ENTERTAINING BELIEFS IN ECONOMIC MOBILITY

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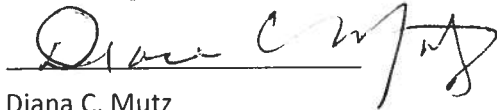Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

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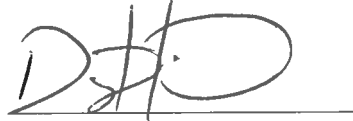
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ENTERTAINING BELIEFS IN ECONOMIC MOBILITY

To mom. . .

그대가 위로해준
육첩방의 빛바랜 시간들

Acknowledgment

When the life of a scholar and questions she asks are connected, her scholarship resonates with me longer. I have aspired to do the same. As a first-generation college student who attended four years of Harvard feeling like an awestruck tourist, I have been drawn to questions about economic mobility and income inequality, which this dissertation is about. The only problem was the mismatch between my lofty aspirations and my mediocre competence.

Fortunately, this dissertation has not been produced by me alone. During the past six years, which were marked as much by self-doubt as by the thrill of original research, I had the privilege of having exceptional mentors. In my first year, I had the luxury of working with Kathleen Hall Jamieson, one of the most charismatic and inspiring women I've met in my life. Her generosity and guidance shaped my subsequent years at Penn, and I thank her for seeing a potential in me that I myself didn't realize. In the same year, I met Matt Levendusky, whose class on American political behavior shaped my scholarship early in my graduate career. Whenever I confessed that I wanted to be like him—a terrific writer, excellent teacher, and caring advisor—his wise answer always was "be yourself." I can only hope to pay forward to my own students the generosity he has shown me.

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There were days—which turned into almost two years—during which I could not really walk. My saddest memories of Philadelphia reside with my sister, who flew 7,000 miles to push me around the campus in a wheelchair. She lifted me up when life felt unusually heavy, and I can only hope to do the same for her.

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Finally, I want to thank two extraordinary women.

I want to express my sincerest gratitude to Diana C. Mutz, an unusual mentor who personified the best that social science can be. Diana taught me a lesson that forever changed the way I approach my career: doing research should be *fun*. She encouraged me to find puzzles and inspirations from everyday life, to see and understand America as it is, and, well, to be a truck driver. For the hundreds of meetings, thousands of emails, many home-cooked dinners (always with furry or bizarre creatures), and many more glasses of wine that frankly did not help my foot recover, I am eternally grateful for her, Robin Permantle, and the rest of the Pemutzle family.

I dedicate this dissertation to my mom, my toughest critic, my life-long comrade, and my greatest hero. Things that we have endured together are inexplicable, but she has shown me how to live a new day even after a sleepless night filled with tears, fear, and despair. She taught me how to run; she also taught me how not to run away from life. For too many part-time jobs she had, for too many international phone calls I made, for too many degrees and too lofty dreams I brought from a different world, I owe her the gratitude of a lifetime, and love beyond this fragile life.

ABSTRACT

ENTERTAINING BELIEFS IN ECONOMIC MOBILITY

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Americans have long believed in upward economic 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, most Americans remain convinced of the prospects for upward mobility. What explains this disconnect? I argue that Americans' media diets play an important role in explaining this puzzle. Specically, contemporary Americans are watching a record number of entertainment TV programs emphasizing "rags-to-riches" narratives. Using detailed Nielsen ratings data and original content analyses, I demonstrate that such shows have become a ubiquitous part of the American media landscape over the last two decades. In three national surveys, I find that exposure to these programs increases viewers' beliefs in the American Dream; for heavy viewers, this effect is as powerful as that of having immigrant parents. Experiments conducted both online and in a lab-in-the-field setting establish that these media effects are causal. Importantly, the rags-to-riches programs, with their narrative emphasis on meritocracy, legitimize income inequality and dampen public support for redistribution. My results shed light on the lingering puzzle of why public preferences for redistribution have not shifted much despite rising disparities in wealth. By boldly expanding what constitutes politically relevant information in this post-broadcast democracy, my dissertation also carries important implications for the study of public opinion more generally.

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Preface

Chapter 1

The American Dream in the Age of Inequality

> "A dream so strong, so brave, so true
> That even yet its mighty daring sings
> In every brick and stone, in every furrow turned
> That's made America the land it has become"
> — From *Let America Be America Again*, Langston Hughes (1936)

In no other country is the promise of upward economic mobility as fundamental to national identity as in the United States. As early a visitor as Alexis de Tocqueville observed in 1835 that Americans were "apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their hands" (de Tocqueville 1835), contrasting their belief that hard work would improve their economic station with the feudal limits facing Europeans. This belief that hard work guarantees success is such a cornerstone of the American ethos that it has become known as the "American Dream" (Cullen 2004; Hartz 1955; Huntington 1981; Lipset 1997; McClosky and Zaller 1984).

Yet the unprecedented increase in income inequality in recent decades has taken a serious toll on economic mobility in contemporary America (Shapiro 2017). Absolute intergenerational mobility rates—the fraction of children who earn more than their parents— have fallen by more than 40% (Chetty et al. 2017a). At the colleges that have successfully offered pathways to upward mobility, the proportion of students enrolled who were from low-income households fell sharply over the 2000s (Chetty et al. 2017b). In this age of intensifying class stratification, concerns about the fading American Dream have certainly dominated public discourse. Politicians from Bernie Sanders to Donald Trump have voiced concerns that the American Dream is dead or has become a nightmare (Sanders 2016; Trump 2015). The best-selling book titles in recent years have included *Our Kids:*

The American Dream in Crisis (Putnam 2016) and *Who Stole the American Dream?* (Smith 2012).

In this increasingly unequal and stratified America, however, many Americans continue to view the United States as a land of opportunity and believe that people can achieve upward mobility through hard work. Recent polls show that around 70% of American adults hold such optimistic beliefs (CBS News Poll 2016; Gallup Organization 2018; George Washington University Battleground Poll 2018). Academic studies also show that Americans substantially overestimate the extent to which people actually experience upward economic mobility (i.e. Davidai and Gilovich 2018; Kraus and Tan 2015). What explains why Americans' beliefs in economic mobility persist despite this raft of empirical evidence to the contrary? Why has public opinion not shifted more than it has on this core issue despite heightened and repeated concerns about declining mobility, and even the strong support received by candidates who call attention to it?

Many point to elements of American political culture to explain the puzzling and resilient optimism in upward economic mobility. Scholars allude to historical factors such as the existence of the frontier or the Protestant work ethic, arguing that beliefs in upward economic mobility are just part of the American liberal tradition and the "American creed" (i.e., Lipset 1997; McClosky and Zaller 1984). Such cultural explanations raise as many questions as they answer, one of which in particular lingers: If all share this "American culture," why do some Americans retain this belief in upward mobility more so than others?

In this dissertation, I bring the contemporary media environment to the forefront of the study of economic mobility. Many prominent scholars across social science disciplines have anchored their research questions to the political discourse found in the news media. Consider, for instance, the sobering remarks on economic mobility delivered by President Obama— ones that virtually every major news outlet and network channel has reported and are hence familiar to academic researchers.

> The problem is that alongside increased inequality, we've seen diminished levels of upward mobility in recent years. (...) The combined trends of increased inequality and decreasing mobility pose a fundamental threat to the American Dream, our way of life, and what we stand for around the globe.

What is vastly overlooked is a simple and uncomfortable truth about post-broadcast democracy: consuming news is certainly not Americans' favorite leisure time activity. Given the dazzling array of media choices, Americans can easily flip the channel and watch

something completely different that happens to feature the same president. With dramatic sound effects, the captivating trailer for *Shark Tank*, a popular business reality TV program, features ordinary hard-working Americans, an assembly line with a full workforce, and scenes of the White House with President Obama shaking hands with investors, voiced over by:

> It employed thousands (...) and changed how America does business (...) *Shark Tank* has become an American phenomenon. And the support of the president just goes to show you that the American Dream is alive and well.

These narratives of economic mobility could not be more different. America is portrayed and envisioned in *Shark Tank* as a land where any budding entrepreneur with talent and good ideas can come in, charm investors, and build lucrative business empires of their own. This popular television show, once the most-watched TV program on Friday nights, has now been renewed for an 11th season.

As I will demonstrate, this is not about one particular TV show but is rather a potent cultural phenomenon in this new Gilded Age. In the past two decades, there has been a meteoric rise in reality TV programs that depict real-life Americans succeeding due to their hard work and talent. Shows that illustrate an ordinary person on a trajectory of upward economic mobility—what I term "rags-to-riches" programs[1]—are among the most popular on television. One such show, *America's Got Talent*, often attracts prime-time audiences seven times larger than those watching Fox News (Elber 2018). Millions of Americans sit down every evening and watch these programs, during which they see evidence that economic mobility—the American Dream—is alive and well.

In the pages that follow, I advance an exemplar-based theory of the American Dream, suggesting that individual variations in perceptions of economic mobility are a function of exposure to rags-to-riches entertainment media. My argument is rooted in the classical theories of political communication that the mass media is an important source of information that shapes collective economic perceptions, and such perceptions cultivate people's political attitudes and preferences. But news media, with its well-known bias for negativity, typically focuses on stories of downward economic mobility—stories of those who lost jobs, have soaring debts, or missed pay-day loan deadlines, to name just a few. The truth of the matter is that hardly anything we encounter from the news media is uplifting

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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 to broadly refer to various trajectories of upward economic mobility.

or pleasant. As we try to understand why Americans remain optimistic about the prospect of upward mobility, however, the conventional answer—the news media—falls short of its typical explanatory power. If anything, exposure to the news and negative exemplars should have heightened citizens' concerns about the prospects of downward mobility, the opposite of the pattern observed.

The prevailing and popular assumption in the discipline is that the political consequences of nonpolitical media for public opinion would be trivial because of its scattered messages. The political content of entertainment programs, as Bennett and Iyengar (2010) put it, is "too sporadic to produce large-scale message effects of the sort described by the classic persuasion paradigm." It has never been a major research agenda in American political behavior scholarship. At most, the entertainment has attracted some research attention only when the contents are delivered in a form that academics are familiar with—in the form of soft "news", for instance (Baum 2011; Baumgartner and Morris 2006; Feldman and Young 2008; Prior 2003; Zaller 2003), and deemed as a force that simply dilutes news media effects (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013).

But when the entertainment media consistently offers positive and vivid exemplars of upward mobility, and when people spend much more time consuming such counter-narrative than the news narratives about declining mobility, it can powerfully distort perceptions of economic mobility. I demonstrate the rise of reality TV programs that have the rags-to-riches narrative in the American media landscape using detailed Nielsen ratings data, content analyses, and online entertainment media databases. I then present supporting evidence using three different national surveys, online survey experiments, and unique lab-in-the-field experiments conducted in suburban New Jersey and Pennsylvania. I also show that rags-to-riches programs, with their narrative emphasis on meritocracy, influence how people think about who is deserving of economic success. I find that rags-to-riches programs do affect people's attitudes toward the gap between the rich and the poor as well as their redistributive policy preferences, more so among Democrats. I supplement these experimental findings by displaying the aggregate trends in Americans' redistributive demand during the past three decades using the General Social Survey. Consistent with the experimental evidence, I show that Democrats who consume a lot of entertainment television have become more tolerant of income inequality and less supportive of government redistribution over time, compared to those who spend little to no time watching television. Last but not least, I present evidence that people's actual upward mobility experiences do not have significant impact on perceptions of upward mobility. Leveraging public opinion

polls over time, county-level data on actual and perceived level of upward mobility, and large-N national survey, I find that actual level of economic mobility hardly explains temporal, spatial, and individual variations in perceptions of economic mobility—a finding that lends additional credence to my main argument that the mass media is the primary source of information that shapes sociotropic perceptions of economic mobility.

This work contributes to the study of both political economy and political communication. Standard political economy models (Meltzer and Richard 1983) posit that the demand for income redistribution would increase as the income gap widens. However, defying such predictions, Americans have generally moved away from more egalitarian policy preferences as the income gap widens (Ashok, Kuziemko and Washington 2015; Kelly and Enns 2010; Kenworthy and McCall 2008). Scholars have repeatedly pointed to beliefs in the American Dream and the unique American political culture as potential answers to this puzzle. In a comprehensive paper that examines the link between economic mobility and preferences for redistribution, for instance, Alesina, Stantcheva and Teso (2018) write how the United States was "founded by poor immigrants, who were fleeing persecution and lack of freedom, and established a new living" and how they believed that "in the New World anyone could make it if only they worked hard enough." They do note that these beliefs are perpetuated and reinforced by the media: "The US media places strong focus on the American dream, opportunity, and on those successful people who have made it." But this work, similar to many other research in quantitative social science, avoids specifying what kind of media it refers to. Perhaps because of our general reluctance to consider the impact of mass media beyond the news, we have yet to consider the role that the rags-to-riches entertainment media plays in politics of redistribution.

Granted, the rags-to-riches entertainment media is not the only source of information that shapes people's beliefs in economic mobility. However, bringing the rags-to-riches media to the social science equation may offer fruitful directions for future research into the curious individual patterns of beliefs in economic mobility that have been left unanswered. For instance, perceptions that economic success is the result of meritocratic factors have been increasing (Mijs 2019), a pattern consistent with the rise of the rags-to-riches entertainment media over the past two decades. One group that has moved the most against income redistribution over time is African-Americans (Ashok, Kuziemko and Washington 2015), and African-Americans watch far more TV than any other racial group (Nielsen 2017).

This dissertation also contributes to scholarship in political communication. My evidence makes it clear that the entertainment media affect foundational beliefs in politics and carry important consequences for politics of redistribution. This work joins a long line of research in communication, which argues that entertainment media exerts as much if not more influence than the news media in shaping some politically relevant attitudes (i.e., Holbrook and Hill 2005; Morgan and Shanahan 2010). In the meantime, this work expands on existing scholarship that has documented the consequences of post-broadcast democracy (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Blekesaune, Elvestad and Aalberg 2010; Boczkowski and Mitchelstein 2013; Prior 2007; Van Aelst et al. 2017) by seriously considering the political content that is present in what Americans are watching instead of news.

1.1 Entertainment Media and the American Ethos

The idea that the entertainment media—or "unusual forms of political discourse"—affects public economic perceptions and hence influences politics may come as a surprise. Entertainment media is still viewed as "at best a distraction from politics and at worst a cause of active disengagement" (Delli Carpini 2014). It is deemed worthy of studying only when it affects ostensibly political variables, such as candidate evaluations, political knowledge, and voter turnout (e.g., Baum 2011; Baumgartner and Morris 2006; Feldman and Young 2008; Hollander 2005; Porter and Wood 2019; Xiong 2019).

Yet the idea that American entertainment media has a neoliberal bias and constantly promotes self-determination and individualism has been a frequent folk hypothesis as well as an ubiquitous academic claim in qualitative cultural studies. Indeed, a handful of prominent political scientists have also conjectured that the entertainment media—as a proxy for American political culture—is instrumental to Americans' economic conservatism. In a seminal book, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How*, Harold Lasswell writes about how "the individualism of bourgeois society" is "extolled in song and story from the very beginning of consciousness" (1936, p. 30), noting that then-contemporary Hollywood films ranging from *Morning Glory* (1933) to *Footlight Parade* (1933) hammer messages of upward mobility into citizens' brains. Similarly, in explaining the paradox of why most low-income African Americans believe they can still achieve the American Dream, Hochschild (1996, p. 136) claims that mass media might account for this "astonishing" optimism. She writes how "television is the medium most devoted to portraying the attractions and ignoring the dark side of the American dream," proclaiming that "shows with black male leads

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in particular emphasize...individualism...[and] upward social mobility." It is often unnoticed that these political scientists are not referring to the news media when they recount how the idea of upward economic mobility is enshrined in mass media. Hollywood films and "shows with black male leads" are clearly elements of the entertainment media that dominate Americans' daily lives.

Despite these exceptions, entertainment media has largely remained peripheral to the empirical study of politics. These "lowbrow" media tastes have been looked down upon, despite their outsized influence in American community life. Critiquing this marginalization, Dorzweiler (2017) writes that many scholars—ranging from Harold Lasswell to the key thinkers of the Frankfurt School—argued that popular culture is political, significantly affecting how average citizens understand their political environment. The gargantuan consumption of nonpolitical media has sparked debates about whether the American public is sufficiently informed, shifting the disciplinary focus to how people make political decisions given limited political information. Nonpolitical media content is simply treated with suspicion and worry. In his magnum opus *The American Commonwealth*, for instance, Bryce (1889, p. 776) voices his concern for the "profusion of new frothy or highly spiced fiction offered at five pence or ten pence a volume" that has spoiled the public's intellectual palate. One can only imagine what Bryce—or many other scholars subject to the same elite bias— would say about contemporary America, where a typical citizen spends nearly as much time watching TV as working on any given day (American Time Use Survey 2015).

More than a century later, the tradition of overlooking entertainment media still dominates the ivory tower. Despite immense changes in the media environment, social scientists' focus on news has remained intact. The most prominent works of political communication in recent years tellingly confirm a focus on the traditionally defined "political" aspect. Scholars have richly documented the political consequences of dwindling news audiences (Prior 2007), partisan media consumption (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Levendusky 2013), the nationalization of local news media (Hopkins 2018), and political discussions on social media (Settle 2018), among other considerations. The farthest afield that academics have looked seems to be the realm of soft news. News content delivered in entertaining forms is known to shape citizens' policy attitudes and affect the level and nature of political knowledge (e.g., Baum 2011).

But even when a handful of social scientists acknowledge the political relevance and importance of the entertainment media, they express discomfort with doing so. In reviewing the political effects of soft news, for instance, Susan Herbst (2006) writes that "we

must... most difficult of all, try to accept unusual forms of political discourse as important ones ... No matter how repulsive, inaccurate, or banal, we need to take it as seriously as other more respectable 'stimuli' in trying to understand public opinion." Her urge is long overdue. But it also shows us how "difficult" it is for political scientists to take nonpolitical media seriously. Many of us find that it feels more natural to study and write about the rise of the Fox News or the fake news than *MasterChef* or *So You Think You Can Dance*.

In light of glaring behavioral evidence that most Americans tune out the news (Bakshy, Messing and Adamic 2015), I argue that we must pay attention to the political content that is present in what Americans are watching instead. Not only has the entertainment media repeatedly been shown to powerfully cultivate citizens' deep-seated values (Morgan and Shanahan 1991), it exerts powerful political influence precisely because citizens are caught off guard. People typically consume information on contentious political issues through their existing partisan perceptual lenses. They resist counter-attitudinal political information with motivated reasoning or assimilate it in a biased way. But, while sitting on the couch after a long day of work, Americans are constantly exposed to ubiquitous stories of ordinary Americans using powerful vocals, mesmerizing dance moves, or some other random talent to compete for and receive clear economic gains. There is less room for counter-argument with such a narrative. As Norton (1993) rightly notes in *Republic of Signs*, "ideas are most powerful not when they impose practices upon us but when we take them for granted, not when their primacy is aggressively asserted but when they go unquestioned."

A growing body of causal evidence in economics finds that entertainment media in India promotes more progressive views about the role of women (Jensen and Oster 2009), a soap opera increases rates of divorce and lowers levels of fertility in Brazil (Chong and Ferrara 2009; 2012), and exposure to MTV's reality program, *16 and Pregnant*, decreases rates of teen childbearing (Kearney and Levine 2015). The contents of entertainment media can be "a very powerful mechanism driving the effect of media on important social outcomes" (Kearney and Levine 2015, p. 3601), yet political scientists have largely overlooked the intriguing interplay between entertainment media and politics. The state of the literature is such that the phrase "popular culture" has appeared only 12 times in the full text of any article published in *American Political Science Review* since 1906 (Dorzweiler 2017, p. 139).

Considering that economic perceptions have always been central to the study of politics, it is no longer tenable to ignore whole categories of entertainment media programs that

affect perceptions of economic mobility. Rather than conforming with the "time-honored tradition to write on the distinctiveness of American institutions—such as an "open" frontier, early universal education, the absence of a feudal past, and the political weakness of labor—in shaping the ideology of the American Dream" (McCall 2013, p. 56), I offer here empirical research on the production of a public discourse of upward mobility, focusing on the narratives produced by the entertainment media in a nation where an average household watches around 8 hours of television *per day* (Madrigal 2018). The palpable reality of post-broadcast democracy—that many Americans choose to opt out of news—and puzzling beliefs in upward mobility in the age of inequality have not been studied together. My aim here is to evince the link between the two and to underscore that the zeitgeist of America cannot be fully understood without studying what Americans nonchalantly choose to watch everyday.

1.2   A Look Ahead

I begin in Chapter 2 by articulating that the focus of the dissertation is collective perceptions of economic mobility, which differs from the most common approach adopted by economists and sociologists who focus on people's actual economic mobility experiences. I bring in the long strand of political psychology scholarship which finds that citizens' perceptions about collectives, often dubbed as sociotropic perceptions, play a central role in shaping political attitudes (Feldman 1984; Kinder and Kiewiet 1981; Weatherford 1983). I suggest that for linking economic mobility to political attitudes, perceptions, not the statistical reality, of economic mobility available for generalized others are the most relevant.

I then turn to the question of what shapes this sociotropic perceptions of economic mobility, and introduce the main theoretical framework—what I refer to as the exemplar-based theory of the American Dream. I propose that individual variations in perceptions of economic mobility are a function of exposure to mass media, a contention that is not different from existing research that finds how collective-level economic perceptions primarily originate from the mass media (i.e., Weatherford 1983; Mutz 1998). However, I challenge the current scholarship that typically treats the news media to be the only source of information that contains politically relevant exemplars. I revisit what the "mass media" consists of: the news *and* entertainment media.

I argue that the existing focus on the news media is problematic for two primary reasons. The first is the existence of a counter-narrative from the entertainment media. Given the

economic realities of rising income inequality and declining mobility, combined with the news media's well-known tendency to overreport negative economic information, the news media typically offer information about *downward* economic mobility. In the meantime, the entertainment media tend to offer the opposite information; in between a myriad of entertainment channels, what people see are dramatic and vivid exemplars of upwardly mobile Americans.

When the two types of media pushing perceptions of economic mobility in opposite directions, the net impact of media exposure depends on the composition of overall media consumption. Here, I shed light on the plain-sight reality of post-broadcast democracy in which most Americans choose to avoid news and spend an enormous amount of time watching entertainment media instead. In other words, this imbalance in news vs. entertainment media consumption is the default for most Americans, and this predicts their upwardly distorted perceptions of economic mobility.

I then elucidate in more detail which aspects of entertainment media would affect the beliefs in the American Dream to extract empirically falsifiable hypotheses. I propose that three components—the presence of ordinary people, visible financial gains, and narrative emphasis on meritocracy—constitute a "rags-to-riches" narrative that dominates the widely popular reality TV programs. I then use detailed Nielsen ratings data, a comprehensive online entertainment media database, and original content analyses to systematically demonstrate that reality TV programs that have the rags-to-riches narrative have become a ubiquitous part of the American media landscape over the last two decades.

With this foundation laid, in Chapter 3, I empirically test the hypothesis about whether and to what extent exposure to rags-to-riches entertainment media affects perceptions of economic mobility. This is rather a difficult test because national election surveys rarely ask much about people's exposure to entertainment media. To address this challenge, I turn to an original national survey that I designed, using two other nationally representative surveys that have a limited battery of entertainment media questions as robustness checks. Consistent with my hypothesis, the results reveal that exposure to rags-to-riches entertainment media plays an important role in shaping perceptions of economic mobility. For heavy viewers who regularly watch 6 or more programs like *America's Got Talent*, for instance, this effect is as powerful as that of having immigrant parents.

Leveraging the fact that the survey responses are geocoded, I merge Gini coefficients and actual county-level intergenerational mobility rates from Raj Chetty and his colleagues (Chetty et al. 2017a) to assess the extent to which these spatial economic contexts matter.

In multivariate models with different sets of covariates, I find no evidence that county-level economic contexts matter for perceptions of economic mobility. There is a vibrant and excellent strand of recent scholarship that addresses how geography and space matter for political attitudes in America (Enos 2017; Sands 2017), but unlike immigrants on the subway or homeless people on the street, it is unclear how people "witness" economic mobility in everyday life, given that the trajectories of upward economic mobility tend to span generations. Furthermore, it is not clear to what extent people generalize stories of upward mobility from their community into a national pattern. The null effects of county-level economic contexts are consistent with the existing theory that people "morselize" their private experiences and separate them from public concerns (Lane 1962).

Chapter 3 continues the empirical pursuit of the effects of rags-to-riches TV programs by showing that these effects are causal through a series of experiments. Like most experimental research in political science, I recruited some respondents online. To obtain additional respondents offline, most studies recruit undergraduate students to a media laboratory on campus. In order to recruit nonstudent samples that would be balanced in terms of partisan identification—which is important when we are interested in studying perceptions of economic mobility—I conducted lab-in-the-field experiments in suburban Pennsylvania using a mobile media laboratory. In both settings, I find evidence that exposure to rags-to-riches TV programs, even just for a short period of time, does promote more optimistic perceptions of economic mobility. These effects are larger among Republicans, who are already more likely to believe in conservative ideology.

Building on these observational and experimental results, Chapter 4 turns to directly examining the effects of the meritocratic element in rags-to-riches programs. There are different ways to "get ahead," but implicit in the conventional American Dream narrative is an assumption that people get ahead by working hard, not by sheer luck with little talent or effort. Disentangling the effect of the meritocratic narrative is important because it matters for people's attitudes toward income inequality and redistribution. By conducting additional lab-in-the-field experiments, this time manipulating only the presence of the meritocratic narrative, I find that exposure to rags-to-riches programs increases people's tolerance of income inequality and decreases demand for government-led redistribution. I find this effect particularly among Democrats, whose policy attitudes shift the most after exposure to merit-based rags-to-riches TV programs.

The chapter next moves outside the laboratory, displaying aggregate trends in redistributive demand during the past three decades in the real world. Using the General Social

Survey, I show that Democrats who consume a lot of entertainment television have become more tolerant of income inequality and less supportive of government redistribution over time, compared to those who spend little to no time watching television. This analysis is more suggestive than definitive; however, it does corroborate the evidence provided by the experiments.

Chapter 5 summarizes the main findings of the dissertation and articulates the scope conditions and limitations. Acknowledging that the mass media is not the only source—albeit primary, as I have argued throughout—of information that matters for perceptions of economic mobility, I address the commonly-assumed hypothesis in political economy scholarship is that personal economic experiences play an important role in shaping the beliefs in the American Dream. Using multiple datasets, however, I find no conclusive evidence that whether people are living in times or areas of declining economic mobility matters for perceptions of economic mobility. Nor do individual factors—such as having a higher education—explain why some Americans are more optimistic than others. This lack of explanatory power lends more credence to my argument that it is the media that primarily matters for perceptions of economic mobility.

Taken together, the evidence I have amassed shows that when a dazzling array of entertainment media constantly sells a narrative of upward economic mobility in our living rooms, it serves as a heavy counterweight to public understanding of economic reality and affect their redistributive policy preferences. In the conclusion, I lay out two major implications of my research. Scholars of political economy have attempted to solve the puzzle of why public preferences for redistribution have not shifted much despite rising disparities in wealth, often resorting to the vague answer of "American political culture." My evidence suggests that individual variations in consumption of nonpolitical media can shed light on which aspect of American culture affects beliefs in upward mobility.

By taking the entertainment media seriously, my research also pushes the boundaries of political communication research. With the continuing decline in news audiences and the simple fact that there will be even more entertainment options in the future, public opinion researchers would be doing the discipline a serious disservice by continuing to ignore the media content Americans watch the most.

<div align="center">***</div>

In the Gilded Age of the late 19th century, which was characterized by robber barons with extreme wealth, a rising income gap, and a struggling middle class, Americans turned to the entertainment media of that time—novels. To the disappointment of many academics, they did not turn to literary masterpieces like *Moby Dick* for comfort. They read *Ragged Dick* and a hundred other Horatio Alger works that all had similar titles—such as *Strive and Succeed*, *Do and Dare*, or *Brave and Bold*—and the same narrative about hard-working protagonists who overcome formidable odds to rise.[2]

Since then, the media environment has gone through unprecedented transformation. Americans no longer spend much time reading novels. Yet current social science research that aims to explain public opinion in the new Gilded Age is missing the role of the mass media of our time, one as popular as those Alger novels that left a profound impact on American culture.

Americans today are browsing through hundreds of channels saturated with rags-to-riches entertainment programs and have elected the former host of *The Apprentice* as the head of state. In this era of choice, entertainment media content, as lowbrow as it may seem, is what appeals to citizens; the political consequences, however, are anything but trivial.

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[2]These widely popular stories of the time, dubbed as "the magic formula" for sales, reinforced "the cherished myth that sanctioned capitalism and upheld the nation's dominant value system" (Kilmer 1996, p. 10).

Chapter 2

The Nature and Origins of Perceptions of Upward Mobility

> "Most of us can't rush around, talking to everyone, know all the cities of the world, we haven't time, money or that many friends. The things you're looking for, Montag, are in the world, but the only way the average chap will ever see ninety-nine per cent of them is in a book."
> —From *Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury (1953)

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 that Americans lack class consciousness and tolerate wealth disparities, but we rarely attempt to explain variations in these sentiments. We are told that such beliefs are just part of the American national ethos, and we receive confirmatory evidence every day. From biographies and commencement speeches to TED talks and TV advertisements, the mosaic of American culture constantly features those who have succeeded against the odds.

The problem is that "culture" encompasses the entire range of values, institutions, and norms that defines a way of life. Many social scientists have therefore ended up in a paradoxical position: They agree that beliefs in economic mobility are central to understanding the politics of redistribution, but have had limited success in amassing empirical evidence to determine which aspect of American culture affects beliefs about economic mobility or the extent of that influence. Time after time, we avoid using beliefs in economic mobility as the key outcome variable in the empirical models and instead refer to the particularities of the American history. Yet whether it is the Protestant work ethics or the waves of frontier settlement, these path-dependent historical factors, useful constants in our theories of American political culture, cannot explain why many Americans still believe in the

prospect of upward mobility despite the vastly changed economic reality, nor why some believe in it more than others.

In this chapter, I offer an exemplar-based theory of the American Dream, suggesting that individual variations in perceptions of economic mobility are a function of exposure to mass media and exemplars it offers. My theory borrows insights from a long strand of public opinion research that has established that collective-level economic perceptions originate from the mass media (i.e., Weatherford 1983; Mutz 1998). Yet existing theories about national economic perceptions often have strikingly narrow understandings of what constitutes the "politically relevant" information that shapes such perceptions. In other words, the current scholarship typically equates information with only the "news media."

When studying perceptions of economic mobility, this traditional approach that treats the news media as the main source of information is problematic for two primary reasons. The first is the existence of a counter-narrative from the entertainment media. Given the worsening economic realities of the New Gilded Age and the news media's well-known tendency to over-report negative economic information, the news media typically offers information about *downward* economic mobility. In the meantime, the entertainment media—whose purpose is to "entertain" people— tends to offer is vivid exemplars of people who achieve *upward* economic mobility.

With the two types of media are pushing perceptions of economic mobility in opposite directions, the net impact of media exposure depends on the composition of the overall media consumption. My contention is that the effect of the counter-narrative from the entertainment media is powerful, given the plain-sight reality of post-broadcast democracy: today, most Americans choose to avoid news and spend an enormous amount of time watching entertainment media instead. This imbalance in news vs. entertainment media consumption is the default state for most Americans, and it predicts their upwardly distorted perceptions of economic mobility.

While this exemplar-based theory of the American Dream makes intuitive sense, we need to extract empirically falsifiable hypotheses that specify which type of entertainment media matters for perceptions of upward economic mobility. Rather than leaving "entertainment media" unarticulated, I propose that three components—the presence of ordinary people, visible financial gains, and narrative emphasis on meritocracy—constitute a "rags-to-riches" narrative that dominates parts of the entertainment media. I then use detailed Nielsen ratings data, a comprehensive online entertainment media database, and original content analyses to systematically demonstrate that rags-to-riches programs have become

a ubiquitous part of the American media landscape over the last two decades.

2.1   Conceptualizing the American Dream

Before introducing the theory of media effects and developing the main argument, we must first elaborate upon the key concept. The core focus of this dissertation is *perceptions* of, or *beliefs* in, economic mobility—widely referred to as the American Dream in popular discourse—that differ from people's actual experiences with economic mobility. When Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels used high economic mobility to explain America's absence of proletariat revolution (Marx and Engles 1942), they were referring to aggregate patterns in Americans' personal economic mobility experiences. In the field of political economy, an empirical study of economic mobility utilizes objective data on people's economic mobility experiences and the paths of people's income distributions across generations.[1]

These personal economic experiences are important, and there is now an emerging body of economics research that examines the factors that drive differential rates of intergenerational mobility rates across the United States. I focus instead on perceptions of economic mobility because I am interested in understanding its political consequences—in particular, its imprint on mass political attitudes and policy preferences. Many studies in political economy use economic mobility to predict a potpourri of political outcomes ranging from democratic stability (Blau and Duncan 1967) to wealth redistribution (Benabou and Ok 2001). Such studies build upon two tacit assumptions: 1) people can accurately assess their own economic mobility trajectory—usually over a long period of time, such as across generations—and 2) people can translate such assessments into political attitudes and behaviors. Unfortunately, even putting aside the fact that many Americans consider it "radical" to reveal their income level to their children (Lieber 2015), correctly assessing the trajectory of their own economic mobility is simply impossible for most people. In the absence of perfect information on economic mobility, people use perceptions to form their attitudes and preferences.[2]

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[1]Raj Chetty and his colleagues (2017), for instance, used two measures of the inflation-adjusted income of parents and children when both groups were approximately 30 years old using the Current Population Surveys (CPS).Typically, calculating absolute intergenerational mobility rates is a challenge due to the lack of historical panel data. But Chetty and his colleagues cleverly used the joint distribution of parent and child income ranks combining the CPS with de-identified federal income tax returns data. A large positive change in income differences indicates a high level of economic mobility.

[2]As Kelley and Kelley (2009) aptly write, what matters when forming political attitudes is "not so much the objective fact of mobility as the subjective reaction to it." In one of the few studies that examine the effects of both objective and subjective economic mobility on political attitudes, Gugushvili (2016) finds that only

More importantly, I focus throughout this dissertation on perceptions of economic mobility as applied to collectives. The perception that one has a feasible chance to move up the economic ladder is fundamentally different from believing that upward economic mobility is possible for everyone else: the two do not necessarily run in tandem. Consider a typical narrative from politicians with working-class backgrounds. In a powerful speech delivered at the 2012 Democratic National Convention, Michelle Obama stated that her husband "knows the American Dream because he's lived it." But that did not mean Barack Obama thought everyone else was living it. Indeed, he thought most Americans were not, which is why "he wants everyone in this country to have that same opportunity, no matter who we are or where we're from or what we look like or who we love" (Obama 2012). Or imagine a boy from a middle-class family who was a competitive bowler in Port Clinton, Ohio; educated at Oxford and Yale; and later became a renowned professor at Harvard University. Having risen from modest means, would he believe that upward mobility is likewise possible for others from similar backgrounds? The answer is no, as the telling subtitle of Robert Putnam's best-selling book—*Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*—indicates.

The other side of the story, the experiences of those who are "downwardly mobile," is similar. Even when people have lost jobs due to macro forces far beyond their control, their own downward economic mobility has not translated into beliefs that the American Dream has become unattainable for others. In her focused interviews of blue-collar citizens who lost jobs due to downsizing, plant closings, and any other structural changes in a post-industrial economy, anthropologist Katherine S. Newman (1988) finds that people wondered about "the real reason" for their job losses, asking themselves what they did wrong and drowning in a swamp of self-blame. Newman's interviewees noted few explanations for the economic distress they suffered other than their own lack of competence (See also Mutz 1998, Chapters 3-4).

Human psychology explains the surprising lack of linkage between individual experiences and political attitudes. Individuals are well-aware of the idiosyncratic nature of their own life trajectory and tend to find internal reasons to make sense of their successes and failures. One's upward economic mobility experience may be explained in terms of individual merits, talents, and luck; losing one's job may be attributed to special circumstances such as a sudden illness or accident (Miller and Ross 1975; Kelley 1967). This bias toward internal attribution regarding one's personal experience has been repeatedly observed by

perceived economic mobility has predictive power in explaining people's attitudes toward income inequality. See also (Duru-Bellat and Kieffer 2008; Merllié 2008).

many psychologists and is pervasive in our daily lives (e.g., Brody and Sniderman 1977; Jellison and Green 1981; Langer 1975; Lerner and Miller 1978).

The attributional tendency to compartmentalize one's own economic experiences is particularly important for the study of politics. Encountering information that nationwide student-debt delinquency is concentrated in low-income areas, citizens rarely claim that all poor students in debt are irresponsible. They are more likely to wonder about what led to skyrocketing college tuition or to blame the government's meager attempt to subsidize tuition. Simply put, people explain perceived economic patterns in broader collectives in terms of external factors, precisely because people "morselize" their private experiences and separate them from public concerns (Lane 1962).

Citizens' perceptions about collectives—dubbed sociotropic perceptions as opposed to egotropic perceptions—play a central role in shaping political attitudes (Kinder and Kiewiet 1981; Feldman 1984; Weatherford 1983). One of the most well-known empirical regularities in political behavioral research is that voters choose to support or oppose the incumbent party based more on their retrospective assessments of the national economy than on their pocketbooks (Gomez and Wilson 2001; Holbrook and Garand 1996; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2007; Nadeau and Lewis-Beck 2001). Economic policy preferences in areas ranging from unemployment (Mutz 1998) and welfare (Gilens 2009) to trade (Mansfield and Mutz 2009) also have been found to stem from sociotropic perceptions. Building on this rich scholarship, throughout the dissertation, my theory and argument about the American Dream refers to sociotropic perceptions of economic mobility.

2.2   The Exemplar-Based Theory of the American Dream

I argue that understanding sociotropic perceptions of upward economic mobility requires dissecting the information that people regularly consume and the types of exemplars it provides. This argument builds on, and is heavily indebted, to public opinion scholarship that identifies mass media as the primary driver of sociotropic economic perceptions (De Boef and Kellstedt 2004a; Mutz 1998; Nadeau et al. 1999; Soroka 2014; Boomgaarden et al. 2011; De Boef and Kellstedt 2004b; Hetherington 1996; Holbrook and Garand 1996).

"Mass media" refers to any means of communication technology that is designed to reach a large audience. While discussion of the fragmented nature of the media audience is omnipresent, I do not here elaborate upon the exact mass of the people that would be deemed to qualify as as large audience. Definitions of mass media have been fluid, in sync

with the ever-changing media environment (Graber and Dunaway 2017). For a parsimonious theory-building, I follow the conventional conceptualization in which the news and entertainment media are the two main building blocks of the mass media system. Next, I will review the extent to which these two types of media are relevant to understanding the beliefs in the American Dream, paying particular attention to the types of accessible exemplars each provides.

The Limited Effects of the News Media

In political behavior scholarship, the news media has understandably been considered the primary source of information about the collectives. The grim economic reality of the U.S.-China trade war, for instance, is unlikely to be covered in depth by the entertainment media. Some scholars have expressed doubts about whether the entertainment media, with its scattered political messages, can influence political attitudes (see Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Bennett and Iyengar 2010). Even when scholars acknowledge that the entertainment media has become "major suppliers of political images," they typically refer to late night shows or talk shows that have a dose of explicitly political information (Baum 2011; Graber and Dunaway 2017).

But when we try to link mass media to sociotropic perceptions of economic mobility, the traditional approach that treats the news media as the main source of information falls short. According to the previous research on the factors that determine the magnitude of the news media effects (i.e., Anderson 2007; Duch et al. 2000; Evans and Andersen 2006), one important condition appears to that an extensive amount of information that is repeatedly available. Studies of political campaign effects, for instance, have found that the persuasion effects of short-term political advertisements or a one-time government report are typically short-lived, decaying in a few days (Gerber et al. 2011; Barabas and Jerit 2010). People express opinions based on information that remains accessible in their memory, so only communication that is present over a long period of time can produce a sizable effect (Hill et al. 2013).

Another condition conducive to a strong media effect is the "high burden of evidence" that inhibits partisan motivated reasoning (Parker-Stephen 2013). It has been documented that partisans interpret economic news selectively and interpret the same set of economic facts differently (Gaines et al. 2007; Gerber and Huber 2009; Jerit and Barabas 2012; Lebo and Cassino 2007). But as Parker-Stephen (2013) addresses, the information environment imposes a different burden of evidence. When economic news is overwhelmingly negative,

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for instance, differing interpretations are less likely to emerge: regardless of their partisan dispositions, people would be hard-pressed to incorporate such news to update their priors about the state of national economy.

Based on these existing theories of political communication, we expect to see strong news media effects on public perceptions of economic mobility. First, consider the volume and duration of the relevant news coverage. With an "apocalyptic" level of economic inequality in America and markedly reduced intergenerational economic mobility (Chetty et al. 2017a), media coverage of the cracks in the American Dream—the sociopolitical structural threats and barriers to getting ahead in America—has been increasing for the last two decades (i.e., Champlin and Knoedler 2008; Diermeier et al. 2017; McCall 2013; Kendall 2011).

Second, consider the burden of evidence. Consistent with the news media's well-known bias for negativity,[3] news media narratives about economic mobility—regardless of the outlet—mostly focus on stories of *downward* mobility.[4] Media reports on the outsourcing of U.S. jobs and globalization, for instance, are typically followed by gloomy reports about the effects of sudden unemployment on blue-collar workers (Perrucci and Wysong 2008). The media's framing of middle-class economic anxieties intensified in the 2010s as income inequality grew (Kendall 2011, p. 189). In their comprehensive text analysis of weekly news coverage from 1999 through 2013, Eshbaugh-Soha and McGauvran (2018) also find that most news coverage of unemployment and income inequality is negative in daily newspapers, network broadcasts, cable news channels, and online news sites. Most importantly, media coverage of economic mobility and income inequality has been negative *regardless* of the news media's partisan slant. In our hyperpolarized politics, economic mobility is, surprisingly, one of very few songs that the partisan chorus sings in harmony. The American dream is "dead" according to Donald Trump and "has become a nightmare" according to Bernie Sanders (Sanders 2016; Trump 2015).

All told, it is reasonable to conclude that today's political information environment offers a very clear signal that upward economic mobility has become much more difficult for most Americans. Therefore, as we try to understand why Americans' sociotropic

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[3]Studies of economic news coverage generally find that the overwhelming majority of economic stories are negative and that the quantity of economic news stories increases during economic downturns (i.e., Blood and Phillips 1995; Fogarty 2005; Nadeau and Lewis-Beck 2001; Sanders and Gavin 2004). This tendency has been confirmed through automated text analyses of a much larger corpus (Hopkins, Kim and Kim 2017).

[4]There is a large difference in news coverage of job gains and losses, with more than 10 times as many articles on job loss than on job creation, even when the actual unemployment rate is falling (Heinz and Swinnen 2015; see also Soroka 2006).

perceptions of economic mobility remain *optimistic*, the conventional answer—the news media—lacks explanatory power. If anything, the heightened news media attention should have resulted in more pessimistic beliefs about economic mobility.

The Overlooked Effects of the Entertainment Media

If not the news media, then what kind of mass media would be an important source of information that promotes beliefs in upward economic mobility? One overlooked possibility is what is left in the media system once we take out the news: the entertainment media. Indeed, it is not difficult to notice that there is a proliferation of stories about upward economic mobility once we stay away from the news. Scenes of everyday Americans competing and getting clear economic gains—with their crisp apple pie, powerful vocals, mesmerizing dance moves, or a new business idea for a smiley-face sponge—appear everywhere.

This counter-narrative about the state of economic mobility in America is essential but overlooked in the existing scholarship. Imagine that the half of the nation simply stops consuming a dose of news about, for instance, how the American dream is becoming an American nightmare, and watches something completely different and irrelevant—say, *The Big Bang Theory*, a popular sitcom about two social challenged science geniuses. In this scenario, the news media effects will be much smaller that if the whole nation were consuming news. This is the same reasoning elaborated in *Changing Minds or Changing Channels?* (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013). The authors establish that partisan media effects on issue polarization are much more limited than assumed, because people simply tune out of news altogether. In other words, the presence of an audience that primarily consumes entertainment media *dilutes* the partisan media effects on political issue attitudes. Their argument is that people did not change minds, but just their channels—from news to entertainment.

But what Arceneaux and Johnson (2013) overlooked is that when Americans choose to avoid news and watch something more entertaining, they have been watching Kelly Clarkson, a former cocktail waitress, win the *American Idol* and aspiring entrepreneurs convince the top-notch investors on *Shark Tank*. Not only these exemplars are vivid and portrayed in a dramatic way, they are frequently activated and highly accessible because Americans choose to spend an astounding amount of time on watching entertainment media everyday. In sync with the exemplification theory—that is, some exemplars have a disproportionate

influence on perceptions conditional on the availability of heuristics—(Busselle 2001; Zill-man and Brosius 2000), I contend that the effects of entertainment media would go beyond simply diluting the news media effects. Indeed, my argument is that it can *distort* economic perceptions: entertainment media consumption leads to more upwardly biased perceptions of economic mobility. By changing their channels, people might well be also changing their minds.

The key underlying argument of the exemplar-based theory of the American Dream—that entertainment media matters for political attitudes—has not resonated strongly among researchers and has remained peripheral to the empirical study of politics. These "low-brow" media tastes have been simply looked down upon (Dorzweiler 2017), and nonpolit-ical media content—despite its outsized influence on American community life—has been treated as an unfortunate distraction.

But it is worth taking a step back and revisiting the basic premise that content that is broadly consumed by people across different demographics has the power to shape public opinion. In the broadcast era—when most Americans tuned into one of three evening news shows every day and Walter Cronkite was a household name—the centrality of the news media as the nation's main information source was indisputable, so it was the research focus (Williams and Delli Carpini 2011).[5]

With the explosion of media choice, however, most Americans consume entertainment media daily (i.e. Arceneaux and Johnson 2013). Nevertheless, this tectonic shift in the media environment barely changed the focus of research. Although excellent studies have documented the consequences of the changing media environment for ostensibly political outcomes, ranging from polarization (Levendusky 2013) to inequality in political knowl-edge and participation (Prior 2007), its effects on the more "foundational" aspects of Amer-ican politics—such as beliefs about economic mobility—have been grievously understud-ied (Delli Carpini 2014). Indeed, in one of the few recent studies that sheds light on how entertainment programs affect political beliefs, Jones and Paris (2018) describe this lack of emphasis as "striking" given that "by any metric, be it preferences, money, or audience, and across modalities, consumption of fiction and entertainment dwarfs that of news and other nonfiction media."

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[5]Williams and Delli Carpini (2011) aptly note: "mainstream political communication research was built on an implicit acceptance of the media regime in place at the time. In turn, the research produced by it, focused as it was on news rather than entertainment, served to further reinforce and naturalize this regime." (p.65)

Such oversight is unfortunate, particularly because there already are theories that expect the entertainment media to have at least as much influence as the news media in shaping politically relevant attitudes. Decades of work on cultivation theory suggest that many of our attitudes on political issues—ranging from crime to social welfare—arise from exposure to entertainment television (i.e., Holbert et al. 2005; Holbrook and Hill 2005; Kim and Vishak 2008; Morgan and Shanahan 2010). Examples from televised entertainment content are more vivid and accessible than real-world examples (Busselle and Bilandzic 2008; Cho, Shen and Wilson 2014), and their narrative presentations of information lead viewers to experience "transportation" through cognitive and emotional involvement (Gerrig 1993; Green and Brock 2002; Moyer-Gusé and Nabi 2010). This narrative persuasion in entertainment media is much more powerful than rhetorical persuasion through political messages because people are less likely to counterargue and critically scrutinize them (Appel and Richter 2007). Several experimental studies have shown that nonpolitical media influence real-world political attitudes (i.e., Jones and Paris 2018; Mulligan and Habel 2011; Mutz and Nir 2010).

Late-night comedy shows or soft news, for instance, are known to affect candidate evaluations, political efficacy, political knowledge, and foreign policy preferences (i.e. Baum 2011; Baumgartner and Morris 2006; Feldman and Young 2008; Hollander 2005; Parkin 2010). This may come as no surprise because this content, while delivered in a different form than traditional news, still resembles news, featuring politicians or referring to real-world political information. But scholars have also looked at the political impact of movies and prime-time dramas. They have explored whether the movie *The Candidate* generated political cynicism (Sigelman and Sigelman 1974), *The Day After* influenced public attitudes toward nuclear war (French and Van Hoorn 1986), or the mini-series *Amerika* changed people's attitudes toward the Soviet Union (Lenart and McGraw 1989), to name just a few.

Exposure to prime-time dramas, ranging from *The West Wing* to crime dramas such as *NCIS*, have also been shown to correlate with public attitudes toward the presidency (Holbert et al. 2005), the death penalty and same-sex marriage (Slater, Rouner and Long 2006), women's rights (Holbert, Shah and Kwak 2003), and many other issues (see also Nabi 2002; Dahlstrom 2010; Kim and Vishak 2008; Morgan, Movius and Cody 2009; Zhang and Min 2013). Discussion of the effects of entertainment media on shaping ideas about world politics has long existed as well (i.e., Daniel III and Musgrave 2017; McNamara 2015). Daniel III and Musgrave (2017), for instance, note that the tradition of regarding

popular culture as a distraction has led "mainstream scholars both to exaggerate the influence of canonical academic sources and to ignore the potentially great influence of popular culture on mass and elite audiences" (p. 503).

There is now a growing body of quasi-experimental evidence that finds that entertainment media is powerful enough to change people's behaviors, such as the effect of soap operas on fertility and divorce rates in Brazil (La Ferrara, Chong and Duryea 2012) or the effect of cable TV entertainment programs on pregnancy rates and school enrollment rates in India (Jensen and Oster 2009). To put it bluntly, if exposure to a popular soap opera affects as difficult a life decision as getting divorced, it is hard not to believe that entertainment media can affect perceptions of economic mobility.

2.3 Identifying the Rise of the "Rags-to-Riches" Media

Notwithstanding the intuitively compelling hypothesis that the entertainment media constantly promotes the stories of upward economic mobility, assessing that claim empirically has been a methodological challenge. First, the term "entertainment media" is broad, encompassing a diverse array of media content that promotes various types of narratives. Even when a particular TV show contains a story about the upward economic mobility of a deserving middle-class family, for instance, other narratives—whether detailing a family conflict or a complicated romance—are included, making it unclear which narrative is dominant.[6] In other words, because different programs (or different episodes of the same program), typically contain various and sometimes competing types of messages and plot lines, their net impact has been unclear. This problem has long plagued research on the effect of nonpolitical media. This difficulty with estimation does not mean media impacts do not exist, but it may explain why theories of entertainment media effects have been a staple of qualitative research or why most quantitative evidence presents the effects of a single or a few similarly themed episodes.

More compelling and influential media effects research has provided a general framework for thinking about the influence of certain types of media content. Instead of a "one-off" approach, scholars have focused on how violence, gender roles and racial stereotyping,

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[6]This is less of a concern when researchers study the impact of the Fox News cable channel, because all programs on that channel have a conservative bias. Hence, it is possible to estimate the media effect on, for instance, the town-level support for the Republican presidential candidate (DellaVigna and Kaplan 2007; see also Hopkins, Ladd et al. 2014). Adopting this approach is not necessarily feasible for studying the effect of entertainment media on individual-level perceptions.

and dystopian narratives, among others, are portrayed across different TV programs (Dines and Humez 2003; Gerbner and Gross 1976; Holtzman and Sharpe 2014; Jones and Paris 2018; Mastro and Greenberg 2000). As Jones and Paris (2018) rightly note, focusing on the shared narrative across different contents offers us a more systematic way to study the effects of entertainment media and broaden the range of media content that can be empirically studied. The remaining challenge is to specify the necessary and sufficient conditions that define a given narrative or genre—a task I undertake next.

The Three Components of the Rags-to-Riches Media

I propose that the entertainment media that illustrates an ordinary person on a trajectory of upward economic mobility—what I term "rags-to-riches" programs—will shape viewers' beliefs in the American Dream due to their three distinctive common features.

First, they feature ordinary American citizens, not hired actors or celebrities. Successful entertainment content requires relatable characters and believable story lines, elements that even children can list (Clark 2012). 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 those who have a postsecondary education. These glorified everymen can serve as a social reference group and provide viewers with more relatable vicarious experiences (Papacharissi and Mendelson 2007; 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 for those who take part. The economic component is important because a general level of optimism towards life is conceptually different from holding an optimistic view that the United States is the land of economic opportunity.

Third, these shows tend to emphasize that economic outcomes are determined by hard work and merit, and they portray their beneficiaries as deserving. The notion of meritocracy is deeply embedded in the American Dream, and rags-to-riches programs tend to highlight people's economic hardships and challenges in order to lionize their later success. Contestants speak of how they never gave up on their dreams, even while holding a minimum-wage job, facing soaring medical bills, or rejection after rejection from investors. 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 a systematic study of their effects on perceptions of economic mobility. These three components that constitute the "rags-to-riches" narrative—ordinary Americans achieving economic benefits through hard work—has led me to focus on two particular nonfictional types of TV show: reality TV and game shows. 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 narratives across different TV programs, I focus on reality TV and game shows for their explicit touting and celebrating of ordinary individuals' economic successes. These types of entertainment media have been widely popular.

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

Reality TV and game shows that portray the stories of ordinary Americans achieving upward economic mobility have been a ratings juggernaut. There was an explosion of reality TV programming in the 2000s. Nielsen Media Research (2011) reports that reality programs were the dominant winners among primetime TV shows. Since the 2002-2003 season, for instance, reality shows "consistently captured the largest percentage of the audience watching the top 10 broadcast programs," up to 77% of total audience viewing in the 2007-2008 season. Reality television has many varieties, ranging from cooking shows and talent shows to adventure reality shows and dating shows, to name just a few. When asked, "Which of the following genres of reality TV shows do you typically watch?", only 27% of people said they did not typically watch reality TV shows (YouGov 2016). As of spring 2016, Nielsen estimated almost 100 million people typically watch at least one show in the reality genre (Nielsen 2017). Given the total population of Americans 18 years and older (246.84 million), this means that around 40% of American adults are regularly watching at least one type of reality show.

The supply side of the story is also consistent. With a fragmented audience, the cheaper production costs of reality TV shows featuring ordinary Americans make increasing economic sense. Commenting on the challenges of producing high-cost scripted shows, one media company executive predicted that 2017 would see a further decline of original scripted

series and hundreds of additional reality shows and docuseries featuring ordinary Americans. The distribution of cable TV shows in the 2014-2015 season, for instance, was dominated by reality shows at 66.6%, followed by drama (11.9%), comedy (11%), and other (10.5%) (The Ralph Bunche Center 2015). In a speech to the Television Critics Association, National Geographic Global Networks CEO Courtney Monroe pointed out that in 2015 alone, 409 scripted and 750 unscripted series (reality TV shows) aired during prime-time; roughly 350 of the reality shows were new series. This number only represents "reality TV shows to air on cable in primetime," meaning there are even more of these shows on the air. In a nutshell, Americans consume a lot of reality TV, and the size of that audience is not even comparable to the news audience.

Indeed, the popularity of rags-to-riches programs goes hand in hand with a massive increase in the number of reality TV and game shows in the overall media landscape, including programs on popular streaming services such as Netflix and Hulu. Figure 2.1 shows the growth in the relative share of reality TV and game shows in the media landscape; it uses all TV programs released between 1960 and 2017 (*N*=102,523) recorded in the media database *IMDb*.[7] Figure 2.1 shows a clear surge in the number of reality TV and game shows starting in early 2000; by around 2008, the proportion of these shows outnumbered that of dramas. This figure is consistent with many other statistics suggesting that 750 reality programs were aired on prime-time cable in a single year (VanDerWerff 2016) and that reality program viewership in popular streaming services has risen more than 100% within the past year (CNN 2018).[8]

To put their popularity in perspective, consider that Fox News attracts 2.24 million prime-time viewers; the seasonal average audiences for the popular rags-to-riches reality shows *America's Got Talent* and *The Voice* are approximately 16 and 10 million, respectively (Nielsen 2018). As of spring 2016, an estimated 100 million U.S. adults—four in 10 Americans—regularly watched at least one reality TV show (Nielsen 2017). In this high-choice media environment in which many tune out the news (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Flaxman, Goel and Rao 2016; Prior 2007), rags-to-riches entertainment shows represent an important source of information that may affect beliefs in upward economic mobility.

Before examining the impact of exposure to the rags-to-riches narrative, I first establish

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[7]This database contains information about programs' release years, their genres, and many other characteristics. Using release years means that a TV show that aired for more than one season will only be recorded once in this data.

[8]The other 2017 study finds that reality TV viewing is up 10.3% from one year ago on Hulu and up 28.3 on Netflix, making reality one of the highest-growth genres for the two services (Holloway 2017).

Figure 2.1: The Relative Share of Reality TV/Game Shows (1960-2017)
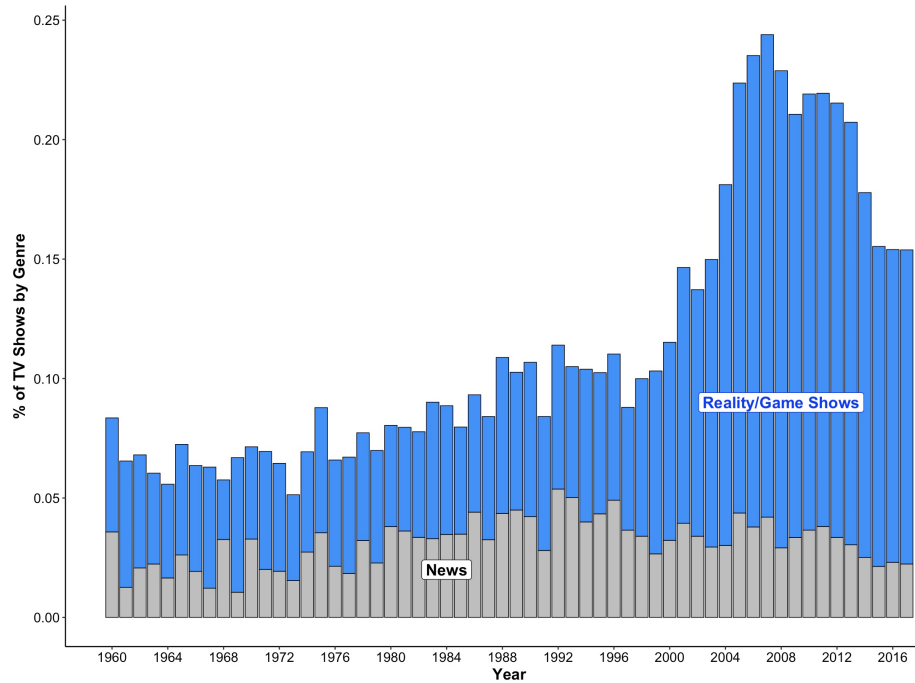
Note: I assessed 102,523 TV programs released between 1960 and 2017
using the Internet Movie Database (imdb.com), which typically lists up to
three relevant genres for each TV program. I calculated the average
proportion of each genre per year, and plotted the relative share of the two
genres (news and reality TV/game shows).

the commonality of this narrative. To do so, 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[9] to identify TV shows that are classified as reality
TV or game shows. These two nonfiction genres were chosen because of their tendency to
feature real-life, ordinary people. Out of 8,701 entries of nonfictional entertainment shows
that aired between 2015 and 2017, 3,362 Nielsen TV entries are identified as reality TV and
game shows.[10] I narrowed this list to include only shows that have a competitive format

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[9]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 television information and offers search
results across 10 different websites, including IMDb.com, TV.com, TVguide.com, Amazon.com, iTunes, and
Wikipedia.

[10]Note that entries are not equal to the number of TV shows because a program may have multiple entries,
including its spin-offs and specials.

(N = 274), because the ideology of meritocracy and the self-made man is closely tied to competition and amplified in the face of unequal outcomes (McNaMee and Miller Jr 2014).

Figure 2.2: Content Analysis Results
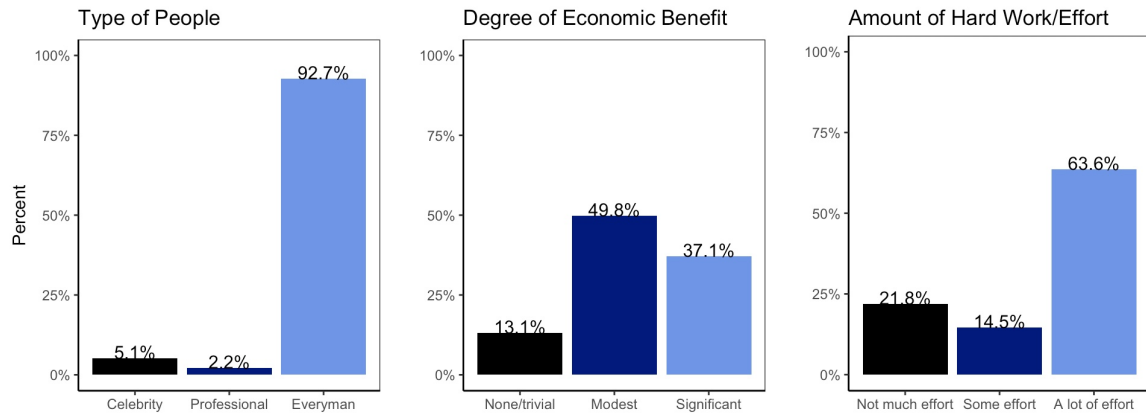
Note: 274 competitive reality TV and game shows were coded for three attributes: type of people (contestants), the degree of economic benefit, and the amount of hard work and effort as opposed to luck required to win. Each attribute has three categories. The panels show the distribution of programs classified into each category. The appendix reports the full coding instructions and results.

I conducted a content analysis focusing on the three elements that I argue above are essential to cultivating beliefs in economic mobility. First, I coded whether a program features ordinary Americans—such as small business owners, home-based cooks, amateur singers, food-truck owners, and so forth—rather than celebrities and expert professionals. Second, I coded the degree of economic benefits contestants received from winning. Recognitions and prizes that have clear implications for contestants' career and business prospects (i.e., a recording deal, a business contract, or a contestant's own TV show; or cash prizes, such as one million dollars) are 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 are 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." Intercoder reliability for 100 randomly selected shows was approximately 90%. Figure A.1 summarizes the results of the content analysis for each element. About 71.3% of the 274 competitive reality TV and 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 broadcast this message to a huge audience. Nielsen ratings data suggest that the most popular shows have all three elements. Among the top-rated programs, which attracted more than four million viewers, eight of 10 featured a rags-to-riches narrative.

2.4   Discussion

This chapter proposes an exemplar-based theory of the American Dream that models perception of economic mobility as a function of exposure to the mass media and exemplars it offers. Pinpointing the mass media as the origin of sociotropic economic perceptions is not itself new, but what is new about my approach that I revisit what the "mass media" consists of: the news *and* entertainment media. Much of the public opinion scholarship assumes that the news media is the primary source of politically relevant information, while entertainment media is viewed as at most a force that dilutes the news media effects.

But when the entertainment media offers powerful and easily accessible exemplars that are counter to what the news media offers, dilution is not the end of the story. When the two types of media push perceptions of economic mobility in opposite directions, the net impact of media exposure depends on the balance between news and entertainment media. The default state for most Americans is that they spend far more time watching entertainment media. This generates predictions that entertainment media consumption will lead to upwardly distorted perceptions of economic mobility.

After offering a general framework, I specify the three elements that constitute the rags-to-riches entertainment media. Identifying these specific elements is important because my theory is fundamentally about the power of a particular American Dream narrative in the media. A generic hypothesis that the entertainment media promotes the American dream is as non-falsifiable as a hypothesis that the American political culture does so. My focus on the three elements that make up the American Dream narrative is better suited for a more systematic study of media effects, overcoming the limitations of previous scholarship that has studied only a handful of entertainment programs.

This chapter is also the first to systematically describe the extent to which the rags-to-riches programs are available and consumed by the American public. A unique combination of comprehensive Nielsen ratings data, online entertainment media databases, and

original content analyses resoundingly demonstrates one aspect of the American media environment: the rags-to-riches programs are ubiquitous and widely consumed by Americans on a daily basis. These efforts to describe the real-world media landscape lead to the next two chapters, in which I test my theory at the micro-level by employing survey and lab-in-the-field experiments. A hypothetical experimental finding that the exposure to certain media content—for instance, a short clip from the C-SPAN—increases political knowledge would not be useful, plainly because in the real world, no one watches that. This chapter has established the macro-level external validity up first. If the rags-to-riches effects are found in the experimental settings in what follows, that would be an conservative estimate of the entertainment media effects.

Chapter 3

The Consequences of the Rags-to-Riches Media

> "Illusions of wealth are sold to the poor, illusions of freedom to the oppressed, dreams of victory to the defeated and of power to the weak. One need not be literate to consume the inviting symbols presented by television, radio, and films in their effort to justify the unequal organization of the world."
> —From *Days and Nights of Love and War*, Eduardo Galeano (1978)

Does exposure to rags-to-riches TV programs shape beliefs about economic mobility? In an ideal world, researchers would have information about the full spectrum of Americans' media consumption and be able to examine whether their beliefs changed after media exposure. Such data, however, do not exist.[1] Reflecting the lack of disciplinary interest in nonpolitical media effects, major election surveys do not measure entertainment media consumption at all or only have a limited battery of relevant items. Detecting media effects on public opinion has been always notoriously difficult—and it is even more difficult when the goal is to detect entertainment media effects.

With these methodological constraints in mind, I turn to three different national surveys: the original national Media & Culture Survey that I designed, the 2016 American National Election Studies survey (ANES), and the 2008-2016 Institute for the Study of Citizens and Politics (ISCAP) Panel Survey. I primarily focus on the Media & Culture survey because it contains the best measures of both perceptions of economic mobility and rags-to-riches programming consumption. Furthermore, because the survey responses are geo-coded, I can compare rags-to-riches programming consumption with county-level intergenerational

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[1]Indeed, in the long-standing nationally representative election survey, asking people about specific programs they watch rather than just asking how many hours of TV they watch has been a relatively recent and much-needed innovation.

economic mobility rates. I use the other two surveys to verify the robustness of my results.[2] These data, which were collected in different time periods, allow me to assess the relationship between rags-to-riches media consumption and beliefs in economic mobility.

Limitations of observational data are clear. To evaluate the *causal* effect of exposure to rags-to-riches TV programs on beliefs in upward economic mobility, I also conduct experiments both online and in a lab-in-the-field setting in suburban New Jersey and Pennsylvania using a mobile laboratory.

3.1   Study 1: Media & Culture Survey

Data and Measures

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 3,000 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.[3] Respondents indicated the extent to which they agreed with each of four statements that measure belief in economic mobility: (1) "The United States in the land of opportunity," (2) "Anyone who works hard has a fair chance to succeed and live a comfortable life," (3) "It is possible to start out poor in this country, work hard, and become well-off," and (4) "Most people who want to get ahead can make it if they are willing to work hard." Respondents indicated the extent to which they agree for each statement. I averaged these four questions into one index (Cronbach α = 0.86) that ranges from zero to one, with higher values indicating more optimistic views about the prospect of economic mobility.

I measured media consumption of rags-to-riches programming at the show level (see Dilliplane et al. 2013; Goldman et al. 2013 for measurement validation). Respondents were shown a list of 30 TV programs, which included 12 rags-to-riches reality programs, 8 reality/game shows that featured celebrities or ordinary Americans who were not competing for economic benefits, and 10 sports programs. The 12 rags-to-riches programs were selected based on three criteria. First, they all illustrated the three components I argue

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[2]These data capture far less than all entertainment media consumption. Indeed, there are only three relevant questions I can use. Hence, I will conduct a statistically conservative test, and any independent effects of watching rags-to-riches TV shows, after controlling for standard demographic variables, will be surprising.

[3]See the appendix for sample characteristics.

are essential to affect beliefs: they feature (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.

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 2016). The eight non-meritocratic reality/game programs on the list feature celebrities, or spotlight ordinary people who are not necessarily hard working and are not perceived to have gained economic benefits. These are 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 to believe in the prospect of upward economic mobility than non-viewers. I again referred to the Nielsen data to decide which shows to include.

To test a possible alternative hypothesis that people's personal economic experiences affect their sociotropic perceptions of economic mobility (Piketty 1995), I included items about personal economic context. Personal economic insecurity (Cronbach $\alpha = 0.72$) is measured as the extent to which people are worried about (1) not being able to afford health care services, (2) not having enough money for retirement, (3) not being able to afford the cost of education, for themselves and their family members. Respondents were also asked whether they think their standard of living now is better compared to their parents when they were at the same age, in addition to whether both of their parents were born in the United States.

SSI provided information about respondents' zip codes and counties. I merged my survey data with county-level data on actual absolute intergenerational mobility rates by Chetty and his colleagues (Chetty et al. 2017) as well as the Gini index of income inequality. These variables were included to test a possible alternative hypothesis that respondents' communities shape their sociotropic perceptions of economic mobility (Newman, Johnston and Lown 2015).

In addition to standard demographic variables, I also included items on religion and religious attendance to account for the widely known role of the Protestant work ethic in shaping American political culture. The survey also included multiple items designed to assess people's general level of optimism about life as well as their psychological propensity to defend the existing social system and see the status quo as legitimate and fair. The survey

design sought to include a list of concepts that, according to existing theories and studies, can affect sociotropic perceptions of economic mobility in addition to rags-to-riches media consumption.

Descriptive Statistics

I start by describing media consumption patterns. 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. Table 3.1 reports the percentage of regular viewers for each program.

Table 3.1: 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.

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—Figure 3.1 demonstrates that 72% of survey respondents watch one or more rags-to-riches TV programs (mean = 3.83 programs per person).

What types of people are most likely to watch rags-to-riches programs? Though Republicans tend to embrace rugged individualism and self-determination more so than Democrats do, there was no partisan difference in the number of rags-to-riches programs people regularly consumed. Overall, the mean number of programs was 2.80 and 2.84 for Republicans and Democrats, respectively, which is not statistically significantly different (p=0.735). There were, of course, partisan differences in a few shows; more Republicans watched

Figure 3.1: Overall Consumption of "Rags-to-Riches" TV Programs
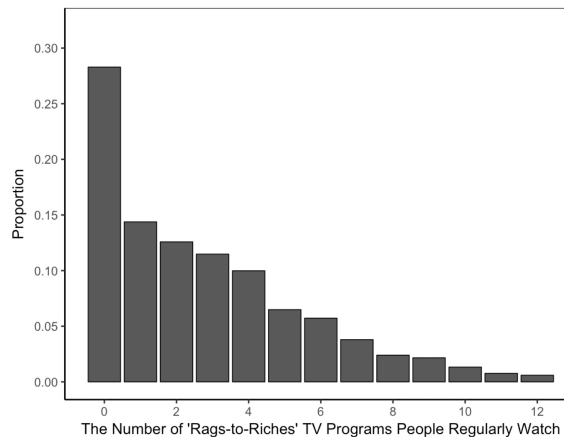
Note: The figure displays the proportion of survey respondents that regularly watches different numbers of rags-to-riches programs. Only 28% of respondents indicated that they do not watch any rags-to-riches program.

Survivor, while more Democrats watched *The Voice* and *Hell's Kitchen*. Even a business-themed show, *Shark Tank*, which arguably might be more appealing to Republicans, was equally popular across partisans. In an era of hyper-polarization in which partisans have different preferences even on food, coffee, pet, and baby names (Haidt and Wilson 2014; Mutz and Rao 2018; Oliver, Wood and Bass 2016), 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 just spillover effects. Selecting a particular type of entertainment media is likely unrelated to a viewer's political awareness of rising income inequality, for instance.

There were racial differences in rags-to-riches media consumption. Non-white respondents were significantly more likely to watch rags-to-riches shows than their white counterparts (t=9.63, p<0.000). In addition, those who are employed, optimistic, younger, have a higher income and immigrant parents were more likely to watch these programs. Interestingly, those who are more politically interested were also more likely to watch rags-to-riches programs.[4] Previous studies have shown that low socioeconomic status is often linked to more time spent watching television, but the patterns I find here suggest that TV

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[4]It is important to note, however, that there are also differences in race, income, age, employment status, optimism, income, and political interest in the consumption of entertainment TV programs without a rags-to-riches narrative (i.e., *The Bachelor*, *Celebrity Family Feud*, *Real Housewives*).

programs, depending on the types of narrative they promote, may attract different types of viewers.

Regression Analysis

The dependent variable, *Belief in Economic Mobility*, is measured using four different questions (Cronbach α = 0.86). The key independent variable, *Rags-to-Riches Media Consumption*, is constructed as a categorical 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 defined as those who watch three to five programs. Those who watch six or more are coded as heavy viewers. The cutoff group line was based on quintile values.

Given the growing concern over researchers' discretionary choices in the use of covariates (Lenz and Sahn 2018), I report results with and without different sets of covariates and weights. Table 3.2, Column 1 presents a parsimonious model with no covariates; the three rows show the difference in the probability of believing in the prospect of upward economic 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 1.9 percentage points, and was not statistically significant. But the gap between non-viewers and frequent viewers and the gap between non-viewers and heavy viewers were both statistically significant. Those who regularly watch more than six rags-to-riches programs, for instance, were 7.6 percentage points more likely to believe in the American Dream.

Granted, those who tune in to rags-to-riches TV programs differ from non-viewers on a host of characteristics. Indeed, this self-selection issue looms large in any studies that estimate media effects. To address this possibility, Models 2–5 include individual-level characteristics and county-level economic contexts that may contribute to sociotropic perceptions of economic mobility. Column 2 of Table 3.2 includes the total count of sports programs and other entertainment shows that respondents regularly watch, in addition to demographic variables including age, gender, race, income, employment status, Protestant, religious attendance, marital status, political interest, and state fixed effects.

Table 3.2: The Impact of Watching Rags-to-Riches Programs on Belief in Economic Mobility

	Dependent variable: Belief in Economic Mobility				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Occasional viewer (1-2 programs)	0.019	0.016	0.014	0.013	0.008
	(0.012)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.010)
Frequent viewer (3-5 programs)	0.047***	0.038**	0.032**	0.032**	0.024*
	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.010)
Heavy viewer (6 + programs)	0.076***	0.063***	0.042**	0.040*	0.033*
	(0.013)	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.014)
Controls					
Other media consumption			✓	✓	✓
Demographics		✓	✓	✓	✓
Personal economic context			✓	✓	✓
County-level economic context				✓	✓
System justification scale					✓
State fixed effect		✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	3,004	3,004	3,004	2,998	2,998
R^2	0.013	0.162	0.239	0.239	0.393
Adjusted R^2	0.012	0.143	0.221	0.220	0.378

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Note: Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients with associated standard errors in parentheses.

To account for personal economic experiences that are frequently linked with the American Dream, Column 3 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 the geographic context into consideration, Column 4 includes county-level absolute intergenerational mobility rates and the Gini index of income inequality. Finally, Column 5 includes a system justification scale, which is a psychological construct that measures people's general tendency to defend and rationalize the existing social system and to perceive the status quo as fair and just (Jost, Banaji and Nosek 2004). This tendency is often described as a powerful ideology that can explain why, despite the existence of widespread economic inequality, most people seem to tolerate such disparities (Jost and Hunyady 2003). I find that in each specification, frequent and heavy viewers were more likely to believe in the prospect of upward economic mobility than those who did not watch any rags-to-riches TV programs, which supports my argument. The effect sizes become smaller as the number of covariates increases, but they remain statistically significant even when I control for the system justification scale (Column 5). It is surprising that media exposure has an independent explanatory power even when accounting for such a fundamental psychological tendency.

To better compare the predictive power of each covariate, Figure 4.2 displays the full regression results from Model 4 (Table 3.2, Column 4). The figure demonstrates that the most powerful predictor of belief in economic mobility was whether a respondent is a self-identified Republican. Compared to Independents, Republicans were 11.7 percentage points more likely to perceive the United States as the land of opportunity. But it is striking that variables such as race, gender, income, age, religious attendance, Protestant identification, and personal economic insecurity had no effect, though being unemployed had a negative impact. Interestingly, having more education and a higher level of political interest were both negatively correlated with belief in the American Dream, though only the former was statistically significant. This can be interpreted to mean that those with a higher education typically exhibit more interest in public affairs and a greater awareness of the structural barriers to upward mobility for other Americans.

The widely quoted county-level variations in intergenerational mobility rates by Chetty and his colleagues (2017) had null effects as well, indicating that while children born in the deep South and in the mountainous Western regions have starkly different chances of achieving upward mobility than those from the coastal cities, geographic variation seems to

Figure 3.2: The Correlates of Belief in Upward Economic Mobility
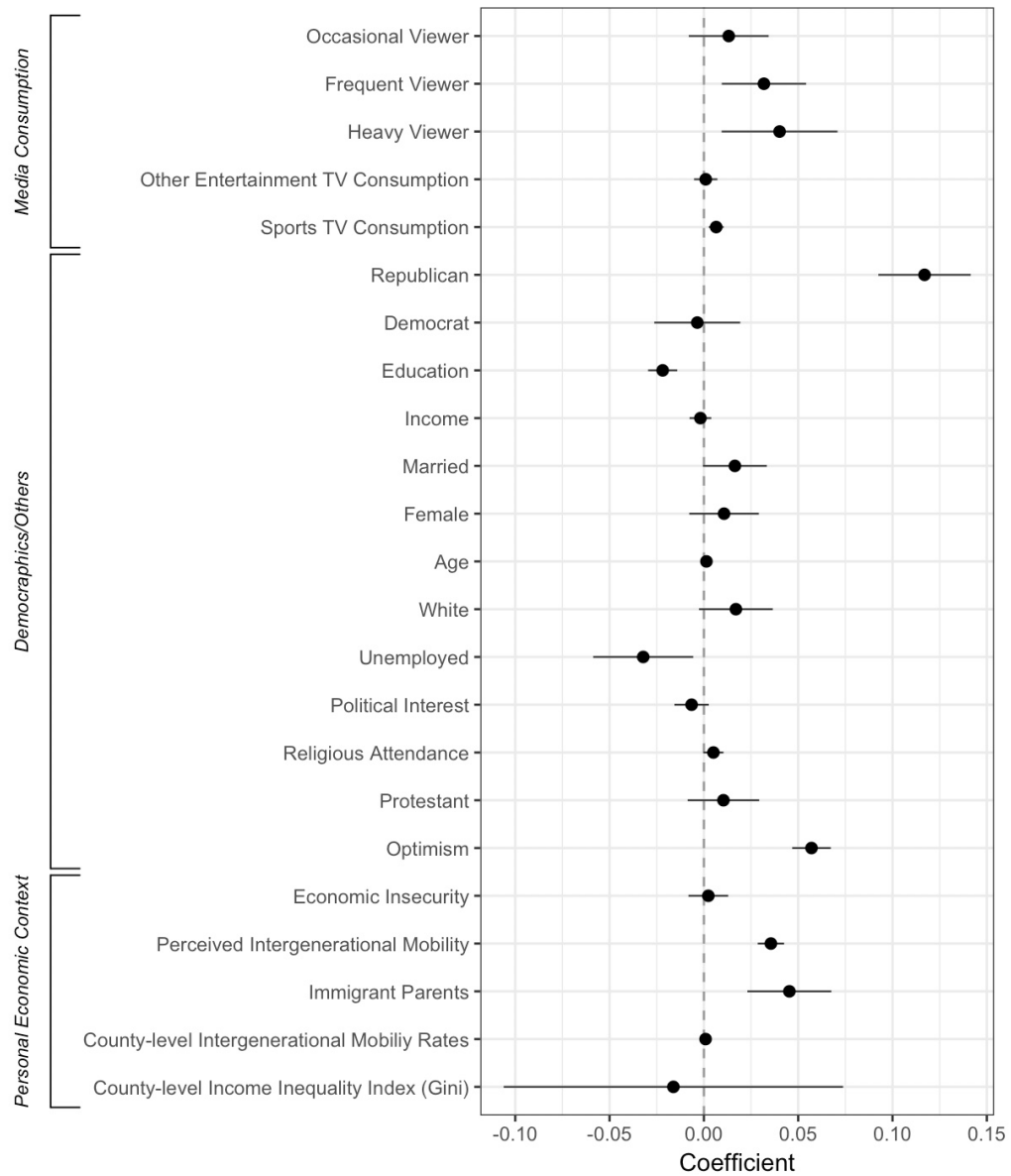
Note: This figure displays the coefficient estimates of an OLS regression model in which I regress perceptions of economic mobility on media consumption, demographic variables, and personal economic context. The black horizontal lines indicate the 95% confidence intervals.

matter less in regard to sociotropic perceptions of mobility. It is possible that county-level measures are not the best proxy for economic contexts that respondents experience on a daily basis. However, it is worth noting that Alesina et al. (2018), in their comprehensive study of the difference between perceived and actual economic mobility, find that optimism about the American Dream is higher in regions with lower levels of economic mobility. They attribute this paradoxical pattern to ideas perpetuated by literature, art, and media that "focus on the American Dream, opportunity, and on those successful people who have made it" (p. 534). They did not specify the types of media that sustain such beliefs, but the statistically significant effects of consumption of rags-to-riches entertainment media directly address their lingering questions.

Respondents who perceive their life as better than that of their parents, and who have immigrant parents, were 3.6 and 4.5 percentage points, respectively, more likely to believe in the American Dream. This finding demonstrates that personal economic experiences do influence people's sociotropic perceptions of economic mobility. However, these effect sizes were comparable to that of watching rags-to-riches programs. Frequent and heavy viewers of these shows were, respectively, 3.2 and 4.0 percentage points more likely to believe in the prospect of upward economic mobility. Indeed, when I account for the system justification scale (Model 5), heavy viewing of rags-to-riches programs and having immigrant parents had the same effect size of 3.3 percentage points (see the appendix). Thus 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. At one level, it is surprising that, other than Republican ideology and a respondent's general level of optimism, media consumption and personal intergenerational mobility experiences were the only statistically significant predictors. The null effects of many other covariates may suggest that beliefs in economic mobility are so embedded in Americans' mindsets that standard demographic variables have little explanatory p ower. This again underscores the importance of studying the impact of mass media on perceptions of economic mobility.

Many link beliefs in the American Dream to diminished support for government-led wealth redistribution, precisely because they are closely related to the view that people are responsible for their own economic circumstances (Lane 2001). The perception that some people get ahead because they are determined and hard working—not because they were born to wealth or because the societal structure has benefited some more than others—typically influences attitudes toward the poor and disadvantaged. As a robustness check, I

Table 3.3: The Effect of Watching Rags-to-Riches Programs on Internal and External Attributions of Economic Success

	Dependent variable:			
	Internal Attribution		External Attribution	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Occasional viewer (1-2 programs)	0.006	0.013	−0.004	−0.007
	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.009)	(0.009)
Frequent viewer (3-5 programs)	0.008	0.017	0.009	0.005
	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.009)	(0.010)
Heavy viewer (6+ programs)	0.052***	0.052***	0.039***	0.014
	(0.011)	(0.014)	(0.011)	(0.013)
Controls				
Other media consumption		✓		✓
Demographics		✓		✓
Personal economic context		✓		✓
County-level economic context		✓		✓
State fixed effect		✓		✓
Observations	3,004	2,998	3,004	2,998
R^2	0.008	0.143	0.006	0.110
Adjusted R^2	0.007	0.121	0.005	0.088

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Note: Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients with associated standard errors in parentheses.

estimated the impacts of rags-to-riches media consumption on internal and external attributions of economic success. The survey 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 such as ambition, self-determination, hard work, and talent; the other half were external factors such as family wealth, well-educated parents, technological changes and automation, and politicians' failure to implement good policies.

As Table 3.3, Column 2 shows, after controlling for different covariates, heavy viewers were 5.2 percentage points more likely than non-viewers to attribute economic success to internal factors. The relationship between exposure to rags-to-riches programs and external attributions was less robust, and as Column 4 shows, media exposure had no explanatory power when I added an array of control variables.

Taken as a whole, the results from the Media & Culture survey support my hypothesis that rags-to-riches entertainment media shapes beliefs in the prospect of upward economic

mobility, promotes the meritocratic idea that success is attributed to internal factors, and has an impact equivalent to life-shaping experiences such as having immigrant parents. Yet these data do not come from a probability sample, and so many not generalize to the nation as a whole. To address this concern, the next section replicates the main findings using two nationally representative surveys. While they have less detailed information on both the key independent and dependent variables, they do allow me to gauge the strength of these relationships in nationally-representative data.

3.2   Study 2 and 3: ANES and ISCAP Survey

Data and Measures

Additional data for the replications 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 (see the appendix for data descriptions). 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 Media & Culture Survey. 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 $\alpha= 0.63$) 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. *Exposure to Rags-to-Riches Programs* also ranges from 0 to 3 here. This is far from a perfect measure, but it serves as a parsimonious proxy for preferences for these types of TV shows.

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 and other variables that tap into sociotropic economic perceptions. The ISCAP survey 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 it uses as a covariate.

Results

As before, belief in economic mobility is regressed on the count measure of exposure to rags-to-riches programs. Table A.8 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. In the ISCAP analysis that includes demographic covariates, news consumption, and panel weights (Column 4), the effect of exposure to one rags-to-riches program on perceptions of economic mobility is 3.1 percentage points. Given that the maximum value of exposure to rags-to-riches programs is three—not because they do not watch more but because they were only asked about three—and that these data understate people's reality TV consumption, these findings support the notion that entertainment media has an independent power to influence sociotropic perceptions of economic mobility. To make sure that these findings are not an artifact of the effect of watching entertainment media in general, I also examined the relationship between exposure to other types of entertainment media and belief in economic mobility, and found no effects.

Table 3.4: The Effect of Exposure to Rags-to-Riches Programs on Belief in Economic Mobility

	Data: 2016 ANES					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Exposure to Rags-to-Riches Programs	0.010*	0.011†	0.012*	0.012†	0.013**	0.012†
	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.007)	(0.005)	(0.007)
Weights (Yes/No)	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y
Controls	None		Demographics		Demographics Economic Perceptions	
Observations	3,627	3,627	3,344	3,344	3,291	3,291

	Data: 2008-2016 NAES-ISCAP					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Exposure to Rags-to-Riches Programs	0.016†	0.024†	0.013	0.031*	0.022*	0.038*
	(0.010)	(0.012)	(0.010)	(0.012)	(0.010)	(0.012)
Weights (Yes/No)	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y
Controls	None		Demographics News Consumption		Demographics News Consumption Economic Perception System Justification	
Observations	1,206	1,206	1,083	1,083	1,078	1,078

†p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01

Note: Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients with associated standard errors in parentheses.

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3.3 Study 4: Online and Lab-In-the-Field Experiments

While the association between exposure to rags-to-riches programs and perceptions of economic mobility is found in multiple datasets with a large number of control variables, it is hard to demonstrate that this represents a causal relationship. To experimentally test whether a similar pattern is found, I recruited 905 respondents: 763 were recruited online through Amazon's Mechanical Turk in October 2016, and 142 were recruited offline in July and August 2018. 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 survey experiments in three counties in rural Pennsylvania in July and August 2018 using ISCAP's mobile media laboratory.

Figure 3.3: The mobile media laboratory
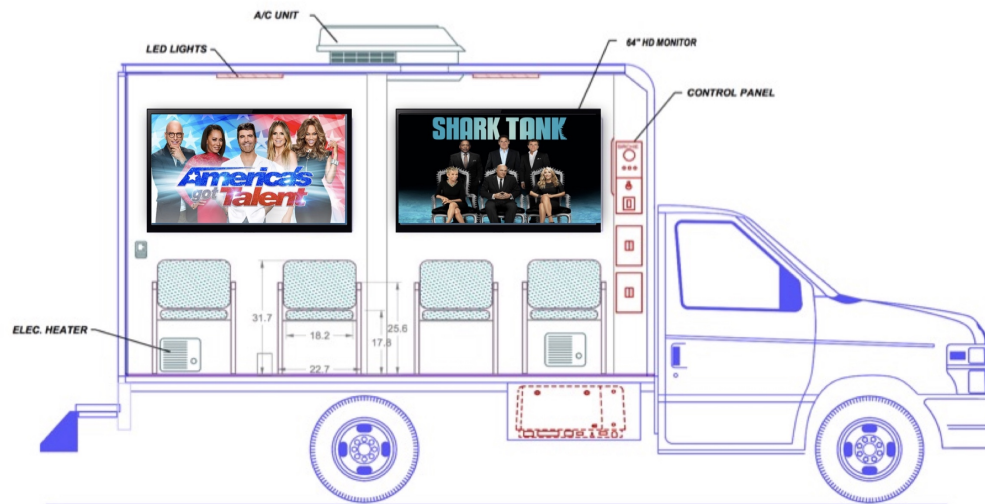
The vehicle has two separate rooms, each equipped with a TV screen and a chair (Figure 3.3). Bucks, Lehigh, and Northampton counties were chosen based on their 2016 presidential election results: 47.8%, 45.9%, and 50.0% of the total county votes, respectively, were cast for Donald Trump. With the goal of targeting non-political events that can potentially

attract local residents of various ages and of different partisan identities, I drove to three different places: 2018 Blueberry Festival in Bethlehem, PA, Quarkertown Farmers' and Flea Market in Quarkertown, PA; Cowtown Farmers Market in Pilesgrove Township, NJ. Except for the Blueberry Festival, both Quarketown and Cowtown Farmer's Market—in operation since 1932 and 1927 respectively—have a spacious outdoor space where vendors sell various products in stands. 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 compensation in cash. 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.

Though the setting and time of the data collection varied, all respondents were asked a similar set of questions about their general attitudes toward the prospect of upward economic mobility. In addition, as pre-treatment covariates, this survey included a system justification scale, an optimism scale, and one question assessing existing belief in economic mobility given that these characteristics were expected to enhance the likelihood of believing in upward economic mobility after being exposed to experimental stimuli.

Given that the purpose of this experiment was to test the effects of media content typical of a broad genre, rather than one particular TV show, I constructed four treatments using different rags-to-riches TV shows: *Shark Tank*, *America's Got Talent*, *American Ninja Warrior*, and *Toy Box*.

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.

Although these shows have different formats and contestants, the treatments highlighted a very similar storyline of upward economic mobility (see the appendix). To ensure that the treatment effects were driven by an upward economic mobility message rather than

Figure 3.4: Experimental Design
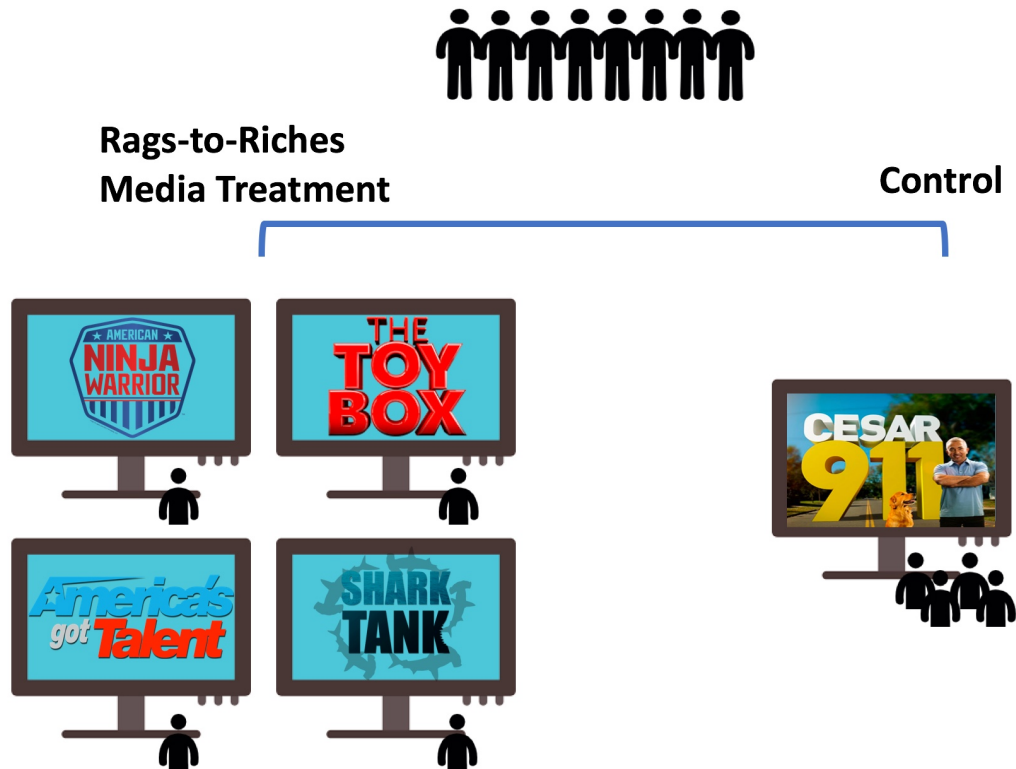
the particularities of reality TV shows, I included a control media treatment that lacked a narrative of economic mobility. The control treatment contained scenes from *Cesar 911*, a reality TV show that featured a young, female dog owner seeking advice about her dog's aggressive behavior. The dog behavior authority evaluates her pet, and equips the dog owner with knowledge and tools to address the aggression. The control treatment ends 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.

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 = 17.43, p < 0.001), is likely to have a higher income from now on (t=17.85, p < 0.001), has a good work ethic (t= 15.31, p < 0.001), and showed that people can succeed when they are willing

Table 3.5: The Experimental Effects of Watching Rags-to-Riches Programs on Belief in Economic Mobility

	DV = Belief in Economic Mobility		
	Full Sample		Partisans Only
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Rags-to-Riches Media Treatment	0.060***	0.052***	0.023*
	(0.012)	(0.009)	(0.014)
Republican		0.034***	
		(0.013)	
Democrat		−0.009	
		(0.011)	
Pre-treatment Belief		0.078***	0.080***
		(0.007)	(0.008)
System Justification Scale		0.080***	0.078***
		(0.007)	(0.008)
Optimism		0.021***	0.020***
		(0.005)	(0.006)
Partisanship (Rep=1, Dem=0)			−0.006
			(0.017)
Treatment x Partisanship (Rep=1, Dem=0)			0.102***
			(0.024)
Constant	0.528***	0.011	0.025
	(0.009)	(0.025)	(0.029)
Survey Date/Location Fixed-Effects	✓	✓	✓
N	905	905	636
Adjusted R^2	0.118	0.491	0.514

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Note: Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients with associated standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is coded to range from 0 to 1. All models also included survey date/location fixed effects.

to work hard (t=10.07, 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=0.13, p=0.89) or whether they thought the program was entertaining (t=1.06, p=0.29).

My experiment shows that exposure to rags-to-riches entertainment media increases people's beliefs in upward economic mobility. Table 5, Column 1 shows the main treatment effects. Watching a rags-to-riches program, even just for five minutes, makes people

approximately 6 percentage points more likely to believe in the prospect of upward economic mobility. To put this into context, consider that in the control condition, the partisan gap in belief in the American Dream is 3.6 percentage points. In other words, the treatment effect is more than one and a half times the size of the gap between Democrats and Republicans, which is a substantial effect. Alternatively, consider the percentage of respondents who either somewhat agreed or strongly agreed with all four statements that comprise the index of belief in economic mobility. The percentage of such respondents changes from 9.25% in the control group to 33.64% in the treatment group, a relative increase of 264%.

To increase the efficiency of the experimental design by further accounting for pre-existing tendencies to believe in upward economic mobility, the pre-experiment portion of the survey included one question designed to assess belief in economic mobility as well as the system justification scale and optimism scale. As shown in Table 3.5, Column 2, a general level of optimism, pre-treatment belief in economic mobility, and the system justification scale were all positively correlated with the post-treatment belief in economic mobility. But the main treatment effects remained similar even after controlling for those covariates.

Does the treatment effect differ by partisan identification? Column 3 of Table 3.5 shows the results among the sample that excludes Independents. In this partisan-only sample, I found strong heterogeneous treatment effects. There was a positive main effect, but the partisan difference in the treatment effects was 10.2 percentage points, which is approximately a 0.6-standard-deviation increase in perceptions of economic mobility. Given that the "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" dictum is closely associated with Republican ideology, this suggests that the treatment video resonated more strongly among those who already believe in the importance of economic individualism.

To the extent that many Americans are already optimistic about the prospect of upward economic mobility, it is worth exploring how pre-existing belief in the American Dream moderates the treatment effects. Table 3.6 shows the treatment effects by the pre-treatment perceptions of the extent to which respondents agree with the statement that anyone who works hard can get ahead and become rich in the US. Those who strongly or somewhat disagreed with the statement—16.46% of survey respondents—were referred to as pessimistic. Those who strongly or somewhat agree—70% of respondents—were referred to as optimistic. Those who neither disagree nor agree were referred to as ambivalent. Those who are ambivalent and optimistic were more likely to believe in economic mobility after watching the rags-to-riches entertainment media. After watching, those who were already

Table 3.6: Heterogeneous Treatment Effects by Pre-Existing Mobility Perceptions

	Dependent variable:
	Belief in Economic Mobility
Treatment (base = pessimistic about economic mobility)	−0.111***
	(0.022)
Ambivalent about economic mobility	0.025
	(0.023)
Treatment x Ambivalent	0.093**
	(0.032)
Optimistic about economic mobility	0.050**
	(0.018)
Treatment x Optimistic	0.215***
	(0.024)
Constant	0.167***
	(0.024)
Covariates Included?	Yes
Observations	905
R^2	0.542
Adjusted R^2	0.536

$^*p<0.05$; $^{**}p<0.01$; $^{***}p<0.001$

Note: Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients with associated standard errors in parentheses. Covariates include partisan identification, system justification scale, and optimism, all of which were measured before the treatment. The dependent variable is recoded to range from 0 to 1, higher values indicating more optimistic perceptions.

optimistic were 21.5 percentage points more likely to believe in the prospect of economic mobility than those who were pessimistic. One striking pattern is that the treatment effects among the pessimists were negative: among those who were originally pessimistic about the American Dream, the treatment stimuli had the backfire effect of decreasing their beliefs in economic mobility by 11.1 percentage points.

3.4 Discussion

Across three national surveys collected at different times, I consistently find that exposure to rags-to-riches programs promotes beliefs in upward economic mobility. These effects are not trivial. Things that we would intuitively hypothesize to matter for perceptions

of economic mobility, such as whether a respondent is living in an area with high inter-generational mobility, had no explanatory power. For those who are heavy viewers of rags-to-riches programs, the media effects are equivalent to having immigrant parents—a finding that would strike many as surprising. Yet the survey data suffers from using self-reported measures of media consumption, and the possibility of omitted variables and reverse causality looms large. The experimental results presented here address those problems.

The experiment presents a rather difficult test for uncovering results. Unlike in the real world, respondents were only watching a 5-minute clip of rags-to-riches entertainment media. But this limited exposure is a strength; many Americans choose to watch these programs for an hour every evening. In many ways, what I conducted is a conservative test.

Yet I did not test how quickly these media effects fade away; nor are participants on Mechanical Turk or at farmers' markets in New Jersey and Pennsylvania representative of American adults. In future versions of this experiment, I will use a population-based survey sample and measure the outcome variables in a separate wave. With full awareness of these limitations of data and method, however, the findings point to the conclusion that the widely consumed rags-to-riches entertainment media does indeed perpetuate a belief in upward economic mobility.

Lastly, the experimental results do not tell us which component of the rags-to-riches programs matters. It cannot distinguish between the effects of the meritocratic narrative and those of simply gaining financial benefits. This distinction is essential when we want to understand the political implications of the rags-to-riches entertainment media in the new Gilded Age. When hard-working, talented people are getting ahead, it changes the way people think about the deservingness of the poor, wealth disparity, and redistribution. In the next chapter, I experimentally disentangle the effects of merit-based rags-to-riches programs.

Chapter 4

Attitudes toward Income Inequality and Redistribution

> "I guess the trouble was that we didn't have any self-admitted proletarians. Everyone was a temporarily embarrassed capitalist."
> — From *America and Americans*, John Steinbeck (1966)

The previous chapter examined how rags-to-riches TV programs promote beliefs in upward economic mobility. But the ultimate question remains: Why should we care? The fact that entertainment media distorts people's perceptions of upward economic mobility is not necessarily troubling from a normative perspective; indeed, it may bode well for Americans' psychological well-being. Jaded by politics filled with negativity and worn out by the pace of modern life, many find an escape from reality through watching entertainment TV, and the potpourri of uplifting "rags-to-riches" stories available at our fingertips empowers each of us to go through another long day.[1]

In this chapter, I demonstrate how "rags-to-riches" TV programs, although individually empowering, can collectively have a conservative influence on our politics. These shows, with their narrative emphasis on how merit and talent generate economic success, have the power to glorify the winners in the economic system, increase tolerance for income inequality, and dampen public support for redistributive policies that could help those who are left behind.

Disentangling the effect of the meritocratic narrative is important because there are many ways to "get ahead" and be financially successful. Stories about people who get ahead by sheer luck with little talent or effort may leave different imprints on people's political preferences. I offer experimental evidence on how the presence of meritocracy in rags-to-riches programs influences people's attitudes toward income inequality and redistribution more than the fact that contestants are financially enriched. I find that it is

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[1]In the media industry, it is a well-known market wisdom that superhero movies surge in their popularity during hard economic times (Burke 2016).

particularly Democrats whose policy attitudes shift after exposure to merit-based rags-to-riches TV programs.

Going beyond the lab-in-the-field experiments, I also display aggregate trends in redistributive demand for the past three decades and show that, consistent with my experimental findings, Democrats who consume a lot of television have become more tolerant of income inequality and less supportive of government redistribution over time, compared to those who spend little to no time watching television. When a dazzling array of entertainment media constantly sells a narrative of upward economic mobility in our living rooms, this serves as a potent serum against public support for redistributive policies. Contrary to prevailing impressions that these "low-brow" programs are too trivial to matter, rags-to-riches programs impact American politics in this new Gilded Age quite broadly.

4.1 Meritocracy and Deservingness

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, as reviewed in Chapter 2, what they have in common is an implicit or explicit emphasis on the role of hard work and talent. In other words, studies of perceptions about economic mobility are typically about beliefs in meritocracy—"a social system as a whole in which individuals get ahead and earn rewards in direct proportion to their individual efforts and abilities" (McNaMee and Miller Jr 2014, p.2).

Disentangling this meritocratic mechanism is particularly important because the absence of merit and hard work affects the way people think about who deserves to receive social welfare. Political psychologists have accumulated an extensive literature on how this deservingness heuristic serves as a primary driver of people's opinions about redistribution. When welfare recipients are portrayed as making little effort to lift themselves by their own bootstraps, they are considered undeserving and public support for expanding social welfare is dampened (Gilens 2009; Oorschot 2000). In a similar vein, political economists have also long argued that deep-seated cultural differences regarding who deserves assistance explain why America does not have a European-style welfare regime (Alesina, Glaeser and Sacerdote 2001; Larsen 2008).

Thus it is surprising that there is so little experimental research that manipulates beliefs in upward mobility, let alone studies that carefully disentangle the role that hard work and

merit play. Granted, a few recent experiments find that beliefs in upward economic mobility breed tolerance for income inequality (Shariff, Wiwad and Aknin 2016) and dampen support for redistribution (Alesina, Stantcheva and Teso 2018). Yet it is worth taking a closer look at how these studies manipulated beliefs in economic mobility. In the online experiment conducted by Shariff, Wiwad and Aknin (2016), for instance, participants were randomly assigned to read mock news articles from *The Economist* on either high or low rates of social mobility in the United States. The articles did not mention anything specific about whether those who work hard are (or are not) getting ahead per se; rather, they offered factual information about the concepts of income mobility and income quantities and about recent research findings about the state of intergenerational mobility in the United States.

In another experiment, by Alesina, Stantcheva and Teso (2018), respondents watched a short animated video that summarized findings of recent academic research about economic mobility. Respondents assigned to the treatment condition were told that very few children from poor families will become rich. The respondents assigned to the control condition were told that children born in rich families are likely to remain rich whey they grow up and that downward economic mobility is unlikely for these children. Again, the experiment focused on the concept of meritocracy rather than that some poor children, despite having stellar credentials and impressive work ethic, cannot get ahead.[2]

In other words, existing research in political economy and social psychology often assumes, but does not experimentally test, that meritocratic beliefs are the key mechanisms in people's attitudes toward income inequality and redistribution. In the following section, I offer such experimental evidence from a lab-in-the-field setting.

4.2 Disentangling the Effects of Meritocracy: Experimental Evidence

Lab-in-the-Field Experiments

To disentangle the effects of the meritocratic narrative in "rags-to-riches" TV programs on political attitudes, I conducted additional lab-in-the-field experiments at a farmer's and

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[2]More problematically, this experiment did not have a true control group. Alesina, Stantcheva and Teso (2018) writes that respondents who watched the animation about the immobility of poor children became more pessimistic about mobility. But it is likely that the animation about how children born in rich families stay rich could also invoke pessimism.

flea market in Quakertown, Pennsylvania, in March and April 2019, again using ISCAP's mobile media laboratory (See Chapter 4 for details of the set up).[3] Respondents were told that they would be watching a random entertainment television program for five minutes and be asked to share their thoughts in exchange for $10 compensation in cash.

Figure 4.1: The Quakertown Farmer's and Flea Market

Note: This figure shows the outdoor market area where the mobile media laboratory is parked.

All respondents were asked a set of questions about their general attitudes about the prospect of upward economic mobility, income inequality, and redistribution. Pre-treatment covariates for this survey included party ID, a system justification scale, and an optimism scale.

To test the effects of the meritocratic narrative embedded in rags-to-riches TV shows, I constructed two treatments using different rags-to-riches TV shows: *Shark Tank* and *America's Got Talent*. The Shark Tank video clip featured a White, middle-aged contestant,

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[3]As the vehicle could accommodate two respondents at a time, I prepared five folding chairs, headsets, and tablet PCs. I could accommodate a maximum of seven respondents simultaneously—two inside, and five outside.

Figure 4.2: Experimental Design

Treatment	Control

Rags-to-Riches Media Treatment (Hard Work)

Rags-to-Riches Media Treatment (Luck)
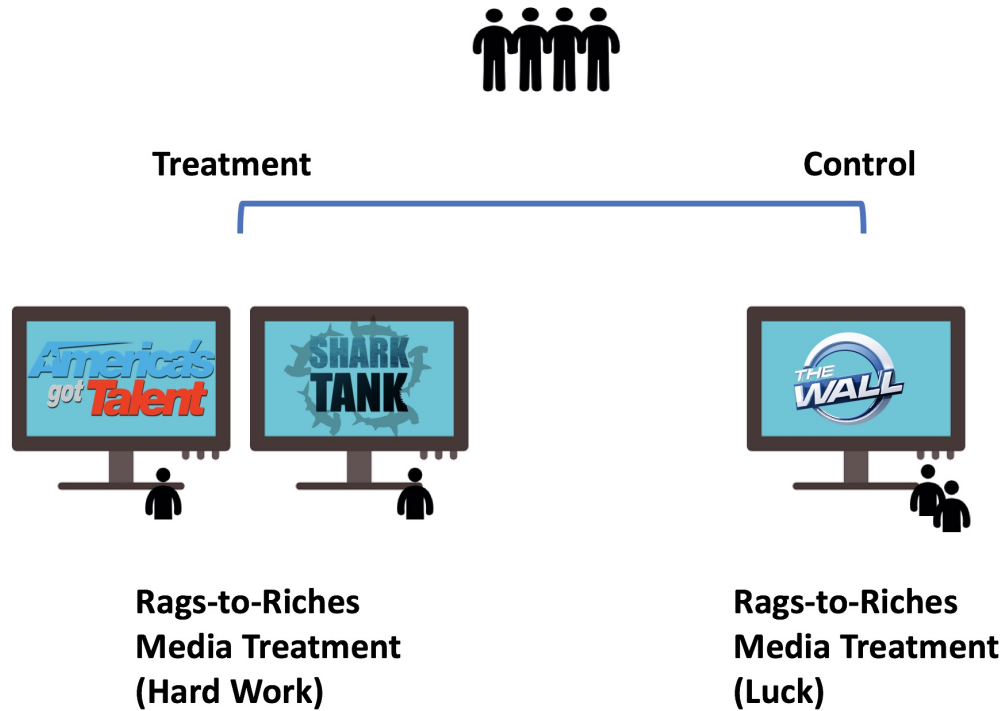
Note: This figure displays the experimental set-up.

Aaron Krause, who pitched the idea for his smiley-faced cleaning sponge *Scrub Daddy*. After emphasizing how hard he worked to get where he is now, he secured the investment he needed. The *America's Got Talent* treatment featured a young, female, deaf singer-songwriter, Harvey Mandy. 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. These shows had different formats and contestants, but the treatments highlighted a very similar story of how hard work and talent pay off.

Because the goal of this particular experiment was to disentangle the effects of the presence of hard work and merit in getting ahead, I included a control media treatment that rewarded financial benefits 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. To prevent even a slight possibility that respondents would think that these contestants are "good people" who deserve such wealth[4], 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 dependent variable uses four questions to measure beliefs in upward economic mobility. Respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they agree or disagree with the following statements: "The United States is the land of opportunity;" "It is possible to start out poor in this country, work hard, and become well-off;" "Most people who want to get ahead can make it if they are willing to work hard;" and "Anyone who works hard has a fair chance to succeed and live a comfortable life."

The second and third dependent variable each uses four questions to measure the extent to which people attribute economic success to various factors. Respondents were asked why they think that some people get further ahead than others; they indicated the degree to which they think that it's because "Some people are more ambitious and determined than others," "Some people work harder than others," "Some people have a good education," and "Some people are more talented than others." These four questions were intended to measure the degree to which people attribute economic success to internal factors. Respondents were asked about external factors as well; they indicated the degree to which they think that some people get further ahead than others because "Technological changes and automation benefited some more than others," "Some come from a wealthy family," "Politicians have failed to implement good policies that advance equality of opportunity," and "Some people have well-educated parents."

Taking into account that people may think that both internal and external factors matter when they are not forced to choose between them, the four and fifth dependent variables measured why people think that some people are rich and others are poor. Respondents were forced 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. They were also forced to choose between whether they think that some people are poor due to lack of effort on their own part or due to circumstances beyond their control.

Respondents were also 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

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[4]media critics have argued that most contestants on this TV show are war veterans or community leaders

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.

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 guarantee jobs and a good standard of living, increase tax rates on Americans earning more than $250,000 a year, reduce the gap between the rich and the poor, and reduce assistance to the unemployed. These questions have been rescaled to range between 0 and 1 so higher numbers indicate a greater desire for government to play a smaller role.

To ensure that my treatments have their intended effects, I conducted manipulation checks.[5] I verified that the treatment prime did convey the meritocratic components that I hypothesized to be important for people's attitudes toward income inequality and redistribution.

As Figure 4.3 shows, respondents in the treatment condition were much more likely than those in the control condition to say that the person featured on the show profited a lot financially (t=4.09, $p < 0.001$), was likely to have a higher income from now on (t=7.79, $p < 0.001$), had a good work ethic (t=11.77, $p < 0.001$), and demonstrated that people can succeed when they are willing to work hard (t=11.44, $p < 0.001$). It is worth noting that the difference between the treatment and control condition was smallest for the question about whether respondents thought that the person featured on the show profited a lot financially.

Results

Before examining the effects of the meritocratic narrative in rags-to-riches TV programs on policy preferences, I first look at the effects on beliefs about economic mobility. Although the four questions that measure those beliefs implicitly tap into the role of hard work and merit in getting ahead, it is possible that watching people get half a million dollars thanks to the sheer chance of a ball falling into the right slot in a pegboard may have prompted respondents to believe that people *can* get ahead in this country— all they need is luck. I find that exposure to meritocratic rags-to-riches entertainment media marginally increases people's beliefs in upward economic mobility, by approximately 7 percentage points. However, this difference in means ($\beta_T - \beta_C$ = 0.832 - 0.763, $p = 0.087$) was not statistically significant at the 95% CI. It is important to put this result in context. In Chapter 4, I showed that rags-to-riches TV programs had significant treatment effects on beliefs

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[5]These manipulation check questions were asked at the very end of the survey.

Figure 4.3: Manipulation Check Results
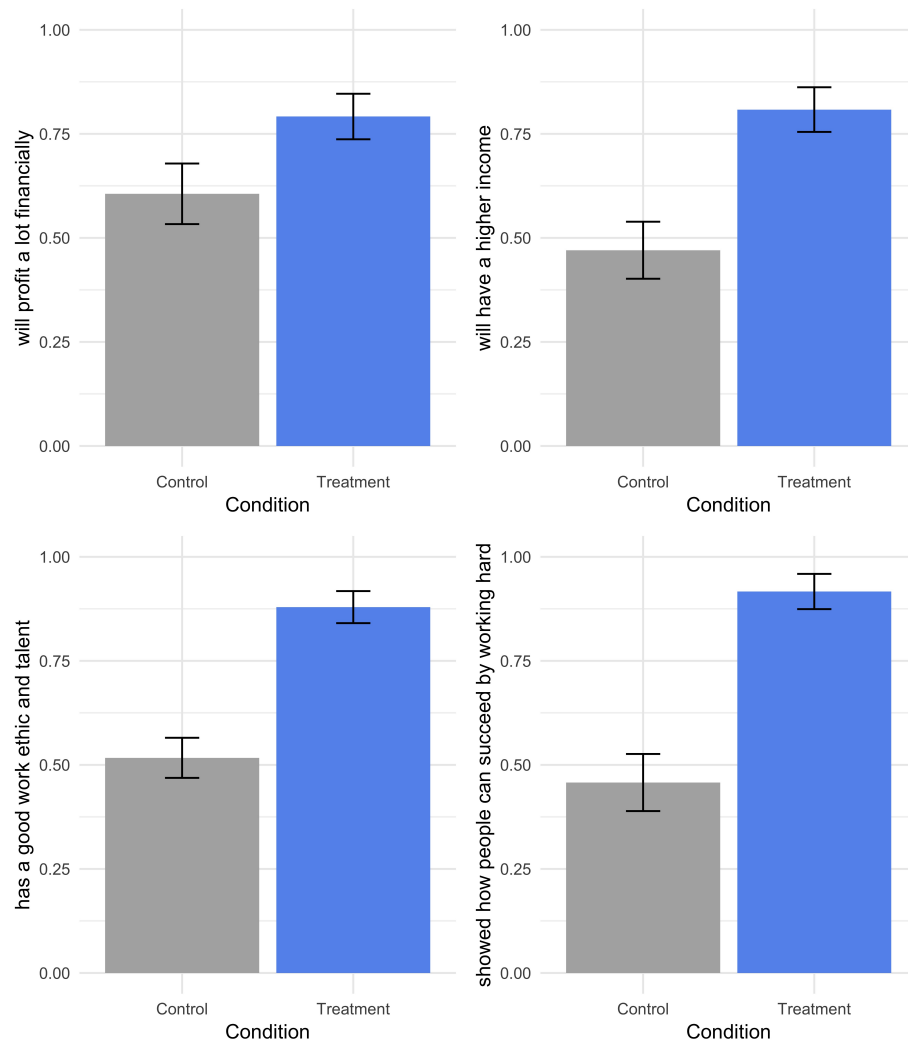
Note: Dependent variables are all rescaled to range between 0 to 1, with higher values indicating a higher level of agreement with the given statement.

about economic mobility using a control group that watched a completely irrelevant television program featuring a dog owner. This null effect on perceptions of economic mobility is important, as the goal of this particular experiment was to disentangle the effects of merit-based rags-to-riches TV programs from those of non-merit-based rags-to-riches TV programs.

Does the treatment influence people's attitudes toward attribution of economic success, income inequality, and redistribution? Figure 4.4 displays the treatment effects on internal and external attribution of economic success, attitudes toward the rich and poor, income inequality, and redistribution—all with and without covariates.

Figure 4.4: The Effects of Meritocratic Narrative in the Rags-to-Riches TV Programs on Economic Policy Attitudes

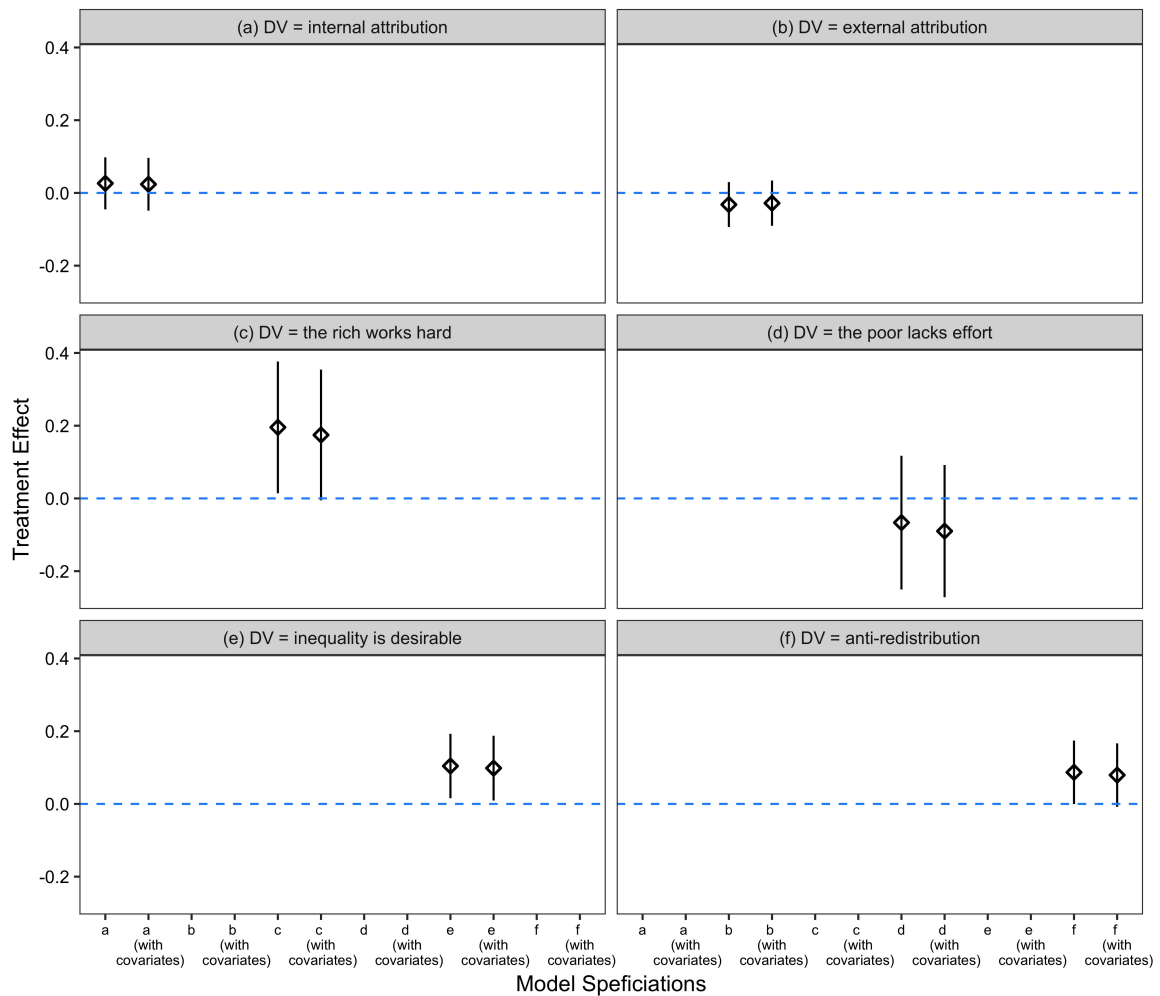*Note*: Dependent variables are all rescaled to range between 0 to 1, with higher values indicating a higher level of agreement with the given statement. Diamond dots indicate the treatment effects. Black bars indicate 95% CI.

First, the treatment effect on the attribution of economic success to internal and external factors was not statistically significant, although it was in the hypothesized direction:

respondents who watched merit-based rags-to-riches TV programs were more likely to report that people are successful due to internal factors such as their own hard work, ambition, and self-determination. This null effect likely stems from the fact that the questions did not force people to choose between internal and external factors. Determinants of success are multidimensional, and rarely are dichotomous.

But when respondents were forced between 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 huge effects: it increased the perception that the rich people are rich due to hard work and talent by around 19.5 percentage points (without covariates). 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. The treatment effects on the perception that some people are poor due to lack of effort, not circumstances beyond their control, were not statistically significant.

Merit-based rags-to-riches TV programs have significant 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.

Are there differences in treatment effects by partisan identification? Although I had reason to believe that partisanship would affect the level of support for my outcome measures, I had no theoretically strong a priori expectations that the effect of the meritocracy treatment would be moderated by partisanship. On the one hand, narratives of meritocracy and self-determination are closer to Republican ideology. Therefore, one might expect that Republicans would become even less supportive of redistribution after watching the merit-based rags-to-riches TV programs. On the other hand, anti-redistribution sentiments among Republican respondents are already high, which might suggest possible ceiling effects.

With those caveats in mind, here I report the results of a closer examination of the role of partisanship. In Figure 4.5, I graphically show the treatment effects by partisan identification for the three dependent variables that had significant treatment effects. What first stands out is that people across all partisan groups became more favorable towards the idea that rich people worked hard ($F(2, 119) = 0.00$, $p = 0.996$). However, the interaction effects between treatment and partisanship were significant in regards to attitudes about income inequality and redistribution ($F(2,119)=4.59$, $p = 0.0122$). It was Democrats whose attitudes changed the most, and the treatment effects were primarily driven by them. This

Figure 4.5: The Effects of Merit-Based Rags-to-Riches TV Programs by Party ID
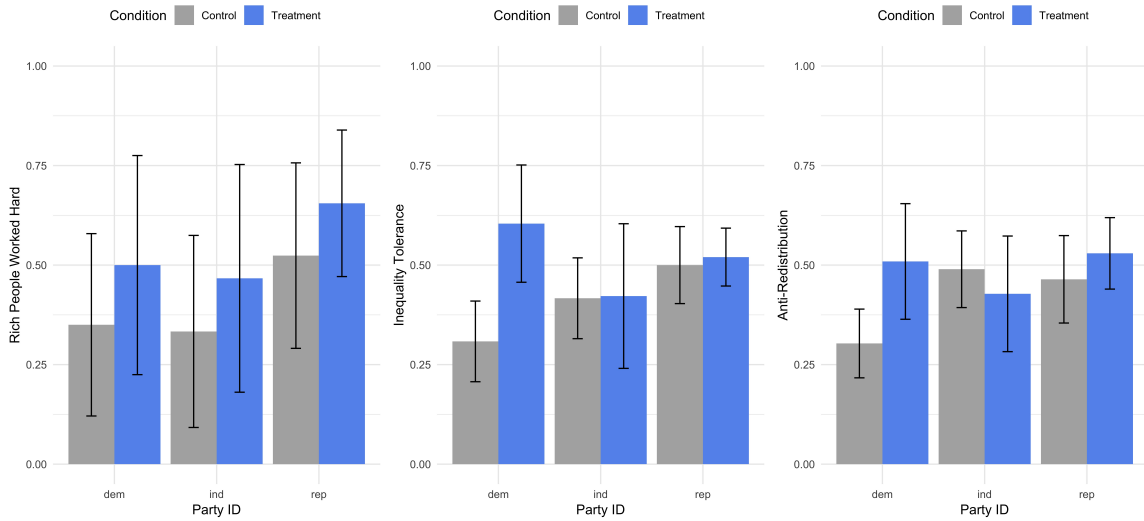
Note: Grey bars indicate the control group means, while light blue bars indicate the treatment group means.

heterogeneity in treatment effects by party ID must be understood in context. The baseline level of tolerance for income inequality or anti-redistribution sentiments among Democrats in the control group was very low to begin with, and the treatment did not shift Democrats' political preferences to the other end of the spectrum. The results show that these treatment effects pushed Democrats to be, if anything, "neutral" in their attitudes toward income inequality and redistribution.

Granted, there is no reason to believe that people who participated in this lab-in-the-field experiments were representative of the general adult population in America. House-holds in Quakertown, PA, 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. Although I did not collect data on participants' income, people who shop at the flea market may not be the richest residents. The lab-in-the-field experiments confirm *how* rags-to-riches programs matter for the politics of redistribution, but we are left with questions about external validity, which will be the next point of discussion.

4.3   Explaining the Macro Trends: 1990-2018

Despite rising income inequality and declining economic mobility, demand for redistribution has remained flat or decreased (i.e. Ashok, Kuziemko and Washington 2015;Kenworthy and McCall 2008; Kuziemko et al. 2015). Throughout this dissertation, I have demonstrated how rags-to-riches TV programs promote beliefs in economic mobility; in this chapter, I showed how merit-based rags-to-riches TV programs make people more tolerant of income inequality and less supportive of government-led redistribution. The lab-in-the-field experiments hint that the media effects on policy-related attitudes are primarily driven by changes among Democrats.

Can these experimental findings shed light on macro trends in the real world? On the one hand, the lab-in-the-field experiments were conducted with a convenience sample— those who happened to be strolling around the Quakertown Farmers' Market on particular spring weekends. On the other hand, if the psychological mechanism is correct and generalizable to other Americans, then the macro patterns we can obtain from nationally-representative survey data should be congruent.

Granted, many factors that could explain the macro pattern in public attitudes toward income inequality and redistribution. My goal is *not* to argue that rags-to-riches TV programs are the only or primary factor that shape such patterns. Rather, my goal is to offer a new and reasonable clue to an enduring puzzle in political economy scholarship: Why have growing levels of income inequality in the United States not sparked public support for further redistribution?

With the reasonable assumptions that Americans mostly watch entertainment media when they watch TV and the proportion and popularity of "rags-to-riches" TV programs has exploded over time, do we see partisan heterogeneity in attitudes toward income inequality and redistribution by the level of TV consumption?

To answer this question, I turn to the General Social Survey (GSS), a representative survey of American households that has been fielded since the 1970s. The GSS does not have questions that tap into the consumption of merit-based "rags-to-riches" TV programs. With this limitation in mind, I use two variables that can be a reasonable—albeit very crude—proxy for people's entertainment media consumption: the frequency of reading the news[6], and the number of hours spent watching TV per day.

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[6]Out of many questions that tap into political interests, the "how often does R read newspaper" question has been asked most regularly. Based on the median value, those who indicated that they read news everyday

Figure 4.6: Trends by news consumption level and party ID
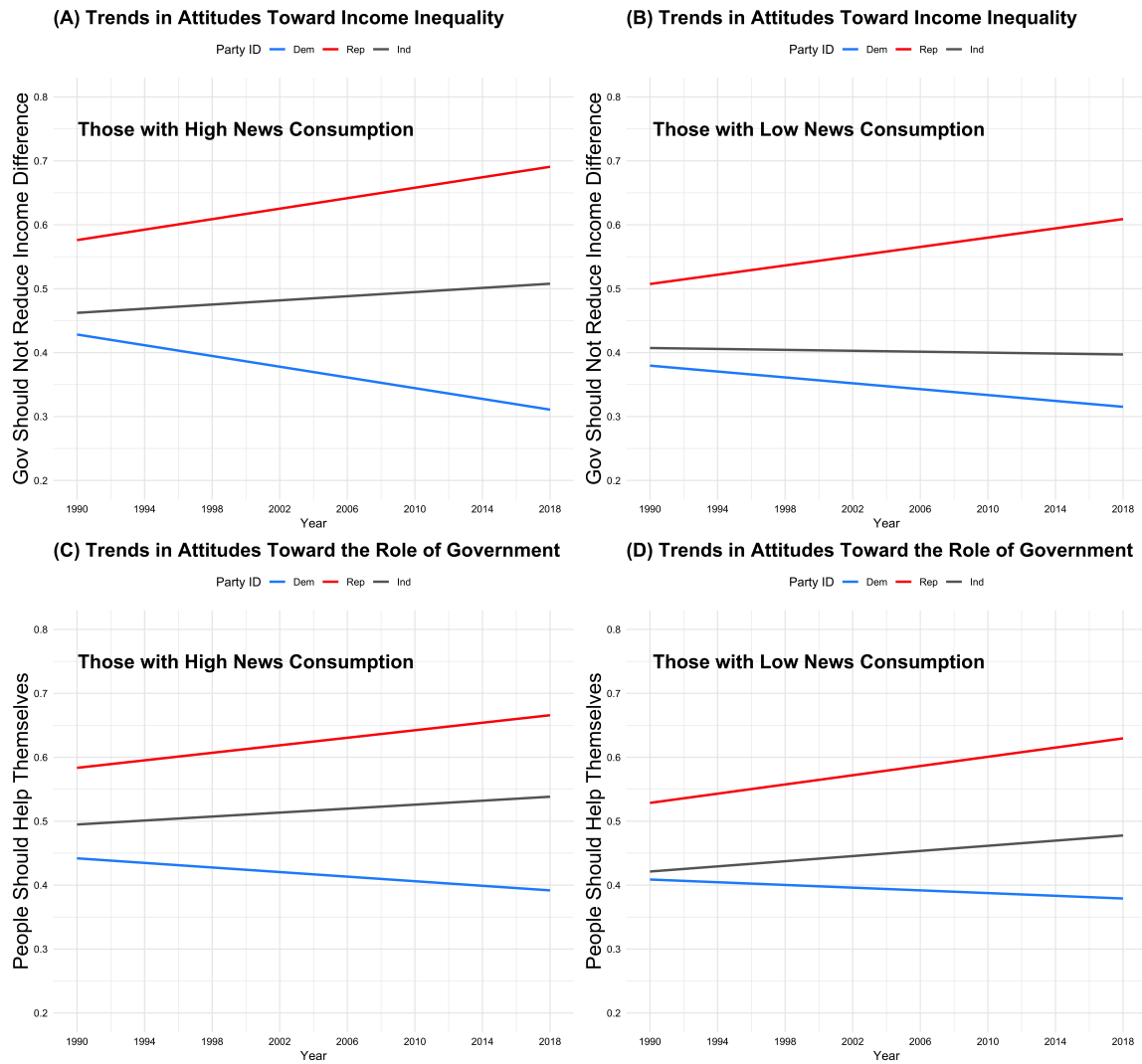
(A) Trends in Attitudes Toward Income Inequality

(B) Trends in Attitudes Toward Income Inequality

(C) Trends in Attitudes Toward the Role of Government

(D) Trends in Attitudes Toward the Role of Government

Note: Plotted lines are the best-fit lines, of mean response to the two questions that ask the extent to which respondents agree that (1) government should reduce income inequality and (2) improve the standard of living. Outcome variables are rescaled to range from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating anti-redistribution sentiment. Red, grey, and blue lines respectively indicate Republican, Independent, and Democratic responses. *Source*: General Social Survey

First, Figure 4.6 displays trends in attitudes toward income inequality and the role of

are coded as high news consumption. The rest (a few times a week, once a week, less than once a week, never) are coded as low news consumption."

Figure 4.7: Trends by TV consumption, news consumption level, and party ID
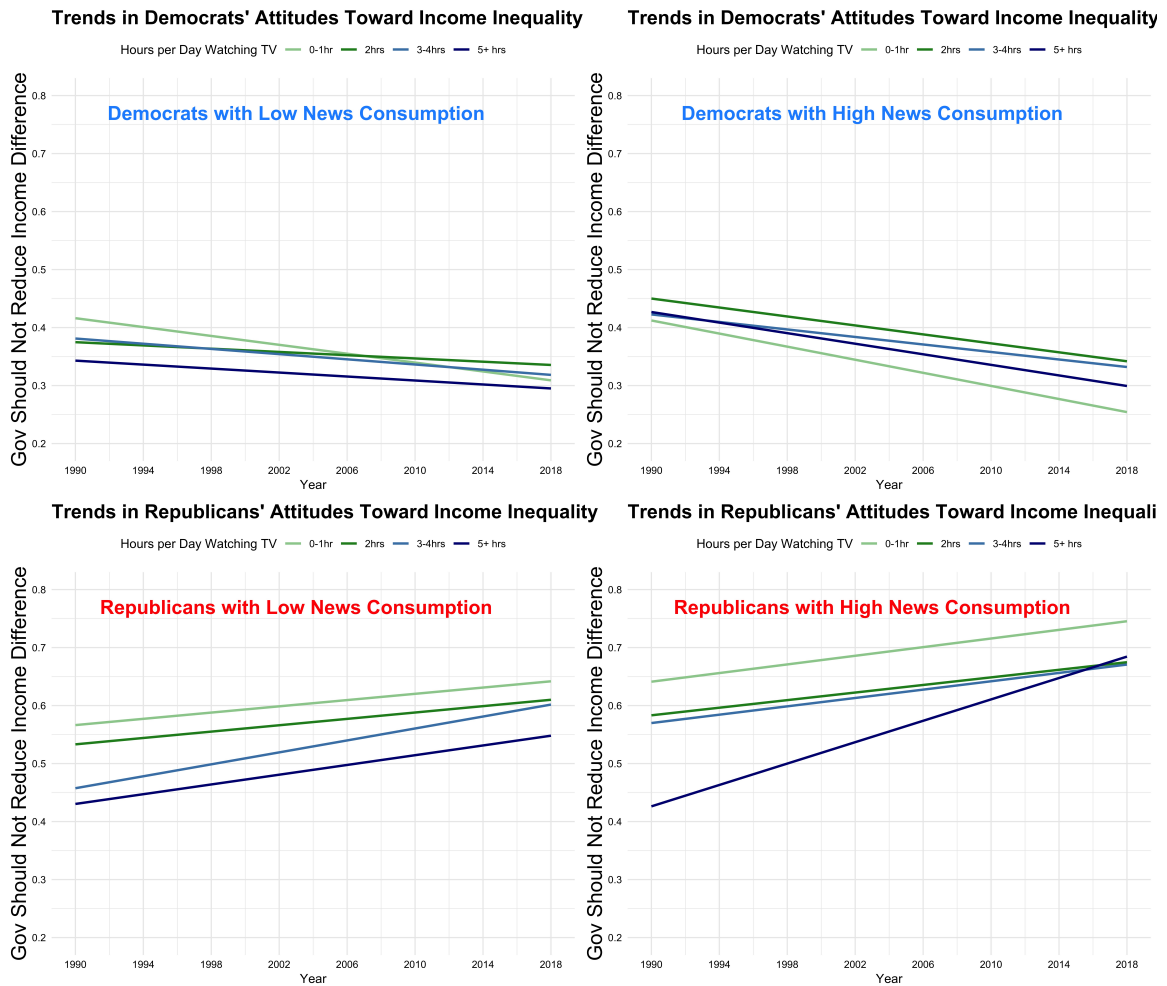
Note: Plotted lines are the best-fit lines, of mean response to the two questions that ask the extent to which respondents agree that (1) government should reduce income inequality and (2) improve the standard of living. Outcome variables are rescaled to range from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating anti-redistribution sentiment. The upper and lower panels, respectively, show the public opinion trends among Democrats and Republicans. Light green, dark green, light blue, and navy lines respectively indicate those who spend less than one hour, one to two hours, three to four hours, and more than five hours watching television per day.

government in improving the standard of living by party ID and news consumption level over the last three decades. Partisans have noticeably diverged in their attitudes toward income inequality and whether they think that people should help themselves instead of relying on the government to help. However, this partisan gap is smaller among those with

low news consumption, as seen in Panels (B) and (D). But again, news consumption and entertainment media consumption are not mutually exclusive–hence it is worth breaking down these patterns further, this time conditional on the number of hours people spent watching TV per day.

There is no way to know what kinds of TV programs people watch from this data. However, when someone does not spend a lot of time reading news—which indicates low political interest—*and* also reports watching hours of television per day, it is reasonable to think that this person must watch a lot of entertainment media on a daily basis. By the same token, if someone spends a lot of time reading news—which indicates high political interest—and reports watching a lot of television, this person may be watching a lot of news on TV because news junkies in this high-choice media environment can watch the news as much as they want, anytime.

The upper left panel of Figure 4.7 shows heterogeneity in trends in Democrats' attitudes toward income inequality by TV consumption levels. Although Democrats overall became more supportive of reducing income inequality, the attitudes of Democrats with low news consumption who watch more than 2 hours of TV per day changed the least. Indeed, among Democrats with low news consumption, the biggest change in attitudes is among those who watch television less than 1 hour per day.

Figure 4.8 shows partisan trends in attitudes toward the role of government by their news consumption level as well as by TV consumption level. This time, the heterogeneity in Democrats' attitudes by their TV consumption level stands out even more. Democrats who watch more than 5 hours of TV per day have become more supportive of the idea that people should help themselves, rather than the government taking care of improving standards of living.

4.4 Discussion

It has long been known that belief in upward economic mobility legitimizes income inequality and diminishes support for wealth redistribution (Piketty 1995). Surprisingly, however, there is a dearth of experimental work that manipulates perceptions of economic mobility. A small number of existing studies assume but do not experimentally test that *how* people get ahead—by merit and hard work—is the key component in shaping people's attitudes toward income inequality and redistribution. Evidence presented in this chapter

Figure 4.8: Trends in Attitudes Toward the Role of Government by Relative News Preference and Party ID
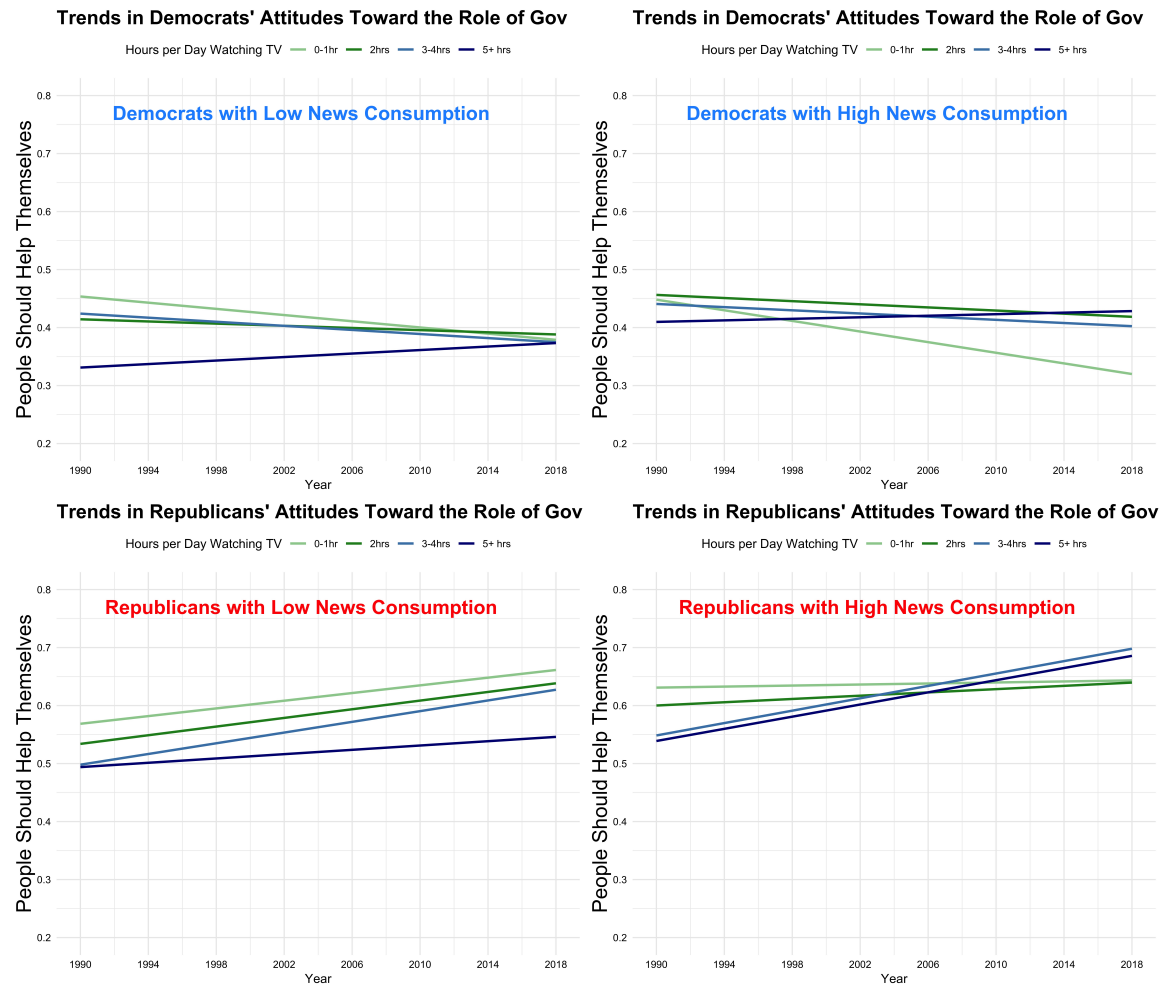
Note: Plotted lines are the best-fit lines, of mean response to the question that asks the extent to which respondents agree that people should help themselves, not rely on the government help, to improve the standard of living. Outcome variables are rescaled to range from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating individualistic sentiment. The upper and lower panels, respectively, show the public opinion trends among Democrats and Republicans. Light green, dark green, light blue, and navy lines respectively indicate those who spend less than one hour, one to two hours, three to four hours, and more than five hours watching television per day.

confirms that it is the meritocratic narrative, not simply the fact that people gain financial benefits, that matters.

The finding that the treatment effects on policy preferences are mostly driven by Democrats,

while surprising at first glance, is consistent with existing scholarship on the asymmetric nature of how partisans think about politics (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016). Republicans are known for their ideological commitment to conservatism and care about symbolic loyalty to ideological purity. Beliefs in small government or individual freedom, for instance, are deeply entrenched parts of their ideology and are hence hard to change. In contrast, Democrats are known to be a coalition of social groups with differing identities and interests, and they exhibit stronger support for specific government programs than for the broad principle of big government. As they are not confined by one broad ideology, they may have more room for in-party heterogeneity in their reactions to communication effects—in line with how American voters are famously "operationally liberal" but "symbolically conservative."

The public opinion trends in the over-time survey data presented in this chapter also shed light on the nature of this asymmetry. For Republicans, whether they watch rags-to-riches entertainment programs or Fox News, the messages that they are exposed to are quite similar: we should lift ourselves up the economic ladder through individual effort and hard work, and those who fail to do so have only themselves to blame. Indeed, such messages are much more explicit in the news media than in the entertainment media. For Democrats, this is not the case. When they are replacing news media with entertainment media, they encounter quite different types of narratives about the role of hard work and the status of meritocracy in America.

All told, rags-to-riches TV programs impact public opinion in the Gilded Age differently for partisans. They reinforce what Republicans already believe in — economic mobility—as shown in Chapter 4. But they also make Democrats more tolerant of conservative values and suppress their support for further redistribution. The macro net result is that people are generally moving away from egalitarian policy preferences (Kelly and Enns 2010; Kenworthy and McCall 2008).

Chapter 5

Conclusion: Entertaining Hearts and Minds

> "...difficult to distinguish politics from entertainment, and dangerous to try."
> — From *Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association*, 564 U.S. 786 (2011)

Over the past two decades, despite the "apocalyptic" level of income inequality, demand for redistribution in the United States has not increased. One of the most common answers to this puzzle, which defies the predictions of the workhorse political economy model, is Americans' beliefs in upward economic mobility. Students of American political culture and its liberal tradition are familiar with an extensive list of historical factors unique to the United States, such as the existence of the frontier or the Protestant work ethic (i.e. McCloskey and Zaller 1984), that are known to account for the persistence of beliefs in the American Dream. They are "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 Kluegel and Smith 1986). But how do "the myths" get sustained in 21st century America, where political elites and opinion leaders consistently talk about sharply declining economic mobility?

Bringing in insights from political communication and social psychology, this dissertation advances an exemplar-based theory of the American Dream, suggesting that individual variations in perceptions of economic mobility are a function of exposure to rags-to-riches entertainment media. Unlike much of the political science scholarship that automatically assumes that the news media is the primary source of politically relevant information, I propose that the media content that Americans watch the most—the entertainment media— offers powerful exemplars of upward mobility and would serve as an important source of information that affects people's beliefs in the American Dream. Entertainment media is not just a force that dilutes news media effects, precisely when it displays positive exemplars that are *counter* to what is present in the news media. In Chapter 2, I describe this

theory in depth, while paying attention to the popularity and ubiquity of "rags-to-riches" reality TV programs. I propose that the common elements in these shows—the presence of ordinary Americans, the narrative emphasis on hard work and talent, and dramatized economic benefits—promote beliefs in upward economic mobility. A unique combination of comprehensive Nielsen ratings data, online entertainment media databases, and original content analyses make it crystal-clear that the rags-to-riches programs are ubiquitous and widely consumed by Americans on a daily basis.

In Chapter 3, I present observational, survey and lab-in-the field experimental evidence that exposure to rags-to-riches entertainment media increases people's belief in economic mobility. These effects are mainly driven by Republicans and those who are already optimistic about the prospect of economic mobility, which sheds light on the mechanism that helps sustain these beliefs. After establishing that the entertainment media powerfully distorts people's economic perceptions, in Chapter 4, I test its more direct consequences on politics of redistribution. By using another set of lab-in-the-field experiments in suburban Pennsylvania, I show that rags-to-riches entertainment TV programs, with their narrative emphasis on meritocracy, have the power to glorify the winners in the economic system, increase tolerance for income inequality, and dampen public support for redistributive policies that could help those who are left behind. I also display aggregate over-time trends in redistributive attitudes for the past three decades, which are consistent with the experimental findings on partisan heterogeneity to shed light on how rags-to-riches media affect partisans differently.

In light of these findings, I now discuss scope conditions, implications, and two promising avenues for future research linking media effects with economic conservatism.

5.1   Scope Conditions

This dissertation used a range of data and methods to demonstrate the political consequences of the "rags-to-riches" entertainment media. The mixed-methods approach was intentional, in part to address lingering doubts about whether such media really matter for politics. It is true that "political" messages are often too scattered in most entertainment media programs. For instance, Bennett and Iyengar (2010) writes that "there is no obvious political mechanism for aggregating and linking individual preferences back into the political process" (p. 36) for us to consider programs such as *The Simpsons* as sources of meaningful media effects. Further, certain types of entertainment programs, such as soft

news and late-night comedy shows, often appeal to a politically skewed segment of the electorate. Because people are self-selecting to view these programs, the extent to which they are persuading—rather than reinforcing—the audience is unclear.

Nevertheless, the methodological advantages of focusing this dissertation on the shared rags-to-riches narratives are clear, as these messages remain the same across different episodes and programs. When people report that they watch the *The Daily Show* or *Saturday Night Live*, it is unclear what types of narratives they are exposed to. It is entirely possible that some have watched the skit on the Robert Mueller investigation, while others checked out the story about Buffalo Wild Wings' new BBQ pumpkin spice wings. On the other hand, the duration of rags-to-riches entertainment media effects was not tested in this dissertation, so it should be explored in future studies. It is possible that rags-to-riches media effects last longer than typical political campaign effects because people are more engaged with the entertaining narrative.

Even if the public's taste for shows that feature ordinary Americans dissipates, the challenges of producing high-cost scripted shows in a fragmented media market means that the vast majority of cable TV shows are expected to continue featuring ordinary Americans (Ralph Bunche Center 2015; VanDerWerff 2016). For the same financial reasons, streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon, and Apple TV now produce their own reality programs. Once again, many have a similar rags-to-riches narrative, ranging from *Planet of the Apps* (Apple), which features software makers who pitch their ideas to judges, to *Shot in the Dark* (Netflix), which highlights freelance journalists competing for stories to sell to news channels.

Given the grim expectation that the inequalities of our world will only get worse in years to come, some scholars have cautiously predicted that the power of the American Dream will erode "if the era of high inequality persists over an extended historical period" (Manza and Brooks 2014, p.31). But the market-forces that affect the supply side of the rags-to-riches entertainment media hint that Americans are likely to continue to encounter on-screen narratives of upward mobility that influence their redistributive policy preferences.

5.2   Limited Effects of Actual Mobility Experiences

Throughout this dissertation, I focused on perceptions of collective economic mobility experiences. This focus has led me to identify the mass media as the primary source of information that shapes such sociotropic perceptions, which is in sync with the decades

of political psychology scholarship on the limited role of self-interests in shaping political attitudes (i.e.,Feldman 1984; Holbrook and Garand (1996); Lane 1962; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2007; Kinder and Kiewiet 1981; Weatherford 1983). Scholars have found that individual-level measures of personal experience and perceived collective experience are sometimes significantly correlated, but typically only weakly (Mutz 1998). Indeed, people's self-interests—in other words, their own experiences—"extend neither to other related policy issues nor to more general policy or ideological questions" (Sears and Funk 1990, p. 267). Kinder (1983), too, notes that "neither losing a job, nor deteriorating family financial conditions, nor pessimism about the family's economic future has much to do with support for policies designed to alleviate personal economic distress."

Yet much of the political economy scholarship focuses on people's actual economic mobility experiences of their own. When individuals are upwardly mobile or see the chance of upward mobility for themselves, they are more likely to be conservative (Lipset and Bendix 1959), against wealth redistribution (Benabou and Ok 2001), tolerant and open to democracy (de Tocqueville 1835), and disengaged from class conflicts (Dahrendorf 1959), to name just a few characteristics.[1] As these studies are often rooted in a rational-choice voter model that dwells on self-interest, personal economic mobility continues to be theorized as a compelling basis for political attitudes (i.e., George 2017; Houle and Miller 2019). The assumption is that if one is or expects to be upwardly mobile, then she would think that many unknown other Americans are too.

If this line of thinking that personal economic experiences significantly shape sociotropic perceptions is true, it engenders three plausible hypotheses. First, as a nation's upward economic mobility—which is the aggregated sum of individual experiences—increases, sociotropic perceptions of economic mobility would become more optimistic. Second, people who live in neighborhoods of those with higher upward economic mobility would have more optimistic sociotropic perceptions of economic mobility. Third, people who are (and are more likely to be) upwardly mobile would have more optimistic sociotropic perceptions of economic mobility than those who are downwardly mobile.

Though the role of personal economic mobility experiences is not the main focus of this dissertation, here I briefly address this possibility using existing data. Patterns in actual economic mobility at the national, neighborhood, and individual levels, however, hardly explain why Americans remain optimistic about upward economic mobility. This lack of

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[1]Note, however, that none of these studies pitted the explanatory power of egotropic perceptions against that of sociotropic perceptions.

explanatory power of personal economic experiences again lends credence to my main argument, which is that the mass media is the primary source of information that shapes sociotropic perceptions of economic mobility.

Economic Mobility at the National Level

Figure 5.1: Trends in Absolute Intergenerational Mobility Rates
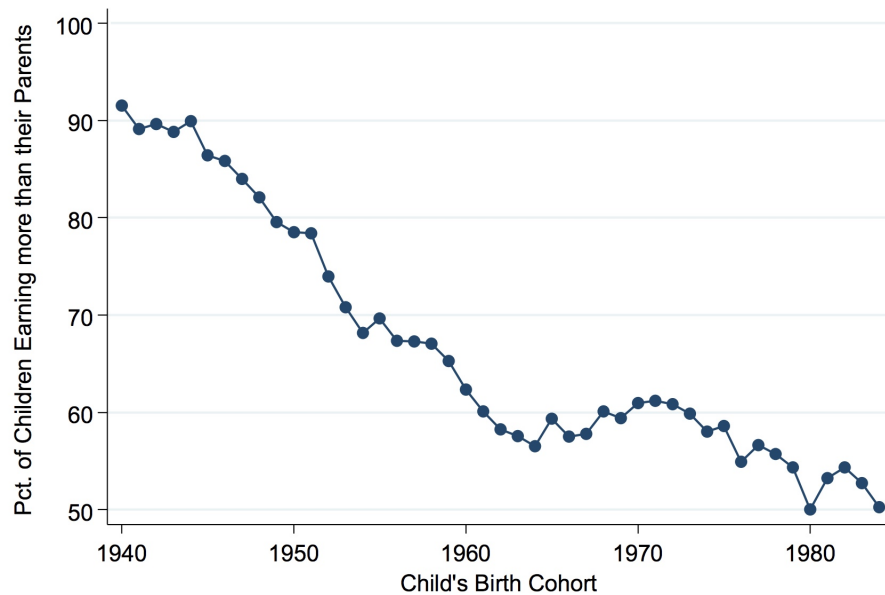
Note: Dots indicate the fraction of children earning more than their parents by parental income percentile on average by child birth cohort. *Source*: Chetty et al. 2017a or see *The Opportunity Atlas* project on www.opportunityatlas.org.

A current scholarly consensus on the state of economic mobility in the United States is that it has been declining markedly (Mazumder 2018). Using extensive federal income tax records, Raj Chetty and his colleagues (2017) estimated the probability that a child will reach the top fifth of the income distribution, conditional on having parents in the bottom fifth of the income distribution. Their grim finding is that the rates of absolute upward income mobility in the United States have fallen sharply since 1940, mostly due to lower GDP growth rates and greater income inequality (see also Davis and Mazumder 2017;

Figure 5.2: Trends in Beliefs about Upward Mobility 1981-2018
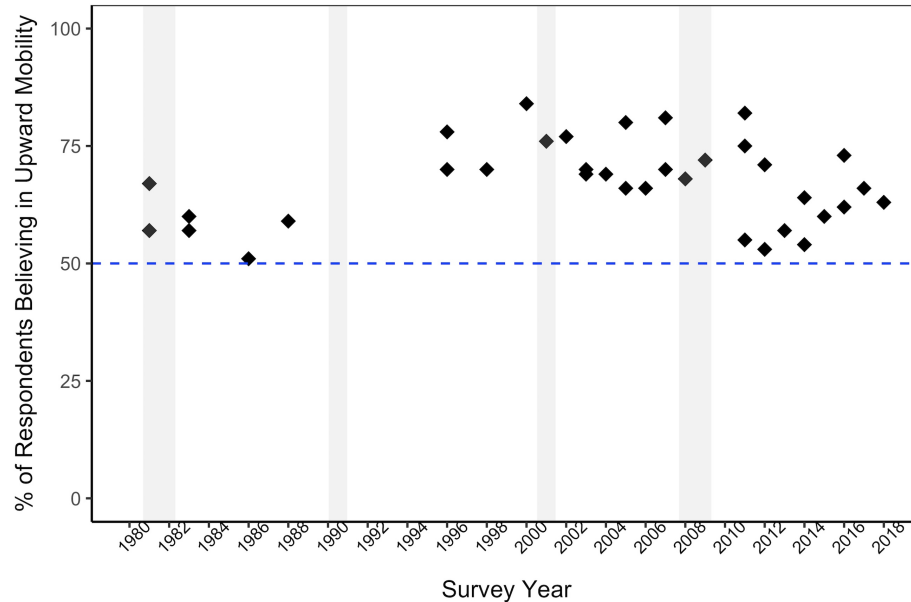
Note: Dots indicate the percentage of respondents who believe that it is possible to get ahead by working hard or that they are satisfied with the opportunity to get ahead. Grey bars indicate recessions as determined by the National Bureau of Economic Research. *Source*: CBS News/New York Times Poll, Gallup Poll, and Merit Report.

Hilger 2017). As seen in Figure 5.1, 90% of children born in 1940 earned more than their parents; however, only 50% of children born in the 1980s did so.[2]

Naturally, we would expect that sociotropic perceptions of economic mobility would have become more pessimistic over time. But the national patterns of beliefs in economic mobility over time defy such an expectation. As there is no long-standing national survey that repeatedly asks questions about economic mobility,[3] I rely on a variety of national polls that used a similarly worded question, leveraging the survey database from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.

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[2] Also, economic mobility is particularly lower in the United States compared to other developed economies (Corak 2013). In other words, there is no longer ample empirical ground for describing America as the "land of opportunity."

[3] One of the most widely used survey questions of subjective mobility perceptions in the General Social Survey, for instance, asks respondents to indicate the degree to which they agree that "people like me and my family have a good chance of improving our standard of living." (See also McCall 2013) But it is not clear whether this question truly captures "sociotropic" perceptions of economic mobility because "people like me and my family" is a vague term.

Figure 5.3: Trends in Opinions of How People Get Ahead 1973-2016
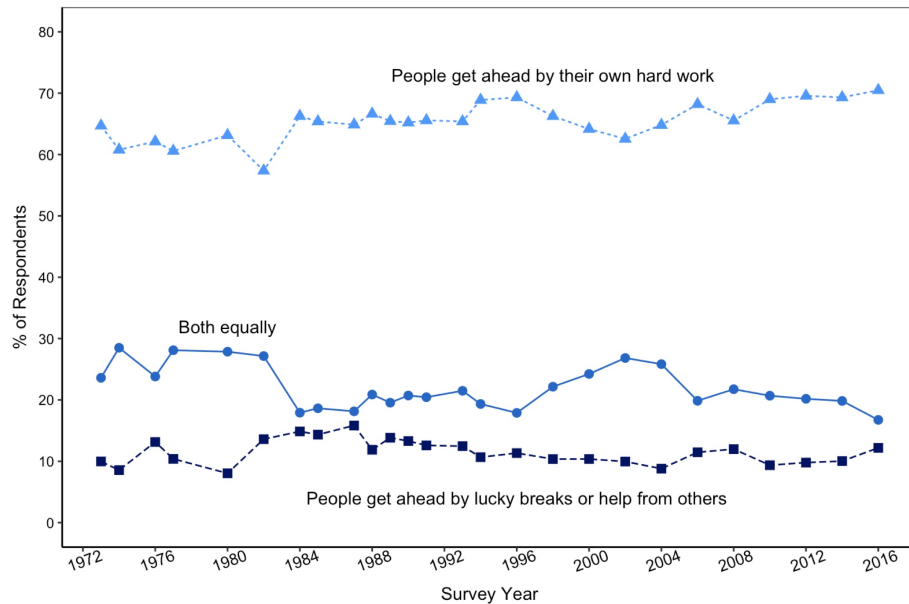
Note: Each line plots the percentage of respondents who agree with the said statement about how people improve their standards of living. *Source*: General Social Survey

As shown in Figure 5.3, though there are certainly temporal variations in beliefs about collective upward mobility, the percentage of respondents who remain optimistic has never been below 50%. Even the CBS Poll conducted immediately after the Great Recession indicated that 72% of Americans believed it was possible to start out poor in this country, work hard, and become rich. In reviewing a vast array of public opinion polls on economic mobility from 1990 to 2011, Shaw and Gaffey (2012) too note that Americans' beliefs in economic mobility have remained somewhat stable despite changing economic conditions. The belief that economic mobility is primarily determined by individuals' hard work rather than luck or help from others, has been consistently high as well. As shown in Figure 5.3, despite declining economic mobility, a sound majority of Americans have consistently indicated that hard work is the reason people improve their standard of living.

Economic Mobility at the County Level

Another way to examine the relevance of personal economic experiences in shaping sociotropic perceptions of economic mobility is utilizing geographic variations.

Figure 5.4: The Realities and Perceptions of Upward Mobility

Intergenerational Mobility Rates

40 50 60

Belief in Upward Mobility
0.00 0.25 0.50 0.75 1.00
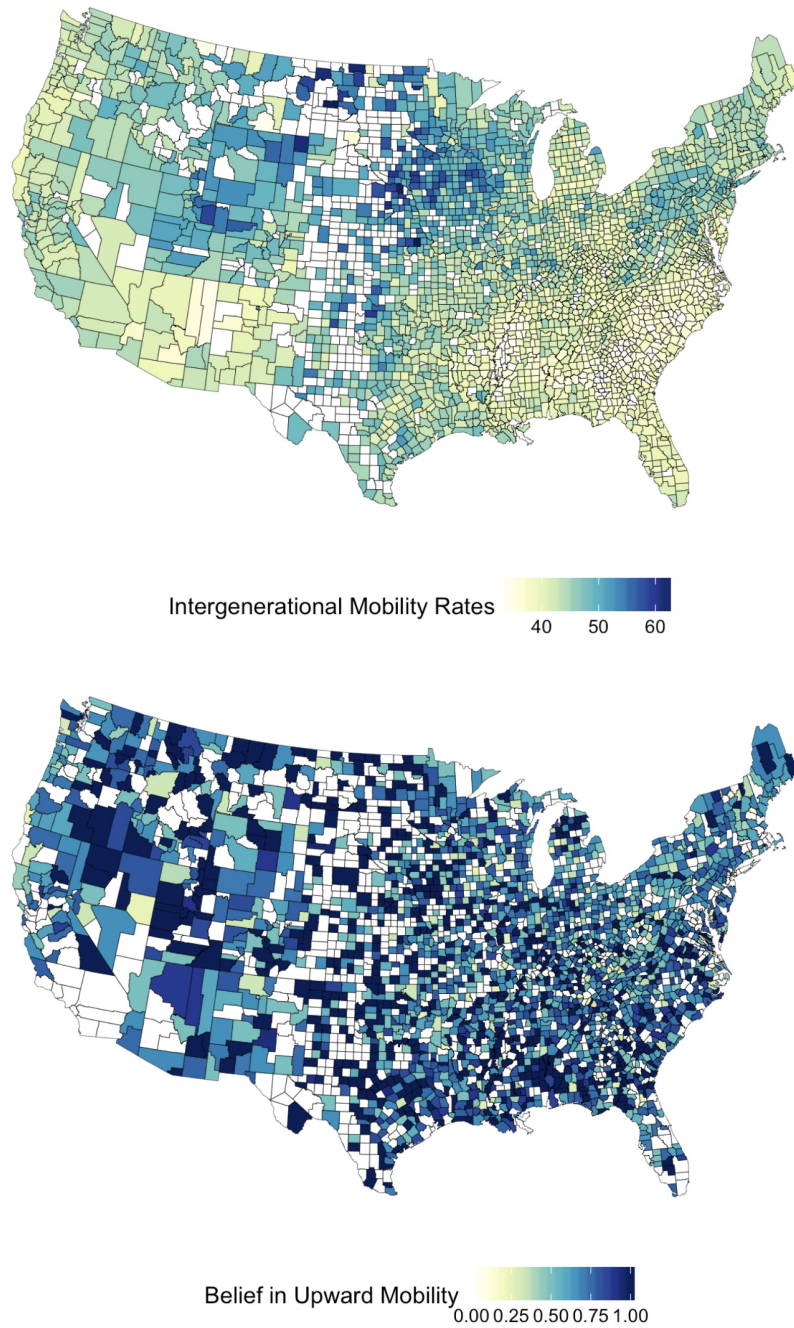
Note: The darker shades of blue indicate higher absolute intergenerational mobility rates and more optimistic beliefs in upward mobility. *Source*: The Opportunity Atlas and 2007 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey (RLS)

Economic mobility has been declining in the United States, but only in certain areas. For instance, the fate of low-income children in Charlotte, North Carolina, is much grimmer than their counterparts in Salt Lake City, Utah. The striking color-coded map of absolute intergenerational mobility rates by Raj Chetty and his colleagues, as reproduced in the top panel of Figure 5.4, reveals the locations where dreams have been lost.

But what about *perceptions* of the American Dream? That is, are people in Charlotte, North Carolina—in accordance with their own economic mobility experiences—much more pessimistic about economic mobility than their counterparts in Salt Lake City? If we believe that people's own economic experiences primarily shape sociotropic perceptions, then the county-level maps of economic mobility and of beliefs in economic mobility should reasonably overlap.

Figure 5.5: No Correlation Between Actual and Perceived Level of County-Level Upward Mobility
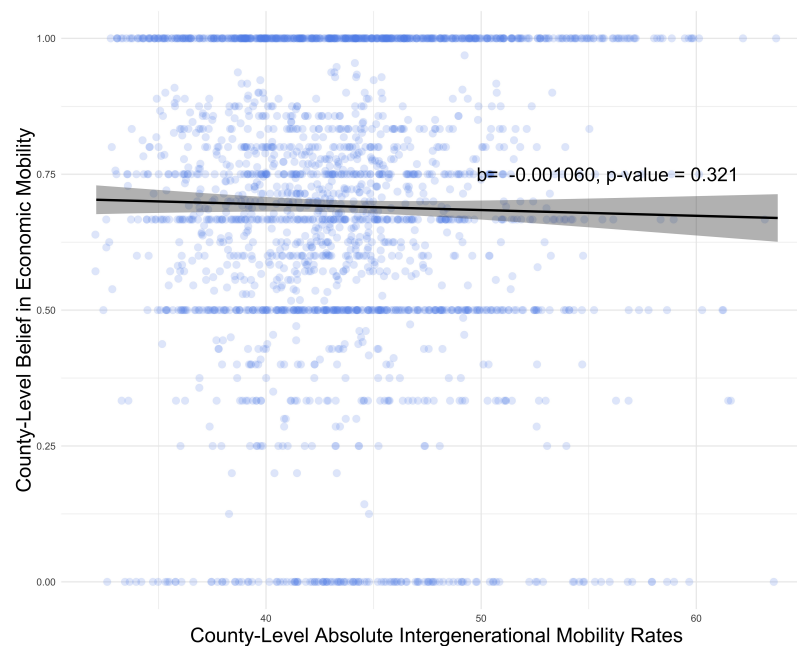
Note: Dots are jittered. The black line represents the slope from the liner regression result, and the grey area represents 95% condence intervals. *Source*: The Opportunity Atlas and the 2007 US Religious Landscape Survey.

To answer this question, I turn to the 2007 US Religious Landscape Survey that interviewed a nationally representative sample of 35,556 adults. Though this survey is a bit

outdated, its unusually large survey sample—which enabled me to calculate the county-level averages of public opinion—included one question that taps into beliefs in economic mobility. Respondents were able to choose among three statements: "Most people who want to get ahead can make it if they're willing to work hard;" "Hard work and determination are no guarantee of success for most people;" and "Both equally." The answers are rescaled to range from 0 to 1 so that higher values indicate the belief that most hard-working people can get ahead.

As seen in Figure 5.4, the map of county-level beliefs in economic mobility looks very different from the map of actual upward mobility rates, with no systematic patterns. Indeed, Figure 5.5 shows that the correlation between actual levels of upward mobility and belief in upward mobility is not statistically significant (b =-0.0002037, $p = 0.728$), suggesting that where people live does not seem to matter much in regard to their beliefs in upward economic mobility.

Economic Mobility at the Individual Level

One other factor that might shape people's sociotropic perceptions of economic mobility is their personal economic mobility experience. Past research has shown that there are certain groups who can get ahead more easily than other groups in America (Chetty et al. 2018). The correlates of personal economic mobility are not surprising given what we already know about typical markers of societal privilege. Whites are much likelier to get ahead than racial minorities, as are those with higher household incomes and better educations, as well as those who are male. One natural hypothesis is, then, that a person who has experienced or expects to experience upward economic mobility *for herself* is more likely to have more optimistic perceptions about economic mobility for others.

To examine this hypothesis, I once again turn to the RLS survey, this time comparing beliefs in economic mobility held by different subgroups. Figure 5.6 displays the levels of beliefs in economic mobility by education level, income, race, sex, age, and whether the respondent has or had immigrant parents. Consistent with the expectation, males and those who have high incomes hold more optimistic beliefs about economic mobility. However, the patterns in beliefs in economic mobility by education, race, age, and immigration experiences defy expectations.

For instance, ironically, those who have the highest levels of education—people who earned master's degrees and above—are the most pessimistic about the idea that most people can get ahead if they work hard. Though whites are more optimistic than blacks—which

Figure 5.6: Heterogeneous Beliefs in Upward Economic Mobility
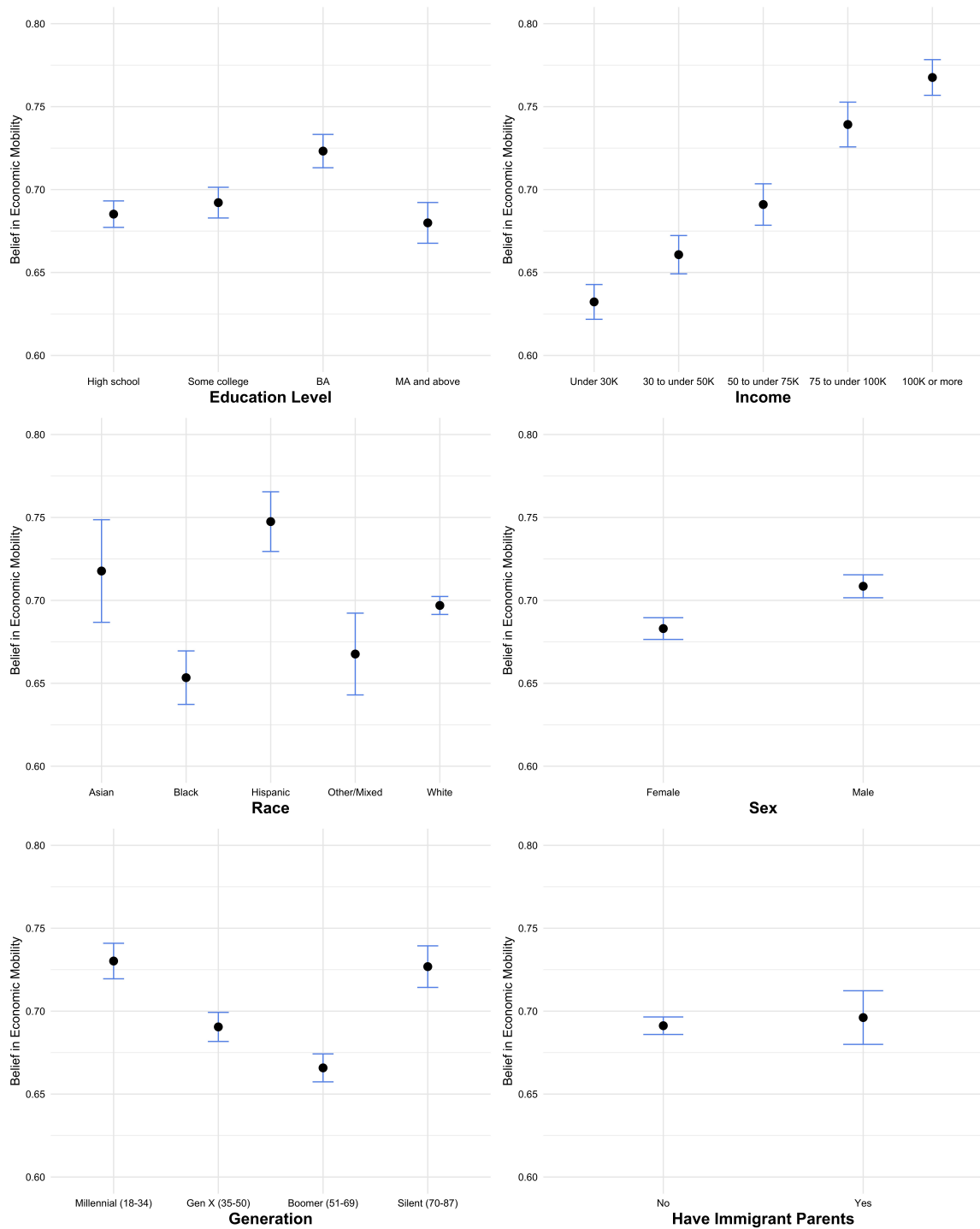
Note: Black dots indicate the extent to which respondents believe that upward mobility is possible for most people as long as they work hard. The outcome variable is rescaled to range from 0 to 1 for the ease of interpretation. Light blue bars indicate the 95% CI. *Source*: 2007 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey

is consistent with economic reality—it is Hispanics, not Asians, who are the most opti-mistic. Furthermore, Baby Boomers—who were born into an America of considerable wealth and economic security and were able to find well-paying jobs and own homes—are the most pessimistic. In stark contrast, Millennials—who experienced the sharpest decline in intergenerational mobility—are the most optimistic.

Granted, these are snapshots of perceptions of economic mobility measured a decade ago. But recent studies also confirm how puzzling the predictors of beliefs in economic mobility are. In one of the few studies that explores predictors of sociotropic mobility perceptions, Davidai and Gilovich (2018) find that it is typically those who are "disad-vantaged by the economic system," such as low-income or non-white respondents, who believe that society offers more economic opportunities for everyone. Alesina, Stantcheva and Teso (2018) also find a similar pattern: Men, those earning high incomes, and the college-educated are more likely to be pessimistic about the prospect of upward mobility for others. These counter-intuitive patterns in beliefs in economic mobility once again un-derscore that personal economic experiences have little explanatory power. All told, when it comes to the question of *where* people draw their information about whether the United States is still the land of opportunity, the mass media stands as the most convincing answer. .

5.3 Implications

Dilemma for Redistributive Democracy

The findings in the previous chapters shed new light on a phenomenon that has baffled many students of redistributive democracy. Undergirding long-standing economic theories of redistribution is an assumption that citizens will favor more generous levels of redistribu-tion when there is an increasing concentration of wealth and resources at the top (Benabou 2000; Meltzer and Richard 1983).

But even now, when the income gap in the United States is at its highest since the 1920s (Piketty 2014), scholars have discovered this "puzzling" phenomenon in which citizens are generally moving away from more egalitarian policy preferences even as the income gap widens (Ashok, Kuziemko and Washington 2015; Kelly and Enns 2010; Kenworthy and McCall 2008).

In a collective quest to explain why, scholars have extensively written about how Amer-icans may be *mis*perceiving income inequality; that is, Americans are either unaware of or

vastly underestimating the extent of income inequality (Chambers, Swan and Heesacker 2014; Cruces, Perez-Truglia and Tetaz 2013; Gimpelson and Treisman 2018). Consistent with this "misperception" explanation, when people are forced to consume news-like information about the actual level of income inequality in a survey experiment setting, they are much more likely to see income inequality as a serious problem and increase support for redistributive policies, ranging from raising the top income tax rate to increasing the minimum wage (Alesina, Stantcheva and Teso 2018; Kuziemko et al. 2015). Hence, the conclusion is that public attitudes toward inequality are "very elastic to information" (Kuziemko et al. 2015).

But how do we square this conclusion with the fact that the news media provides a plethora of information about the alarming level of income inequality? This seeming paradox can be resolved if we recognize that Americans are watching four hours of television every day (Koblin 2016)[4] and are receiving distorted information about upward mobility from the entertainment media.

Belief in economic mobility can powerfully legitimize wealth disparity (Corak 2013; Kluegel and Smith 1986; Shariff, Wiwad and Aknin 2016), and scholars of class and inequality should recognize that nonpolitical mass media—the lion's share of today's information environment—cultivates foundational aspects of American politics, such as beliefs in economic freedom and individualism. This dissertation has demonstrated that public attitudes toward economic mobility are indeed "elastic to information;" its novel contribution, however, is that I have taken a much broader approach to defining "information" and politically relevant exemplars it offers.

These findings pose a democratic dilemma. Implicit in this dissertation's premise is an argument that an accurate perception of economic mobility—which would be a much more pessimistic one that aligned with economic reality—is better for democratic politics. When citizens are aware of the cracks in the economic ladder, they push the government to address such problems. Yet in other parts of the world, the opposite is happening. In South Korea, public support for redistribution and welfare has certainly increased along with pervasive pessimism about the country's economic mobility. But policies that remedy economic woes typically take a long time to take effect; meanwhile, lost hopes for upward mobility have led many young people to postpone marriage and having a child. With historically low birth rates, emptying rural schools now put grandmothers and children in the same classroom

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[4] American exceptionalism also applies to the realm of TV consumption: the United States has second-to-none TV consumption rates compared to all other developed economies (OECD 2013).

(Choe 2019; Pew Research Center 2015). If Americans' persistent beliefs in economic mobility instill a sense of hope for their own lives, if such "false consciousness" propels many to develop innovative products, apply for more opportunities, and seek their own aspirations, the rags-to-riches narratives might be indeed beneficial for many individuals— even though their collective impact on politics might be the opposite. This dissertation offers no easy solution to this normative dilemma.

Future of Political Communication Research

Americans consume an enormous amount of media each day, and there was a time when academics could safely assume that general media exposure was a good proxy for political news exposure. In a bygone media era, watching a news program during dinner was a familiar routine for most American households: America's most-watched TV program was CBS's *60 Minutes*.

Today, provocative headlines about the dangers of the echo chamber and misinformation easily create an impression that many Americans are constantly consuming news and thinking about politics. When asked to estimate the number of Americans watching *Fox News*, my cab driver's guess, for instance, was "the half of the nation" that voted for the Republican party. Unfortunately, more educated guesses from academics are often not that different. So much of contemporary research is about partisan media and fake news, for instance, that it is easy to lose sight of what Americans are actually consuming the most on a day-to-day basis.

Take the cable news channels, for instance. According to Nielsen ratings, less than 8% of Americans tune into network news regularly, and only 1% of American adults (around 1.7 million) watch cable news regularly (Prior 2013). The Fox News Channel, currently the most-watched cable network, attracts around 2.2 million viewers during primetime (Nielsen 2019), with CNN now attracting less than 1 million viewers. Even accounting for the problems of inflated self-reporting, the audience for broadcast news has been shrinking every year in survey data. In one nationally representative panel survey, the percentage of people who do not watch any political TV programs increased from 20% in 2008 to 27% in 2012 and to 33.8% in 2014 (Mutz and Kim 2017).

But don't people consume the news in different ways now? Maybe the audience for the "traditional" TV news programs has been shrinking, but people consume news via different outlets—smartphones, computers, and tablet PCs. They do—but wait, do they?

In a recent paper that leverages an impressive number of web-browsing records, Flax-man, Goel and Rao (2016) had to significantly reduce the initial sample of 1.2 million individuals in order to focus on people who consume even a small dose of news online. This analysis was based on the subset of people "who have read at least ten substantive news articles and at least two opinion pieces" between March and May 2013. This "strin-gent" requirement reduced the sample to only 50,000 users. In other words, during one three-month time period in a non-election year, 96% of Internet users read fewer than 12 news articles, or approximately one news article per week. This is a "surprisingly" small fraction of the population.[5]

Other statistics tell a similar story about how Americans are increasingly avoiding the news. In a study analyzing 2.8 million Twitter shares, Gabielkov et al. (2016) found that 59% of news links shared on social media have never actually been clicked, indicating that the widespread impression that people are constantly tweeting about politics is grossly misleading. Another study that examined 10 million Facebook users also finds that articles about national news, politics, and world affairs constituted only about 13% of all articles shared (Bakshy, Messing and Adamic 2015). The rest concerned something nonpolitical, such as entertainment, sports, or travel. Hindman's study (2008) using traffic data from 2007 also showed less than 3% of all web traffic targets news and political sites. Similarly, a recent survey by the American Press Institute reveals that approximately 6 out of 10 Americans have watched, read, or heard news stories only through headlines in the past week (American Press Institute 2014). These numbers are astounding, suggesting that news consumption today is more like a hobby for a small subpopulation, with most citizens choosing other media options that they find more entertaining than political reports.[6]

Social scientists must grapple with the bleak reality of American news consumption. It is important to note that the absolute amount of political news has increased in recent decades (Aalberg, Van Aelst and Curran 2010; Esser et al. 2012). There are now channels devoted to broadcasting only political news, and the rise of the Internet has enabled a plethora of blogs, independent news sites, and citizen journalism. Whether the quality of

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[5]Flaxman, Goel and Rao (2016) write: "whatever the ultimate cause, the fact that such a small fraction of the population regularly reads online news arguably has considerable impact on both political discourse and media production, though we by and large leave further discussion of these topics to future work."

[6]It is also worth noting that this affinity for entertainment may well be prominently an American behavior; Americans know much more about celebrity affairs than public affairs than their European counterparts. Less than 4 of 10 Americans could identify Nicolas Sarkozy as the president of France or knew that the Kyoto Accords were about climate change. But over 90% of Americans correctly identified celebrities such as Mel Gibson, Donald Trump (a reality TV star at the time), and Britney Spears (Curran et al. 2009).

news is declining is another topic of discussion, but as Van Aelst et al. (2017) note in their comprehensive review of contemporary political communication research, the increasing absolute amount of political news does not indicate an increase in the relative amount of political news as a share of the overall media supply (p.6). Indeed, even though there is more political information available than ever before, there is an even greater increase in nonpolitical media content, such as sports and entertainment. This decreasing share of political media coverage means that it is now easier to consume media while avoiding political news altogether (Prior 2007).

By boldly expanding what constitutes "political relevant information," this dissertation carries important implications for the study of political communication, and of public opinion more generally. My results underscore the overdue need to expand the scope of political communication and public opinion research beyond news. Granted, it is difficult to even hypothesize what would be the net impact of exposure to the many different programs that people binge watch. On the other hand, as this dissertation has demonstrated, one promising step would be to focus on the shared narrative and common elements that different programs have. Have narratives about LGBTQ citizens or the role of women, for instance, changed across the board? Do all popular crime series, for instance, promote similar misperceptions about the criminal justice system and the police (i.e. Byers and Johnson 2009; Cole and Dioso-Villa 2006)? Answering these questions would require a creative synthesis between econometric approaches, which typically estimate the causal effects of aggregate-level media exposure, and qualitative approaches that take the specifics of media content seriously.

5.4   Media Effects and Economic Conservatism

In considering the next steps beyond identifying the effects of rags-to-riches media, here I discuss two lines of inquiry that are at the intersection of media effects and public economic conservatism.

Sports and Winner-Takes-All Society

In this fragmented media market, chances are slim that we watch the same TV shows as our co-workers and friends. With "too much TV to choose from," many pundits have lamented the loss of cultural common ground (New York Times 2015). Gone are the days when we could talk about the Cosby Show with virtually anyone in the office near the water cooler.

But if there's any common media experience left that brings Americans together, it is certainly sports. On the day of the 2019 Super Bowl, the CBS broadcast of the victory by the New England Patriots was watched by approximately 100 million people. As a point of comparison, *Game of Thrones* on HBO—a widely popular program referred to as a cultural phenomenon—attracts around 17 million Americans. It is obvious that the cultural impacts of sports cannot be negligible.

Though it is still rare that political scientists ponder the consequences of sports for our democratic life, sports have always been an important part of American political culture. For Dwight Eisenhower, "the true mission of American sports is to prepare young people for war;" for some NFL players, the football stadium has served as a place for powerfully visible political protests against racial injustice.

But sports media, much like rags-to-riches TV programs, also have an ample potential for influencing Americans' beliefs about meritocracy, promoting conservative views about the role of government. Not only do many sports stars have their own rags-to-riches stories, the "level playing field" of sports typically evokes the spirit of a Darwinian "survival of the fittest" and is known to convey subtle ideologically conservative messages (Sage 1990; Whannel 2005).

Indeed, in one of the few studies that examines the impact of sports on political attitudes, Thorson and Serazio (2016) hypothesize that sports media may reify a narrative of economic individualism and affect how Americans attribute economic success to internal factors. Using a nationally representative survey, the study finds that sports fans are more likely to believe that economic success is a result of meritocratic process and that internal factors, such as individual ambitions and perseverance, matter more for getting ahead than structural factors.

Granted, the magnitude of effects found in that study is relatively small[7], and this observational study cannot tell us whether the sports media is actually *causing* these attitudinal changes. But given the common knowledge that American sports culture is mostly a conservative space, future research should document the political consequences of sports media, possibly by leveraging a quasi-random geographic variation in sports viewership or utilizing different survey timing in public opinion data (i.e. see Depetris-Chauvin, Durante and Campante 2018)

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[7]For example, "a one-unit change in fan intensity (as measured on a five-point scale) is associated with a .03 change (on a four-point scale) in those meritocratic attitudes."

Social Media, Envy, and Inequality

For a long time, we have known that human beings tend to assess their self-worth by comparing themselves to others, envy those who are better off, and desire power and status within the group they belong to (Tesser 2000). As central as it is to our everyday life, social comparison is also a powerful driver of our political life. In *Envy in Politics*, McClendon (2018) sheds light on the role of status motivations in shaping people's political preferences and behaviors. It turns out, for instance, that people are more supportive of greater redistribution only when such policies would make them better off than their neighbors.[8]

Though McClendon does not say much about the role of media, it is hard not to miss the ample opportunity that the contemporary media environment offers us to compare our lives to those of others. Indeed, in the entire span of human history, when did we ever know this much about the lives of others? In the world of Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, our friends as well as many unknown others constantly boast of their exotic trips abroad, new cars, and designer bags. In this carefully curated world online, we rarely encounter the stories and photos of those who are poor.

There is now growing empirical evidence about the impact of social media on our mental well-being. Thal (2019) cleverly offers a theory of how social media matters for the politics of inequality. Using a survey experiment, he finds that social media, by fueling envy and status concerns, causes affluent American men to be more economically conservative. Because this particular group—wealthy American men—have disproportionate inuence in politics (e.g., Carnes 2013; Druckman and Jacobs 2015; Gilens 2012), their status-seeking behaviors, fueled by changes in the media environment, matter for the politics of redistribution.

We are, however, still left with questions about the implications of social media for ordinary Americans' attitudes toward income inequality or redistribution.[9] Social media may also fuel economic conservatism among non-affluent Americans if exposure to the lifestyles of those who are better off provokes envy rather than resentment. In addition, social media may powerfully disguise the extent of real-world inequality. For example,

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[8]In other words, sometimes people are willing to disadvantage themselves or their own in-group to maximize their relative advantage. See Mutz and Kim (2017) for a discussion on this tendency dubbed "Vladimir's choice."

[9]Thal's results are focused on affluent Americans whose annual income is more than $150,000, and he finds that for non-affluent Americans, status motivation is not an important predictor of their support for conservative economic policies.

Indaco and Manovich (2016) use 7.5 million publicly shared and geotagged photos taken in Manhattan to find that the poor parts of Manhattan are less represented in the world of social media. We are already economically segregated in physical space, and even in cyberspace we may be losing the power to imagine and see the lives of those who have less.

5.5 Conclusion

Many of us vividly remember the election night of 2016, when a celebrity businessman who defied expectations at every stage of the campaign won the presidency in a stunning upset over Hillary Clinton. Although this was not the first time America elected a celebrity as commander in chief, Donald Trump's "improbable" victory brought entertainment media to the epicenter of political discussion. We could laugh away politicians' occasional appearances on late-night comedy shows; this time, however, it was simply impossible to ignore the role that *The Apprentice*, a reality TV show that Trump hosted for more than a decade, might have played in an election that challenged many prediction models.

Once again, however, discussions about the political consequences of entertainment media effects soon vanished. The Trump presidency evoked far thornier questions, ranging from the rise of authoritarianism and anti-immigration sentiment to intensified racial conflicts and opposition to globalization. Mainstream social science scholarship has turned its gaze to those questions, and the world has moved on from one unusual TV program. To this day, we do not know who were the regular viewers of this TV show that may have changed the fate of American democracy and have no convincing empirical evidence whether and to what extent Donald Trump benefited from his celebrity status. *At the end of the day, why would we need such evidence? Let's focus on the fundamentals that matter.*

In the meantime, the world has seen this: Ukraine has just elected as president the comedian Volodymyr Zelensky, with zero political experience. Zelensky is best-known for starring in one of the country's most popular television series, *Servant of the People*, in which his character accidentally becomes Ukrainian president and attempts to change a corrupt political system. In the Philippines, 44 celebrities—actors, singers, and comedians—ran as political candidates in the 2016 election alone, and many of them won office across the country. Among them is Vicente "Tito" Sotto III, one of the Philippines' most famous stars and now an influential senator, who for more than 30 years hosted a highly rated noontime variety show.

In Russia, Vladimir Putin is exploring uncharted territory by appearing in a weekly reality show on state television. The show describes how the president's week has been and features Putin's intense hiking and boating activities as well as his warm and positive conservations with everyday Russians. Moviegoers in China now get a dose of Communist Party propaganda before every movie screening. This government-issued video featuring A-list Chinese celebrities talks about socialist core values and Xi Jinping's patriotic vision for the "Chinese Dream."

Entertainment once hummed along creating the background noise of our political lives. Nowadays, it has come to the foreground, and intervenes in politics more than ever. The boundary of "politically relevant media" has become porous. As more and more citizens around the globe are consuming an astounding amount of entertainment media, researchers are doing an immense disservice by glossing over these "nonpolitical" media and underestimating their consequences.

My aim of course is not to suggest that news media do not matter. The politically attentive segment of the electorate who watch news are those who turn out to vote, call their congressmen and women, and donate money to candidates. But the asymmetry between what Americans spend the most time watching and what public opinion scholars spend the most time researching is hard to miss. When today's young adults, who grew up with YouTube, Netflix, and HBO rather than with Lester Holt of *NBC Evening News*, replace older cohorts, this asymmetry, if continued, would be regrettable.

Future studies of political culture would be incomplete without grappling with entertainment media effects. I cannot but think that the 21st century version of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* would certainly have a volume on the astounding level of nonpolitical media consumption and its peculiar effects on unequal democracy in America.

Appendix A

Appendix

A.1 Survey Questionnaire

A.1.1 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

A.1.2 Survey Experiment Questionnaire

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.

Q. Please choose the word you've just heard.

- Television
- Fantasy
- Entertainment
- Drama
- Soap Opera
- 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?

- Republican
- Democrat
- Independent
- Other
- Don't know

    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)

– In uncertain times, I usually expect the best.

– If something can go wrong for me it will.

– I am always optimistic about my future.

– I hardly ever expect things to go my way.

– I rarely count on good things happening to me.

– 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)

– In general, I find society to be fair.

– American society needs to be radically restructured.

– It is possible to start out poor in this country, work hard and become well-off.

– Most policies serve the greater good.

– Everyone has a fair shot at wealth and happiness.

– Our society is getting worse every year.

– 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

Note: The Shark Tank treatment featured two young entrepreneurs who were pitching their start-up business product to the panel of judges who are business investors. They explained how they developed the idea of caffeinated chewing coffee pouches in their dorm room, and how they put effort in 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, deaf singer-songwriter. 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 is featured with his new-born baby, and tells how he will be able to pay for a high-quality education for his son if he wins. The treatment video ends with him finishing one obstacle course in record-breaking time.

The Toy Box treatment showed an elderly female toymaker pitching a multilingual doll she invented to representatives from major toy-making companies. She explained how she spent years developing this toy and faced many financial challenges in the process. The video ends with her doll being endorsed and chosen by the judges. To ensure that respondents were familiar with each TV program and the award offered to winning contestants, each treatment began with a brief trailer introducing the general purpose of the TV program, and how anyone in America could participate and achieve immense economic gain by winning.

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)

– Anyone who works hard has a fair chance to succeed and live a comfortable life.

– It is possible to start out poor in this country, work hard and become well-off.

– United States is no longer the land of opportunity.

– Success in life is pretty much determined by forces outside our control.

– Hard work and determination are no guarantee of success for most people.

– 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)

- The person on the show profited a lot financially from being on it.

- The person featured in the program is likely to have a higher income from now on.

- The person featured in the program has a good work ethic.

- 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

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

– The United States is the land of opportunity

– It is possible to start out poor in this country, work hard, and become well-off.

– Most people who want to get ahead can make it if they are willing to work hard.

– Anyone who works hard has a fair chance to succeed and live a comfortable life.

Q. Why do you think that some people get ahead further than others?

Some people are more ambitious and determined than others.
Some people work harder than others.
Some people have a good education.
Some people are more talented than others.
Technological changes and automation benefited some more than others.
Some come from a wealthy family.
Politicians have failed to implement good policies that advance equality of opportunity.
Some people have well-educated parents.

Q. Which of the two statements is closer to your view? Some people are rich because...

1) they worked harder than others
2) they had more advantaged than others

Q. Which of the two statements is closer to your view? Some people are poor due to...

1) lack of efforts on his or her own part
2) Circumstances beyond his or her control

Q. Please tell us the extent to which you agree or disagree..

1) The income gap between the rich and poor is not a serious problem.
2) People make different contributions in a society, some more, others less. Therefore, income inequality is a desirable feature of modern society.
3) High-income earners in our society generally deserve their pay.

Q. Some people feel that the government in Washington should see to it that every person has a job and a good standard of living. Suppose these people are at one end of a scale, at point 1. Others think that the government should just let each person get ahead on

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his/her own. Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7. And of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between, at points 2,3, 4,5, or 6. How about you?

1) Government should guarantee jobs and a good standard of living.
7) Government should let each person get ahead on his/her own.

Q. Please tell us the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.

1)The government should increase the tax rates on Americans earning more than $250,000 a year.
2) The government should not reduce the gap between the rich and poor.
3) Government assistance to the unemployed should be reduced.
4) We should combat residential segregation by expanding federal rental assistance program in high-poverty neighborhoods.

Q. Next we are going to ask some questions about your perceptions of the person in the TV program you just watched. Think about [insert the name of the contestant(s)] as you answer these questions. Please tells us the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.

1)The person featured in the program will profit 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 and talent.
4) The person featured in the program showed how a person can succeed if he or she works hard.

A.2 Data Descriptions and Full Regression Results

A.2.1 Internet Movie Database

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 top 22 genres that appear the most: Action, Adventure, Animation, Biography, Comedy, Crime, Documentary, Drama, Family, Fantasy, Game, History, Horror, Reality-TV, Music, Mystery, News, Romance, Sci-Fi, Sport, Talk, Thriller (listed here in alpha order). I calculated the average proportion of each genre per year.

Figure A.1: IMDb.com Sample Program Entry
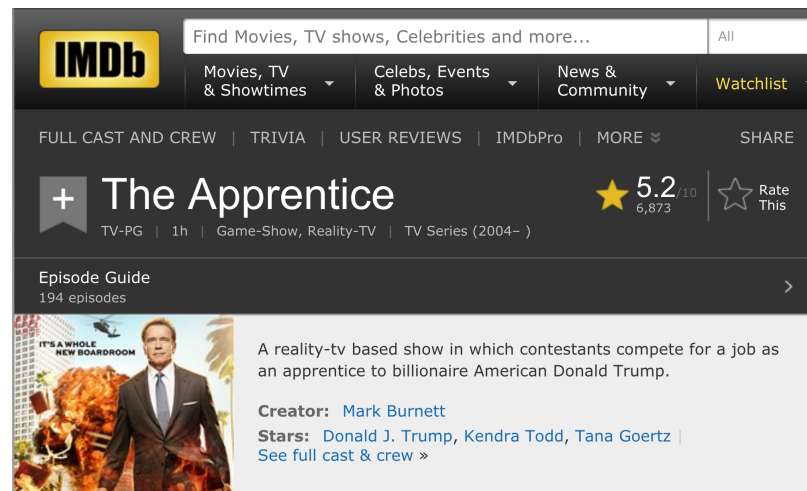
A.2.2 Nielsen Ratings Data 2015-2017

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. For 2015-2016 season, for instance, there exist 39 TV program entries for AP, 5,050 for DO, 926 for GV, 1,061 for IA, 238 for PV, 71 for QG, 25 for QP, 357 for U, and these came with 10,063 entries of shows. 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 10,063 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.

Figure A.2: TV Tango.com Sample Search Result

A.2.3 Media & Culture Survey

Table A.1: Summary Statistics

Variable name	min	max	mean
Belief in Economic Mobility	0	1	0.6796
Rags-to-riches reality TV	0	12	2.749
Other Reality TV	0	8	1.281
Sports TV	0	10	2.043
Education	1	4	2.281
Income	1	4	2.738
Married	0	1	0.427
Female	0	1	0.506
Age	18	100	45.8
White	0	1	0.629
Unemployed	0	1	0.099
Political interest	1	4	3.090
Religions attendance	1	5	2.503
Protestant	0	1	0.245
Democrat	0	1	0.496
Republican	0	1	0.340
Optimism	1	4	3.325
Personal economic insecurity	1	4	2.601
System justification tendency	1	5	2.730
Subjective intergenerational mobility experience	1	5	3.482
Immigrant parents	0	1	0.164
County-level absolute intergenarational mobility rates	30.86	58.91	41.48
County-level gini coefficient	0.207	1.097	0.460

Table A.2: Full regression results (Rags-to-Riches TV consumption as a factor variable)

	Dependent variable:				
	Belief in Economic Mobility				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Occasional Viewer	0.019	0.016	0.014	0.013	0.008
	(0.012)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.010)
Frequent Viewer	0.047***	0.038**	0.032**	0.032**	0.024*
	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.010)
Heavy Viewer	0.076***	0.063***	0.042**	0.040*	0.033*
	(0.013)	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.014)
Other Reality TV		−0.00005	0.001	0.001	−0.001
		(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Sports TV		0.007**	0.007**	0.007**	0.005*
		(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Republican		0.124***	0.117***	0.117***	0.085***
		(0.013)	(0.012)	(0.013)	(0.011)
Democrat		−0.005	−0.004	−0.003	0.005
		(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.010)
Education		−0.022***	−0.022***	−0.022***	−0.020***
		(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Income		0.008**	−0.002	−0.002	−0.001
		(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Married		0.020*	0.017*	0.016	0.012
		(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.008)
Female		0.011	0.011	0.011	0.029***
		(0.010)	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.008)
Age		0.002***	0.001***	0.001***	0.001***
		(0.0003)	(0.0003)	(0.0003)	(0.0002)
White		−0.014	0.018	0.017	0.005
		(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.009)
Unemployed		−0.045**	−0.032*	−0.032*	−0.022
		(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.012)
Political Interest		0.003	−0.006	−0.007	−0.002
		(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.004)
Religious Attendance		0.010***	0.005	0.005	0.001
		(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.002)
Protestant		0.010	0.010	0.010	0.016
		(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.009)
Optimism			0.057***	0.057***	0.036***
			(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Economic insecurity			0.002	0.002	0.014**
			(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Mobility experiences			0.036***	0.036***	0.022***
			(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.003)
Immigrant parents			0.045***	0.045***	0.033**
			(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.010)
Intergenerational mobility rates				0.001	0.0003
				(0.001)	(0.001)
Gini index				−0.016	−0.033
				(0.046)	(0.041)
System Justification Scale					0.144***
					(0.005)
Constant	0.649***	0.534***	0.291***	0.267**	−0.007
	(0.008)	(0.044)	(0.049)	(0.085)	(0.077)
Observations	3,004	3,004	3,004	2,998	2,998
R^2	0.013	0.162	0.239	0.239	0.393
Adjusted R^2	0.012	0.143	0.221	0.220	0.378

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table A.3: Regression results (with Rags-to-riches TV consumption as a continuous variable)

	Dependent variable:				
	Belief in Economic Mobility				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Rags-to-riches TV	0.011***	0.009***	0.007***	0.006**	0.005**
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Other reality TV		−0.002	−0.001	−0.001	−0.003
		(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Sports TV		0.006**	0.006**	0.006**	0.004*
		(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Republican		0.125***	0.118***	0.118***	0.086***
		(0.013)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.011)
Democrat		−0.005	−0.003	−0.003	0.005
		(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.010)
Education		−0.022***	−0.022***	−0.022***	−0.021***
		(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Income		0.008**	−0.002	−0.002	−0.001
		(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Married		0.020*	0.017*	0.017	0.012
		(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.008)
Female		0.011	0.011	0.011	0.030***
		(0.010)	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.008)
Age		0.002***	0.001***	0.001***	0.001***
		(0.0003)	(0.0003)	(0.0003)	(0.0002)
White		−0.014	0.018	0.017	0.005
		(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.009)
Unemployed		−0.045**	−0.031*	−0.032*	−0.022
		(0.014)	(0.013)	(0.014)	(0.012)
Political Interest		0.003	−0.006	−0.006	−0.002
		(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.004)
Religious attendance		0.010***	0.005	0.005	0.001
		(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.002)
Protestant		0.010	0.010	0.010	0.015
		(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.009)
Optimism			0.056***	0.057***	0.036***
			(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Economic insecurity			0.002	0.002	0.014**
			(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Intergenerational mobility experiences			0.036***	0.036***	0.022***
			(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.003)
Immigrant parents			0.045***	0.045***	0.033**
			(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.010)
Absolute intergenerational mobility rates				0.001	0.0003
				(0.001)	(0.001)
Gini index				−0.014	−0.032
				(0.046)	(0.041)
Sjstem justification scale					0.144***
					(0.005)
Constant	0.651***	0.540***	0.301***	0.275**	−0.001
	(0.006)	(0.043)	(0.049)	(0.085)	(0.076)
Observations	3,004	3,004	3,004	2,998	2,998
R^2	0.015	0.163	0.239	0.239	0.393
Adjusted R^2	0.015	0.144	0.221	0.220	0.378

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table A.4: The Effect of Rags-to-Riches TV on Internal and External Attributions of Economic Success

	Internal Attribution		External Attribution	
	Dependent variable:			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Occasional viewer	0.006	0.013	−0.004	−0.007
	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.009)	(0.009)
Frequent viewer	0.008	0.017	0.009	0.005
	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.009)	(0.010)
Heavy viewer	0.052***	0.052***	0.039***	0.014
	(0.011)	(0.014)	(0.011)	(0.013)
Other Reality TV		−0.002		0.0003
		(0.003)		(0.003)
Sports TV		0.006**		0.006***
		(0.002)		(0.002)
Republican		0.026*		−0.029**
		(0.011)		(0.011)
Democrat		−0.019		0.027**
		(0.010)		(0.010)
Education		−0.003		0.010**
		(0.003)		(0.003)
Income		−0.001		−0.002
		(0.003)		(0.002)
Married		0.007		−0.003
		(0.008)		(0.007)
Female		0.010		0.001
		(0.008)		(0.008)
Age		0.002***		0.001***
		(0.0002)		(0.0002)
White		0.022*		−0.003
		(0.009)		(0.008)
Unemployed		−0.011		0.011
		(0.012)		(0.011)
Political interest		0.013**		0.020***
		(0.004)		(0.004)
Religious attendance		−0.001		−0.005*
		(0.002)		(0.002)
Protestant		0.018*		−0.002
		(0.009)		(0.008)
Optimism		0.032***		0.009*
		(0.005)		(0.004)
Personal economic insecurity		0.019***		0.045***
		(0.005)		(0.005)
Intergenerational mobility experience		0.015***		−0.001
		(0.003)		(0.003)
Immigrant parents		0.022*		−0.002
		(0.010)		(0.010)
Absolute intergenerational mobility rates		−0.0001		0.001
		(0.001)		(0.001)
Gini index		−0.025		0.006
		(0.040)		(0.039)
Constant	0.756***	0.431***	0.709***	0.401***
	(0.007)	(0.075)	(0.006)	(0.072)
Observations	3,004	2,998	3,004	2,998
R^2	0.008	0.143	0.006	0.110
Adjusted R^2	0.007	0.121	0.005	0.088

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

A.2.4 ANES and ISCAP Panel Survey

American National Election Survey

I use the 2016 American National Election Survey Time Series Data. Pre-election interviews were collected between September and November, and were followed by post-election interviews beginning on November 9, 2016, and continuing until early January 2017. Overall, the pre-election survey included 1,181 (face-to-face sample) and 3,090 (Internet sample) respondents, and the post-election survey included 1,059 (face-to-face sample) and 2,590 (Internet sample) respondents.

The dependent variable, Economic Mobility Perceptions, was constructed as an index comprising two related questions (Cronbach's alpha = 0.63) in the post-election wave. The first item measured the level of opportunity in America to get ahead, and the second item measured the extent to which economic mobility has gotten easier or harder compared to 20 years ago. The summary statistics reveal that responses for the first item were more optimistic than those for the second. The mean level for the belief in economic opportunity was 2.97 (1="None" to 5="A great deal); the mean level of retrospective evaluations for economic mobility was 2.5 (1="Much harder" to 7="Much easier"). Since the two questions were scaled differently, they were standardized and then recoded to range from 0 to 1 after combined as an index.

The ANES pre-election survey asked respondents to indicate TV programs that they watch regularly. The primary purpose of the ANES is to study electoral behaviors, so a sound majority of media exposure questions are about news programs, ranging from *60 Minutes* and *Face the Nation* to soft news programs, such as *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*. Table 5 summarizes the mean consumption level for the top 30 shows listed in ANES (coded as 1 if respondents indicated that they watch the listed program regularly, 0 if not). Keeping in mind that this was an election survey in a highly contested and controversial election year, a considerable number of respondents indicated that they do consume political news. For instance, 26.8% of respondents indicated that they watch *60 Minutes*.

To estimate the impact of entertainment media, I focused on three programs that fit the three necessary conditions of the genre I described in the previous chapter: TV programs that 1) feature ordinary Americans, 2) gaining economic benefits, 3) through their own hard work and effort. These shows were *The Voice, Shark Tank*, and *Dancing with the Stars*. I create one categorical variable for entertainment media consumption, so that *Number of Reality TV Shows Watching* is coded to range from 0 to 3. Out of 4,271 pre-election respondents, 31.4% indicated that they are watching at least one of these three programs regularly; there were also 2.48% of an avid reality TV audience who indicated that they watch all three programs regularly.

For other predictors, I include two measures of news media consumption: one is the number of days of news consumption in a given week, and the other is the total number of news programs respondents are watching. I also include a set of demographic variables, according to the previous literature, that are known to be related to perceptions of economic

Table A.5: List of the 30 Most-Watched TV Shows from 2016 ANES

	Program Name	Mean
1	Sunday Night Football	0.293
2	60 Minutes	0.268
3	Big Bang Theory	0.234
4	Dateline NBC	0.233
5	Good Morning America	0.225
6	NCIS	0.200
7	20/20	0.200
8	Criminal Minds	0.174
9	Voice	0.171
10	Today	0.166
11	CBS This Morning	0.165
12	ABC World News with David Muir	0.162
13	The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon	0.157
14	Modern Family	0.151
15	Shark Tank	0.147
16	CBS Evening News with Scott Pelley	0.143
17	Blue Bloods	0.135
18	The O'Reilly Factor	0.134
19	Anderson Cooper 360	0.131
20	Dancing with the Stars	0.128
21	Game of Thrones	0.118
22	Judge Judy	0.109
24	Meet the Press	0.109
25	PBS News Hour	0.102
26	The Blacklist	0.101
27	Jimmy Kimmel Live	0.097
28	Hannity	0.109
29	The Late Show with Stephen Colbert	0.091
30	Face the Nation	0.089

mobility (partisan identification, ideology, race, education, gender, income, age, religion, and marital status). I include a dummy variable to capture people's downward economic mobility experiences, whether it is a job loss or a recent pay cut. I also use three variables that tap into people's sociotropic perceptions, regarding the state of the economy, national unemployment, and the perceived political direction of the country.

Institute for the Study of Citizens and Politics Panel Survey

The NAES-ISCAP panel data span across 2007 to 2016. The first set of these studies are part of the 2008 National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES), a five-wave election panel with a total of 10,472 respondents who completed all waves. The second set of studies is the

2012-2016 Institute for the Study of Citizens and Politics (ISCAP) panel that followed up a representative subset of NAES interviewees. A stratified sample of 3,621 NAES respondents was selected, and of those, 2,471 completed both the pre-and post-election surveys in 2012. Similar procedures were followed for the 2014 (n=1,493 completing both pre- and post-election) and 2016 ISCAP (n=1,227 completing two pre-election surveys in January-February and October 2016) study.

The dependent variable, *Economic Mobility Perceptions*, was constructed using one question asked in October 2016. This item measured the degree to which respondents think that economic mobility has increased or decreased compared to 20 years ago. Around 50% of the respondents answered that it has decreased, while 21% said neither, and 29% said it has increased. The mean level of belief in economic mobility was 2.65 (with 1 indicating "decreased a lot" and 5 indicating "increased a lot").

For the key independent variable, *Exposure to Rags-to-Riches Reality TV*, this NAES-ISCAP panel data had an unusually rich set of media exposure information. The data used the program list technique (see Dilliplane et al. 2013), in which respondents were asked to check off the TV programs they watched regularly on the lists of widely-watched programs based on Nielsen ratings. The lists included traditional news programs, several soft news programs, as well as purely entertainment TV shows. Most importantly, because this media exposure was measured in multiple waves, it provided more detailed information on the respondents who tune in to reality TV shows. Once again, the number of entertainment programs asked about in these panel surveys was limited, and even fewer reality TV shows fit my specific criteria. In the end, I focus on three TV shows—*Dancing with the Stars, American Idol*, and *Voice*—that were asked about in three waves (2012 pre- and post-election wave, and 2014 pre-election wave). Out of all the panelists who stayed until 2016, around 37% tuned in to one of those shows between 2012 and 2014. Granted, there were variations of amounts of media exposure: there were 9 avid respondents (or 0.73% of the sample), for instance, who reported that they regularly watch all relevant shows across three waves; 7.91% of respondents indicated they watched only one of the programs in only one wave. For other predictors, I include average TV news consumption, political interest, and partisan identification, along with a set of demographic variables that I used in the 2016 ANES data analysis in the previous section.

Table A.6: 2016 ANES Analysis

			Dependent variable:			
			Belief in Economic Mobility Index			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Exposure to Rags-to-Riches TV	0.010**	0.011**	0.012**	0.012**	0.013***	0.012**
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Republican			0.038***	0.042***	0.035***	0.042***
			(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.013)
Democrat			0.022*	0.030**	−0.018	−0.014
			(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)
Ideology			0.011***	0.012***	0.017***	0.019***
			(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.003)	(0.004)
White			−0.064***	−0.070***	−0.048***	−0.049***
			(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.009)
Education			0.010*	0.011**	0.008	0.008*
			(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Female			−0.011	−0.021***	−0.006	−0.013*
			(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.007)	(0.008)
Income			0.003***	0.002***	0.002***	0.001***
			(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Age			0.001	0.001	0.002*	0.002
			(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Married			0.0002	0.009	−0.007	0.001
			(0.008)	(0.009)	(0.008)	(0.008)
Born again			0.011	0.012	0.017*	0.017*
			(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.010)
Unemployed			−0.048***	−0.059***	−0.044***	−0.052***
			(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.011)	(0.011)
Country is in the wrong direction					−0.047***	−0.059***
					(0.009)	(0.010)
National economy is getting better					0.029***	0.027***
					(0.005)	(0.005)
Unemployment got worse					−0.020***	−0.026***
					(0.004)	(0.004)
Income gap has widened					−0.027***	−0.030***
					(0.004)	(0.004)
Constant	0.372***	0.366***	0.282***	0.288***	0.392***	0.432***
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.022)	(0.022)	(0.037)	(0.035)
Observations	3,627	3,627	3,344	3,344	3,291	3,291
R^2	0.001	0.001	0.044	0.047	0.108	0.126
Adjusted R^2	0.001	0.001	0.041	0.044	0.104	0.122

Note: $^{*}p<0.1$; $^{**}p<0.05$; $^{***}p<0.01$

Note: The dependent variable was coded to range from 0 to 1 for an easier interpretation. Standard errors are in parenthesis. State fixed-effects are included.

A.2.5   Experimental Data

Table A.7: Figure 4.4. Full Regression Results

								Dependent variable:						
	dv1		dv2_internal_rcd		dv2_external_rcd		dv3_rich_rcd		dv3_poor_rcd		dv4_inequality_rsc		antigov2	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)
condition	0.072^{+}	0.067^{+}	0.026	0.024	−0.032	−0.028	0.195^{*}	0.175^{+}	−0.067	−0.090	0.104^{*}	0.098^{*}	0.087^{+}	0.079^{+}
	(0.041)	(0.040)	(0.036)	(0.037)	(0.031)	(0.031)	(0.092)	(0.091)	(0.093)	(0.092)	(0.045)	(0.045)	(0.044)	(0.044)
rep		0.038		0.034		−0.041		0.227^{*}		0.216^{+}		0.074		0.029
		(0.050)		(0.046)		(0.039)		(0.113)		(0.114)		(0.056)		(0.055)
dem		−0.016		0.015		−0.005		0.031		−0.020		0.024		−0.068
		(0.052)		(0.048)		(0.041)		(0.120)		(0.121)		(0.059)		(0.058)
optimism		0.082^{**}												
		(0.026)												
surveymode	−0.054	−0.047	−0.028	−0.028	−0.035	−0.036	0.0005	0.004	−0.090	−0.083	-0.082^{+}	-0.082^{+}	−0.076	−0.070
	(0.043)	(0.041)	(0.038)	(0.038)	(0.032)	(0.033)	(0.095)	(0.094)	(0.096)	(0.095)	(0.046)	(0.047)	(0.046)	(0.046)
date	−0.003	−0.018	0.092^{*}	0.085^{+}	0.047	0.054	−0.018	−0.061	0.032	−0.005	0.036	0.021	0.029	0.029
	(0.047)	(0.047)	(0.042)	(0.043)	(0.036)	(0.037)	(0.105)	(0.107)	(0.107)	(0.108)	(0.051)	(0.053)	(0.051)	(0.052)
duration	−0.00001	−0.00000	0.00001	0.00000	0.00004	0.00004	-0.0002^{*}	-0.0002^{**}	0.0001	0.00003	0.00002	0.00001	−0.00003	−0.00004
	(0.00004)	(0.00004)	(0.00003)	(0.00003)	(0.00003)	(0.00003)	(0.0001)	(0.0001)	(0.0001)	(0.0001)	(0.00004)	(0.00004)	(0.00004)	(0.00004)
Constant	0.793^{***}	0.499^{***}	0.738^{***}	0.730^{***}	0.671^{***}	0.677^{***}	0.625^{***}	0.588^{***}	0.397^{**}	0.376^{*}	0.391^{***}	0.375^{***}	0.458^{***}	0.475^{***}
	(0.066)	(0.115)	(0.058)	(0.061)	(0.050)	(0.052)	(0.146)	(0.151)	(0.148)	(0.152)	(0.071)	(0.075)	(0.070)	(0.073)
Observations	119	119	119	119	119	119	119	119	119	119	119	119	119	119
R^2	0.038	0.144	0.051	0.056	0.045	0.057	0.073	0.115	0.016	0.066	0.082	0.097	0.058	0.087
Adjusted R^2	0.005	0.090	0.018	0.006	0.012	0.007	0.041	0.067	−0.018	0.015	0.050	0.049	0.025	0.038

+ p<0.1; * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001

A.3 Content Analysis

A.3.1 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)
    - 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.

Table A.8: Coding Results for Top 25 Competitive Reality/Game TV Shows

Program Name	Content Analysis Coding			Nielsen Data on Audience Size	
	Contestant Type	Economic Benefit	Hard Work/ Efforts	'15-'16 Estimate (millions)	'16-'17 Estimate (millions)
Dancing with the Stars	1	1	2	9.923	8.514
Wheel of Fortune	2	1	1	9.716	9.475
Family Feud	2	1	0	9.676	9.764
America's Got Talent	2	2	2	9.591	9.967
The Voice	2	2	2	9.591	8.448
Jeopardy	2	1	1	8.586	8.489
American Idol	2	2	2	7.508	NA
Survivor	2	2	2	6.066	5.568
The Bachelor	2	0	0	5.887	5.293
Celebrity Family Feud	0	0	0	5.658	5.856
American Ninja Warrior	2	2	2	5.534	4.931
The $ 100,000 Pyramid	2	1	1	5.489	4.718
Great Christmas Light Fight	2	1	2	5.217	NA
Steve Harvey's Funderdome	2	2	2	NA	5.127
The Bachelorette	2	0	0	4.857	4.076
Shark Tank	2	2	2	4.837	4.086
Hunted	2	1	2	NA	4.304
Big Brother	2	2	1	4.043	4.167
Match Game	2	1	0	4.578	2.645
Amazing Race	2	2	2	4.564	3.257
Wall	2	2	1	NA	3.967
500 Questions	2	1	1	4.557	NA
To Tell the Truth	2	1	0	4.230	3.707
Great American Baking Show	2	1	2	3.638	3.764

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