Can identity reduce inequality? Hispanics face the lowest high school and college completion rates out of all major ethnic and racial groups in the US. Compared to their white (Asian) classmates, they are 17% (66%) less likely to pass AP tests, 6% (33%) less likely to take the SAT or ACT, and 31% (54%) less likely to be enrolled in advanced math classes. The Hispanic achievement gap is vast, and it is imperative that we find tools to close it.

In this paper, I investigate the causal impact of Spanish Language Television (SLTV) on Hispanic students in public schools. I find that SLTV improves academic performance across the board, and construct evidence suggesting that an amplified Hispanic identity is a mechanism driving these results.

To identify the causal effect of SLTV on Hispanic students, I exploit a spatial regression discontinuity arising from the FCC regulation OET Bulletin 69. This regulation guarantees protection of a TV station’s broadcast signal only with a certain distance of a station’s main antenna. This produces coverage contours inside which people can receive TV, but not outside. Thus, households and schools just inside the border of the contour should be observably similar to those just outside the border, except for the presence of TV. To further dispel concerns over potential confounds, I employ a difference-in-discontinuities design, comparing outcomes for Hispanic students against Asian students in schools within 100 kilometers of SLTV coverage contours (I compare against Asian rather than white students because they are less likely to identify as Hispanic). The data to construct this instrument comes from the FCC.

To verify that this instrument works, I employ this difference-in-discontinuities approach with the American Time Use Dataset.I find that Hispanics watch 10 more minutes of TV within these boundaries (which implies even greater viewership of SLTV if Hispanics substitute English programs with Spanish ones), while the rest of the population does not differentially change their TV viewership across the contour.

Next, I utilize the Civil Rights Data Collection to analyze the effect of SLTV on Hispanics in public schools. Academic outcomes for Hispanics improve across the board: the presence of SLTV closes the Hispanic-Asian gap in passing AP tests by 5%, reduces the gap by 18% for taking the SAT and ACT, and the gap in calculus enrolment by 4%. These effects are statistically significant and meaningful in magnitude, and also extend to other outcomes such as gifted enrolment and enrolment in the hard sciences. I show these results remain qualitatively similar when including a wide range of controls at the school and county level, varying the distance to coverage contour cut-off, accounting for spatial autocorrelation, and a host of other robustness checks. This establishes that SLTV closes the Hispanic achievement gap. I next marshal three of sources of evidence that each indicate an identity mechanism is at play.

First, using the same datasets, I show that Hispanic students are differentially classified as having ‘limited English proficiency’ under SLTV despite greater general academic achievement, a likely outcome if these students shift from English to Spanish mastery due to the presence of SLTV. Furthermore, Hispanic students are also differentially bullied more on the basis of their ethnicity, directly indicating a more salient identity that other students may target.

Second, I make use of archive.org’s TV transcript database to classify the percentage of programs in each station that focus on the Hispanic identity. I show that, a greater amount of SLTV programming focused on identity is associated with better Hispanic academic performance compared to locales with fewer programs on identity. However, a greater amount of programming focused on education & schools or positive role models for children have a null effect on Hispanic performance. This indicates that the content of these television programs matter, and that identity is a channel through which these positive results are attained.

Third, to demonstrate the general strengthening of the Hispanic identity under SLTV, I use foot-traffic data from Safegraph to show that Hispanics with SLTV are differentially more likely to visit Hispanic branded restaurants and recreation establishments. However, using Brazilian (and Japanese) establishments as placebo tests yield null results: this speaks to the Hispanic identity in particular (vs. Latin American or some other identity) being strengthened.

Collectively, these suggest that identity is a mechanism through which SLTV reduces inequality and the Hispanic achievement gap. This paper shows the potential power of television in bolstering academic performance, with its findings on identity widely applicable to policy beyond TV itself.

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* Background/Significance
* Research Questions
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