican, Q. Would you call yourself a...
      -Strong Republican / Not very strong Republican
    If PARTY ID = Democrat, Q. Would you call yourself a...
      - Strong Democrat / Not very strong Democrat
    If PARTY ID = Independent/Other/Don't know, Q. Do you think of yourself as closer to the...
      - Republican Party / Democratic Party

Q. To what extent do you agree/disagree with each of the following statements? (1: Strongly Disagree - 5: Strongly Agree)

1) In uncertain times, I usually expect the best. 2) If something can go wrong for me it will. 3) I am always optimistic about my future. 4) I hardly ever expect things to go my way. 5) I rarely count on good things happening to me. 6) Overall, I expect more good things to happen to me than bad.

Q. To what extent do you agree/disagree with each of the following statements? (1: Strongly Disagree - 5: Strongly Agree)
1) In general, I find society to be fair. 2) American society needs to be radically restructured. 3) Most policies serve the greater good. 4) Everyone has a fair shot at wealth and happiness. 5) Our society is getting worse every year. 6) Society is set up so that people usually get what they deserve.

Treatment (Experimental Stimuli)
We are interested in knowing what types of TV shows people find most entertaining. Next, you will see a portion of one TV show for about 4 minutes. You won't be able to move on until the video ends. Then you will be asked to answer several questions about the program.

- Treatment Group: Shark Tank/Toy Box/America's Got Talent/American Ninja Warrior
- Control Group: Cesar 911

Post-Treatment Items
Q. How much did you like or dislike the program? (1: Liked it very much - 5: Disliked it very much)
Q. How entertaining was this show? (1: Very entertaining - 5: Not very entertaining)
Q. Indicate to what extent you feel this way right now. (1: Not at All - 5: Extremely)
joyful, proud, sad, afraid, mad, lively, scared, cheerful, happy, miserable

Q. Please tell us the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements. (1: Strongly Disagree - 5: Strongly Agree)
1) Anyone who works hard has a fair chance to succeed and live a comfortable life. 2) It is possible to start out poor in this country, work hard and become well-off. 3) United States is no longer the land of opportunity. 4) Most people who want to get ahead can make it if they're willing to work hard.

Manipulation Checks
Next we are going to ask some questions about your perceptions of the person in the TV program you just watched. Think about [Matt and Pat, the entrepreneurs, (if Shark Tank) Darla, the toy maker, (if Toy Box) Mandy Harvey, the singer (if America's Got Talent) Ian Dory, the contestant, (if American Ninja Warrior) Yolanda, the dog owner (If Cesar 911)] as you answer these questions.

Q. Please tell us the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements. (1: Strongly Disagree - 5: Strongly agree)
1) The person on the show profited a lot financially from being on it. 2) The person featured in the program is likely to have a higher income from now on. 3) The person featured in the program has a good work ethic. 4) This program shows that people can succeed when they are willing to work hard.

Attention Checks
IF SHARK TANK
Q. what is the name of the Matt and Pat's company ? 1. Jolt 2. Grinds 3. Uptime 4. Catalyst
Q. What was their previous job? 1. NBA players 2. Football players 3. Soccer players 4. Baseball players

IF TOY BOX
Q. How many phrases Niya can speak? 1. 10 phrases 2. 100 phrases 3. 200 phrases 4. 500 phrases
Q. What is the name of the storybook that comes with the doll? 1. We Are Friends 2. The Adventures of Niya 3. Touch the Earth 4. Niya Loves Me

IF AMERICA'S GOT TALENT
Q. What is the title of the song that Mandy Harvey wrote? 1. At Last 2. Again 3. Smile 4. Try
Q. During Mandy's performance, 1. Mandy did not wear shoes. 2. Mandy played piano. 3. Mandy's mom was crying. 4. Mandy was wearing a blue dress.

IF AMERICAN NINJA WARRIOR

Q. What is the name of Ian's son? 1. Pax 2. Michael 3. Matt 4. Dan

Q. Where does Ian keep his son's photo? 1. In his wallet 2. In his pocket 3. In his socks 4. In his pants

IF CESAR 911

Q. What is the name of Yolanda's dog ? 1. Phoebe 2. Emmy 3. Roxie . 4. Izzy

Q. What is the name of Yolanda's second dog? 1. Dodger 2. Bailey 3. Charlie 4. Tucker

I employ several manipulation checks to ensure that my treatments have their intended effect on perceptions of economic mobility. First, I need to verify that the treatment prime actually conveyed the components that I hypothesized to be necessary to a belief in upward economic mobility. Respondents in the treatment condition were much more likely to say that the person featured on the show profited a lot financially (t = -17.032, p < 0.001), is likely to have a higher income from now on (t=-17.251, p < 0.001), has a good work ethic (t= -16.35, p < 0.001), and showed that people can succeed when they are willing to work hard (t=-11.669, p < 0.001) than those in the control condition. Further, I also checked whether my manipulation had unintended consequences. There was no statistically significant difference between the two conditions regarding whether respondents liked the program (t=-0.631, p=0.528) or whether they thought the program was entertaining (t=-1.467, p=0.148). The tables below demonstrate the heterogeneous treatment effects by system justification tendency among the full, combined sample (with survey mode fixed effects included).

Table K1. Heterogeneous Treatment Effects by System Justification Tendency

	Dependent variable:
	Beliefs in Upward Mobility
Rags-to-Riches Media Treatment	−0.029**
	(0.013)
System Justification Scale - High (vs Low)	0.032**
	(0.014)
Treatment x System Justification Scale - High	0.181***
	(0.020)
Optimism	0.042***
	(0.005)
Party ID	−0.033***
	(0.007)
Constant	0.550***
	(0.037)
Date/Location Fixed Effects	Yes
Survey Mode Fixed Effects	Yes
N	966
Adjusted R^2	0.393

Note: A median value of system justification scale is used (high vs low) * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001

L. Supplementary Experimental Evidence: The Effects of Merit-Based Rags-to-Riches TV on Attitudes Toward Inequality and Redistribution

Sociotropic perceptions about upward economic mobility are fundamentally linked to ideas about how people get ahead. Although scholars across disciplines conceptualize economic mobility in different ways, studies of perceptions about economic mobility typically tap people's beliefs in meritocracy. Disentangling this meritocratic mechanism is particularly important because merit and hard work affect how people think about whether the rich deserve what they earned or whether the poor deserve to receive social welfare. .

To disentangle the effects of the meritocratic narrative in "rags-to-riches" TV programs on policy preferences, I conducted additional lab-in-the-eld experiments at a farmer's and ea market in Quakertown, Pennsylvania, in March and April 2019, again using the mobile media laboratory.[1] I constructed two treatments using different rags-to-riches TV shows. The *America's Got Talent* video was the same one I used in the previous experiment. The *Shark Tank* video clip featured a White, middle-aged contestant, Aaron Krause, who pitched the idea for a smiley-faced cleaning sponge. After emphasizing how hard he worked to get where he is now, he secured the investment he needed.

Because the goal of this experiment was to disentangle the effects of the presence of hard work and merit in getting ahead, I included a control media treatment that awarded nancial benets to contestants who did not demonstrate any hard work or talent. The control treatment contained scenes from *Wall* (NBC), a reality TV show that featured a middle-aged White couple who won half a million dollars primarily due to luck. The premise of the show is that contestants, if they correctly answer trivia questions, are allotted a selection of large balls that ping around on a four-story-tall pegboard and randomly fall into slots marked with various U.S. dollar amounts up to one million dollars. To prevent even a slight possibility that respondents would think that these contestants are "good people" who deserve such wealth, I edited the video so there was no mention of the contestants' occupation and background. Their correct answering of trivia questions was also edited out, as some people might interpret that behavior as "talent."

The first two outcomes measured what people think leads to some people being rich and others being poor. Respondents were asked to choose between whether they think that some people are rich because they worked harder than others or because they had more advantages than others (*The Rich Work Hard*). They were also asked to choose between whether they think that some people are poor because of lack of effort on their own part or because of circumstances beyond their control (*The Poor Lack Effort*). In addition, respondents were asked a series of questions about their attitudes toward income inequality. They indicated the extent to which they agreed that the income gap between the rich and poor is a serious problem, income inequality is a desirable feature of modern society because people make different contributions, and high-income earners in our society generally deserve their pay. These three questions are coded to range from 0 to 1 (greater tolerance with income inequality) and are averaged together into *Inequality Tolerance* (Cronbach's α = .73). The last dependent variable uses four questions to measure attitudes toward government-led redistribution. Respondents indicated the extent to which they agreed that the government should increase tax rates on Americans earning more than \$250,000 a year, reduce the gap between the rich and the poor, reduce assistance to the unemployed, and expand federal rental assistance program to high-poverty neighborhoods. These four questions are coded to range between 0 and 1, with higher numbers indicating the most conservative response, and averaged together into *Anti-Redistribution* (Cronbach's α = .68). To ensure that my treatments would have their intended effects, I conducted manipulation checks and veried that the treatment priming did convey the meritocratic components that I hypothesized to be important for people's attitudes toward income inequality and redistribution.

Results

My experiments show the extent to which merit-based rags-to-riches TV programs inuence people's attitudes toward attribution of economic success, income inequality, and redistribution, as displayed in Table L1. Columns 1 and 2 show the results on the attitudes toward the rich and poor. When respondents were limited to two choices— whether they thought that some people are rich because they worked hard or because they were lucky— exposure to merit-based rags-to-riches TV programs had substantial effects: it increased the perception that the rich people are rich because of hard work and talent by around 17.5 percentage points.

To put this in context, the partisan gap in the control condition was 19 percentage points. In other words, the treatment effects were the same size as the gap between Democrats and Republicans. On the other hand, the treatment effects on the perception

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[1]Similar to the previous experiments, respondents received \$10 compensation in cash for their participation. All respondents were asked a set of questions about their general attitudes about the prospect of upward economic mobility, income inequality, and redistribution. Party ID was measured as a pre-treatment covariate.

Table L1. The impact of merit-based rags-to-riches TV on redistribution-related attitudes

	The Rich Work Hard	*The Poor Lack Efforts*	*Inequality Tolerance*	*Anti-Redistribution*
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Merit-based TV Treatment	0.175^{+}	-0.090	0.098^{*}	0.079^{+}
(vs. Luck-based treatment)	(0.091)	(0.092)	(0.045)	(0.044)
Observations	119	119	119	119
R^2	0.115	0.066	0.097	0.087

Note: Pre-treatment covariates include Party ID and optimism index. + p¡ 0.1, * p¡0.05; ** p¡0.01; *** p¡0.001

that some people are poor due to lack of effort, not circumstances beyond their control, were not statistically signicant. This hints a possibility that narrative emphasis on the merits of the economic winners does more to legitimate the deservingness of the rich than to delegitimize the deservingness of the poor.

Consistent with my expectations, merit-based rags-to-riches TV programs have signicant treatment effects on people's attitudes toward income inequality and redistribution. People in the treatment condition were approximately 10 percentage points more likely to tolerate income inequality and around 8 percentage points more likely to be opposed to redistribution. Granted, there is no reason to believe that people who participated in the lab-in-the-field experiments were representative of the general adult population in America. The experimental finding here is not conclusive, but it sheds useful light on the psychological mechanism articulated in previous studies that links meritocracy with tolerance of income inequality and lower support for redistribution (Mijs 2019, Piketty 1995).

M. Trends in the American Dream from 1990 to 2018

It is important to acknowledge that the main findings of the manuscript are cross-sectional evidence, while the ultimate question of why beliefs in the American Dream have persisted can be better answered with long-running surveys. But perhaps reflective of the discipline's general reluctance of accepting "unusual forms of political discourse as important ones" (Herbst 2006), widely-used national surveys have either not asked about non-news media consumption or only included a few program-level measures of entertainment media consumption. With this glaring data limitation, the below figure demonstrates the marginal effects of TV consumption on beliefs in the American Dream from 1990 to 2018. Though not conclusive, it demonstrates that people who watch more than 3 hours of television per day have become more optimistic over time.
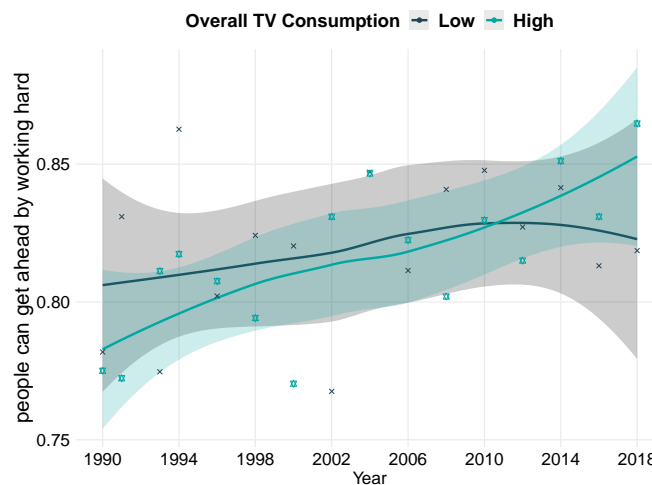

Figure M1. Marginal effects of TV consumption on beliefs in the American Dream. *Note*: The figure uses the General Social Survey from 1990 to 2018. High TV consumption (navy) refers to those who watch more than 3 hours of television per day. The cut is based on mean. The marginal effects are calculated conditional on age, income, race, education, gender, and interest in news. The outcome variable ranges from 0 to 1.

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