# Entertaining Beliefs in Economic Mobility

**Eunji Kim**   Vanderbilt University

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

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

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

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

do Americans' beliefs in economic mobility persist despite the raft of empirical evidence to the contrary? More importantly, why do some Americans retain this belief in upward mobility more than others?

I argue that the contemporary media environment provides an important and overlooked part of the answer. An excellent body of political communication scholarship makes it clear that only a small subpopulation makes it their hobby to devote much time to news consumption. Most citizens instead consume an astounding amount of entertainment media (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Flaxman, Goel, and Rao 2016; Prior 2007). In the past two decades, this overlooked part of the media landscape has featured many entertainment programs offering powerful exemplars of real-life Americans succeeding because of their hard work and talent. Shows that illustrate an ordinary person on a trajectory of upward economic mobility—what I broadly term "rags-to-riches" programs[1]—are among the most popular on television. One such show, *America's Got Talent*, often attracts a prime-time audience seven times larger than that of Fox News (Elber 2018). Another show, *American Idol*, used to attract contestant vote totals that exceeded those of a typical American presidential election (Schwarz 2015). Such popularity matters because this segment of reality TV shares a meritocratic narrative. When millions of Americans sit down every evening and watch these programs, they continue to see evidence that economic mobility—the American Dream—is alive and well.

In this article, I investigate whether and to what extent these rags-to-riches TV programs affect perceptions of economic mobility and assumptions people make about wealth and poverty. Using comprehensive Nielsen ratings data and original content analysis, I first demonstrate that these programs have exploded in popularity in recent years and that they propagate a narrative emphasizing that hard work produces economic success. Using several original experiments conducted both online and in a lab-in-the-field setting, I assess the causal effect of these programs on beliefs in the American Dream. I find strong evidence of such effects, especially among self-identified Republicans who already believe in rugged individualism. Findings from an original national survey are also consistent with the experimental evidence. I find that exposure to rags-to-riches programs increases perceptions of economic mobility and promotes beliefs that economic success can be attributed to internal, rather

than structural, factors. These effects are substantively important: regularly watching six or more rags-to-riches TV shows, like *Shark Tank*, is as powerful as having immigrant parents in shaping beliefs in upward mobility. In contrast, neither local economic context nor personal economic insecurity explains much of the variation in beliefs in upward mobility.

I conclude by discussing the implications of the post-broadcast media environment for the study of public opinion. Despite the astounding amount of entertainment media consumption, it is still mostly viewed as a force that simply dilutes news media effects (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013). But when so-called nonpolitical media consistently offers positive and vivid exemplars of upward mobility to citizens who mostly opt out of consuming counternarratives from the news, it can powerfully distort mass economic perceptions. Furthermore, this evidence offers a new explanation to the scholarly debate about why rising inequality has failed to spur public demand for redistribution (Bonica et al. 2013; Kenworthy and McCall 2008; Norton and Ariely 2011). By affecting beliefs in economic mobility—which are well-known to legitimize free-market capitalism (Piketty 1995)—the rags-to-riches narratives that prevail in the contemporary media environment exert a conservative influence over American politics in this new Gilded Age.

## Media Exemplars and Perceptions of Economic Mobility

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

Understanding perceptions of upward economic mobility[2] requires dissecting the economic information

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

[2]I focus on sociotropic perceptions because citizens' economic perceptions about collectives—as opposed to egotropic perceptions—

**FIGURE 1** **Sentiment Analysis of News Coverage on Economic Mobility (2000–2019)**
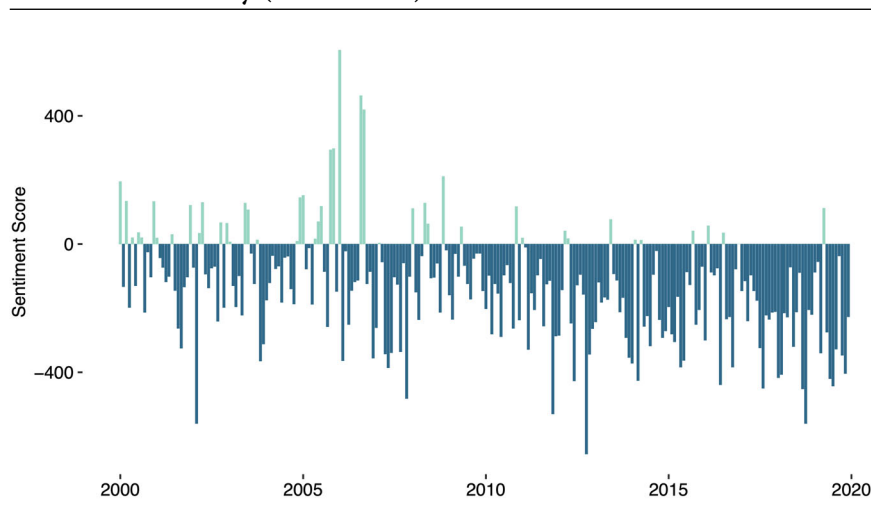


*Note*: The sentiment score is calculated using the Bing Lexicon that categorizes words in a binary fashion into positive and negative categories. Values below zero indicate negative sentiment. The corpus consists of a total of 9341 *New York Times* articles that contain the phrases related to economic mobility (i.e., "upward mobility," "land of opportunity," "self-made success"). For details, see Appendix C, 8.

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

In sync with the news media's well-known tendency to overreport negative economic information (Soroka 2006) and the worsening economic realities of the new Gilded Age, it is no surprise that the news media typically offer information about downward economic mobility. The news media have devoted considerable attention to rising income inequality, with a consistent focus on highlighting the diminishing prospects of upward mobility for the American working and middle classes (Diermeier et al. 2017; Eshbaugh-Soha and McGauvran 2018; McCall 2013). Indeed, as seen in Figure 1, sentiments in news coverage about economic mobility in America have been predominantly negative over the last two decades.

play a central role in shaping political attitudes (Feldman 1984; Kinder and Kiewiet 1981).

In theory, these patterns should have heightened citizens' concerns about the prospects for upward mobility, yet we still observe sustained beliefs in economic mobility.

In the meantime, entertainment media—whose purpose is to "entertain" people—tends to offer uplifting exemplars of people who achieve upward economic mobility, ones that are more vivid and accessible than real-world examples (Busselle and Shrum 2003). This idea indeed has a long scholarly lineage. For instance, Lasswell's (1936) seminal book *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* asserts that Hollywood films hammer messages of upward mobility into citizens' brains. Explaining the paradox of why most low-income African Americans believe they can achieve the American Dream, Jennifer Hochschild (1996) claims that "(television) shows with black male leads" are devoted to "portraying the attractions and ignoring the dark side of the American dream" (136). Similar speculations can be found across myriad qualitative cultural and sociological studies that explore the links among American popular culture, belief in the American Dream, and the absence of class conflict in America (Murray and Ouellette 2004; Pines 1993).

Although entertainment media is a much-overlooked source of economic information, decades of work on cultivation theory suggests that the entertainment media exert at least as much influence as the news media on politically relevant attitudes. Many of our attitudes about political issues—ranging from crime to social welfare—are shaped by exposure to entertainment

television (e.g., Holbrook and Hill 2005; Morgan and Shanahan 2010). Furthermore, through their narrative presentations of information, viewers experience the phenomenon of "transportation," a cognitive and emotional experience in which viewers immerse themselves in a story (Green, Brock, and Kaufman 2004). Such narrative persuasion in entertainment media is much more powerful than rhetorical persuasion via political messages, as people are less likely to develop a counterargument or critically scrutinize such a message (Jones and Paris 2018). Indeed, a growing body of natural and field experimental evidence finds that entertainment media powerfully alter the dynamics of electoral processes (Durante, Pinotti, and Tesei 2019; Xiong 2022) and change important social outcomes ranging from school enrollment rates to eating habits and White supremacist activities (Ang 2020; Jensen and Oster 2009; Paluck et al. 2015).[3]

Taken together, these theories tell us that both the news and entertainment media have the power to shape perceptions of economic mobility, with each type pushing them in opposite directions. The net impact of media exposure, therefore, depends on the overall composition of media consumption. I contend that the effect of the narrative of upward mobility from the entertainment media is powerful, given that most Americans choose to avoid news and spend an enormous amount of time watching entertainment media instead. This imbalanced exposure to entertainment media may explain individual variations in upwardly distorted perceptions of economic mobility. To test this, I develop empirically falsifiable hypotheses that specify which type of entertainment media matters for perceptions of upward economic mobility.

Rather than leaving entertainment media unarticulated as a concept, I propose that three components—the presence of everyday Americans, visible financial gains, and narrative emphasis on meritocracy—comprise the rags-to-riches narrative that dominates parts of the entertainment media. Rags-to-riches programs, a subset of reality television, have three distinctive components that I hypothesize shape viewers' beliefs about upward economic mobility. First, they feature everyday American citizens, not hired actors or celebrities. Successful entertainment content requires relatable characters and believable storylines, elements that even children can list (Moyer-Gusé 2008). Featuring ordinary Americans dramatizes the representation of reality and offers a con-

venient point of identification for the viewer. Watching a working-class janitor or waitress become a celebrity overnight or earn most of a year's income in one month suggests that these things can happen to anyone, not just to those from wealthy families or who have a postsecondary education. These glorified everymen can serve as a social reference group and provide viewers with more relatable vicarious experiences (Reiss and Wiltz 2004).

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

Third, rags-to-riches shows tend to emphasize that economic outcomes are determined by hard work and merit by portraying their beneficiaries as deserving. The notion of meritocracy is deeply embedded in the American Dream, and these programs tend to highlight people's humble backgrounds and economic hardships in order to lionize their later success. Contestants routinely speak of how they were not born with privileges and how they never gave up on their dreams, even while holding a minimum-wage job, facing soaring medical bills, or receiving rejection after rejection from investors.[4] Indeed, a frequent folk hypothesis is that these programs "reignited Horatio Alger's imagination in the modern world" (Cromewell 2015) and promoted "the national myth of meritocracy" (Anzuoni 2016). Defining these three components of the rags-to-riches narrative is methodologically important for this systematic study of their effects on perceptions of economic mobility. Many previous studies have examined the effects of a single TV program or a few similarly themed episodes (e.g., Butler, Koopman, and Zimbardo 1995; Lenart and McGraw 1989). But their net impact has been unclear because different programs, or different episodes of the same program, typically contain various, sometimes competing, types of messages and plot lines. This problem has long plagued research on the effect of nonpolitical media. In the next section, I establish the premise of this study by

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

[4]Several examples are: "I think I am living proof of the American dream. My parents emigrated here with $100 in their pocket from Guyana, and look at me now. I just got a deal from Mark Cuban on *Shark Tank*" (Krystal Persaud, *Shark Tank*); "I can't be cleaning pools forever. [...] I've literally been climbing a mountain to get my voice heard, and today is the day to reach the top." (Blaise Raccuglia, *The Voice*). See more quotes in Appendix D, 8.

using detailed Nielsen ratings data, a comprehensive online entertainment media database, and original content analyses to demonstrate that rags-to-riches programs have become an ubiquitous part of the American media landscape over the last two decades.

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

Ranging from *American Idol* to *Shark Tank,* TV programs that feature real-life, everyday Americans—widely referred to as reality TV shows—have been a ratings juggernaut that has dominated the American media market during the past two decades (DeVolld 2016; Livingstone 2017). These observations can be empirically confirmed. Using 102,523 TV programs—including those on popular streaming services, such as Netflix—released between 1960 and 2017 ($N = 102,523$) as recorded by IMDb,[5] I find a clear surge in the number of reality/games shows starting in early 2000. By around 2008, one in five newly released TV programs was a reality show (see Appendix B, Figure 1, 6). The cheaper production costs of reality shows featuring ordinary Americans also contributed to the increasing supply, leading many critics to declare that we are living in the golden age of reality TV (Rosa 2019; Yahr, Moore, and Chow 2015).[6] In the meantime, the relative share of news programs has remained stable. While the absolute amount of news programming has increased in recent decades, the relative share of such programming in the overall supply of media has not increased (Van Aelst et al. 2017). This decreasing share of news programming means that it is now easier to consume media while avoiding political news altogether (Prior 2007).

Granted, not all reality TV shows broadcast narratives of upward mobility. Those that feature stories about the undeserving rich would not have the same implications for real-world phenomena as the ones that feature ordinary hardworking Americans (Condon and Wichowsky 2020). But, with the exception of *Desperate Housewives* in the 2004–2006 and 2007–2008 TV seasons, all the reality shows that were among the 10 most

watched programs from 2000 to 2017 had a competitive format that featured a narrative of the American Dream (see Appendix B, 7). *American Idol*, for instance, was the most watched program for eight consecutive seasons, from 2003 to 2011. None of the 10 most watched TV shows over the last two decades was a news program: in stark contrast, *60 Minutes* (CBS) was a top-10 show from 1977 to 2000.[7]

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

I matched Nielsen ratings data from September 2015 to August 2017 with the *Encyclopedia of Television Shows 1925−2016* (Terrace 2012; 2017) and the TV Tango.com database to identify TV shows that are classified as reality/game shows. Of the 8,701 entries of nonfictional entertainment shows that aired between 2015 and 2017, Nielsen identified 3,362 as reality/game shows. I narrowed this list to shows that had a competitive format because the ideology of meritocracy and the self-made person is closely tied to competition and amplified in the face of unequal outcomes (McNaMee and Miller 2014) (see Appendix A, 4, which summarizes the results of the content analysis for each element). About 71.3% of the competitive reality/game shows that aired between 2015 and 2017 had all three elements of the rags-to-riches narrative, while only 1.8% had none of these elements.

Such programs not only offer a powerful lesson about hard work leading to success; they also broadcast this message to a huge audience. Nielsen ratings

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

[6]Indeed, 750 reality programs were aired on prime-time cable in 2015 (VanDerWerff 2016) alone, and most Americans are watching reality TV shows, even when they think there are too many such programs (Shevenock 2018). The pandemic also led to an increase in reality TV viewership across networks and channels (Aurther 2020; Jones 2020).

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

**FIGURE 2  Mobile Media Laboratory**
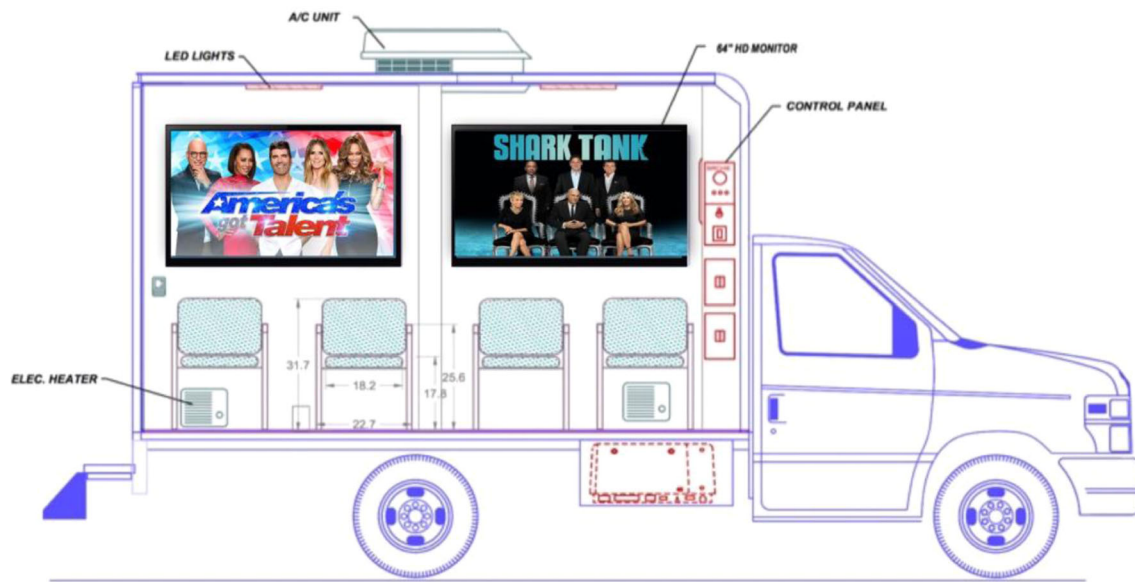


*Note:* The figure shows a mobile media laboratory that was used for lab-in-the-field experiments.

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

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

Having established the prevalence of rags-to-riches programming, I turn now to whether such programming actually shapes citizens' perceptions of economic mobility. To explore the causal effects of rags-to-riches entertainment media, I conducted online and lab-in-the-field experiments, which took place in October 2016 and during July–September 2018, respectively. I recruited 763

respondents online through Amazon's Mechanical Turk and 203 respondents offline in suburban New Jersey and Pennsylvania. To obtain enough partisanship variation in the sample, Bucks, Lehigh, Northampton, and Salem counties were chosen based on their 2016 presidential election results.[8] For the lab-in-the-field experiments, I used a mobile media laboratory, as shown in Figure 2. The vehicle—a big box truck—had two separate rooms, each equipped with a TV screen and a chair. I drove to nonpolitical events that attract local residents of various ages, such as farmers' markets, flea markets, and summer festivals. A team of field assistants and I recruited participants on site. They were told that they would be watching entertainment media and asked to share their thoughts in exchange for $10 in cash compensation (see Appendix I, 16).[9]

Although the setting and time of the data collection varied, all respondents were asked a similar set of questions about their general attitudes about the American Dream.[10] Respondents indicated the extent to which they agreed with each of four statements: (1) "Anyone

[8]47.8%, 45.9%, 50.0%, and 55.6% of the total county votes, respectively, were cast for Donald Trump.

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

[10]These experiments have been approved under University of Pennsylvania IRB Protocol 828418.

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

*Treatments* Given that the purpose of this experiment was to test the effects of media content that was typical of a broad genre, rather than the effects of any one show, I constructed four treatments using different rags-to-riches TV shows: *Shark Tank, America's Got Talent, American Ninja Warrior,* and *Toy Box.* These four shows were chosen after I conducted a pilot test using 14 different TV shows that featured ordinary Americans achieving economic gains (see Appendix J, 17).

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

invented to representatives of major toy manufacturers. She explained how she spent years developing this toy and faced many financial challenges in the process. The video ended with her doll being endorsed and chosen by the judges.

Although these shows had different formats and contestants, the treatments—all edited to last less than 5 minutes—highlighted very similar storylines of upward economic mobility. To ensure that the treatment effects were driven by an upward economic mobility message rather than the particularities of reality TV shows, I included a control media treatment that lacked an economic mobility narrative. The control treatment contained scenes from *Cesar 911*, a reality TV show that featured a young woman seeking advice about her dog's aggressive behavior. The dog behavior authority evaluated her pet and equipped the dog owner with the knowledge and tools to address the aggression. The control treatment ended with a well-behaved dog and a satisfied owner. The control treatment was chosen primarily because the quality of life of the ordinary American featured on the show improved without any visible financial gains. Manipulation checks successfully demonstrated that the experimental treatments did convey the components that I hypothesized were necessary for a belief in upward economic mobility.[11]

*Results* My experiment shows that exposure to rags-to-riches entertainment media increases people's beliefs in upward economic mobility. As shown in Table 1, in the full-sample models with covariates (Columns 1 and 5), watching a rags-to-riches program, even just for 5 minutes, makes people approximately 5.5–6.8 percentage points more likely to believe in the prospect of upward economic mobility. To put this into context, in the control condition for the lab-in-the-field sample, the partisan gap in belief in the American Dream is 10.87 percentage points. In other words, the treatment effect is substantial: more than half the size of the gap between Democrats and Republicans. A general level of optimism and the system justification scale are all positively correlated with a posttreatment belief in economic mobility. But the main treatment effects remained similar even after controlling for those covariates.

I also find heterogeneous treatment effects by party identification. The effects of rags-to-riches TV are statistically significant among Republicans, albeit weakly in the lab-in-the-field sample (Columns 2 and 6), but not among Democrats (Columns 3 and 7). To formally test this difference, Columns 4 and 8 show the results of the

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[11]See Appendix K, 17, for the full manipulation check results.

**TABLE 1 Effect of Rags-to-Riches TV on Belief in Economic Mobility**

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

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

interaction model. Note that the small size of the lab-in-the-field sample prevents the precise estimation of the interaction term. Given that the "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" dictum is closely associated with Republican ideology, this suggests that the treatment video resonates more strongly among those who already believe in the importance of economic individualism. As additional evidence for this mechanism, I find that the treatment effects are larger among those who tend to defend and rationalize existing social systems (Appendix K, 17)[12]—a pattern consistent with existing evidence that Democrats tend to score consistently lower on system justification than Republicans (Jost, Banaji, and Nosek 2004).[13]

It is worth noting that I conducted a conservative test: while my participants only watched a single 5-minute clip of rags-to-riches entertainment media, Nielsen ratings data confirm that many Americans choose to watch these programs for more than an hour

every evening. The experimental findings here provide causal evidence on how media exemplars of upward mobility in entertainment media shape beliefs in the American Dream. When survey participants are forced to consume pessimistic, news-like economic information on declining economic mobility, they become more supportive of redistribution (Alesina, Stantcheva, and Teso 2018)—a pattern not found across different observational data (Ashok, Kuziemko, and Washington 2016; Kenworthy and McCall 2008). The effects of rags-to-riches media found here can shed light on this discrepancy. Indeed, in supplementary lab-in-the-field experiments, I find that the meritocratic narrative in rags-to-riches TV programs promotes the idea that rich people have more because of their hard work dampens public support for redistribution and increases their tolerance of income inequality (see Appendix L, 20).

Granted, there is no reason to believe that those who participated in the lab-in-the-field experiments as well as MTurk respondents were truly representative of the general adult population in America. Households in Quakertown, PA, for instance, have a slightly lower median annual income ($54,068) than the national average ($60,336), and it is a racially homogeneous

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

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

suburban town where 86.5% of residents are White. Compared to the national representative sample, MTurk subjects are notably younger and much less likely to own a house (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012). To investigate whether the effects of rags-to-riches TV are observable among the general population, I next turn to national surveys.

# Observational Evidence

I designed a national survey that Survey Sampling International (SSI) administered to 3,004 U.S. residents in August 2018.[14] I present full details of the survey in Appendix E (9) and summarize the key elements here. My goals in this step were to demonstrate that the effects of rags-to-riches entertainment media are observable among the general population and that these effects can be distinguished from those of exposure to any reality TV program regardless of its narrative. This step also contextualizes the media effects by testing the extent to which people's real-world economic context and personal economic experiences shape perceptions of economic mobility.

## Key Variables

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

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

For ease of interpretation, the key independent variable, rags-to-riches media consumption, is constructed as a categorical variable, with the cutoff group line based on quintile values (for the analysis with media consumption as a continuous variable see Appendix F, 11). The baseline category is those who watch zero rags-to-riches programs. Occasional viewers are coded as those who watch one or two rags-to-riches programs. Frequent viewers are coded as those who watch three to five programs. Those who watch six or more are coded as heavy viewers.

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

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

**TABLE 2  Correlation Between Rags-to-Riches TV and Belief in Upward Mobility and Attributions of Economic Success**

|  | Belief in Economic Mobility | | Internal Attribution | | External Attribution | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) |
| Occasional viewer (1–2 programs) | 0.019 | 0.013 | 0.006 | 0.013 | −0.004 | −0.007 |
|  | (0.012) | (0.011) | (0.010) | (0.010) | (0.009) | (0.009) |
| Frequent viewer (3–5 programs) | 0.047** | 0.032** | 0.008 | 0.017$^{\dagger}$ | 0.009 | 0.005 |
|  | (0.012) | (0.011) | (0.010) | (0.010) | (0.009) | (0.010) |
| Heavy viewer (6+ programs) | 0.076** | 0.040* | 0.052** | 0.052** | 0.039** | 0.014 |
|  | (0.013) | (0.016) | (0.011) | (0.014) | (0.011) | (0.013) |
| Controls included: |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Other media consumption | N | Y | N | Y | N | Y |
| Demographics | N | Y | N | Y | N | Y |
| Personal economic context | N | Y | N | Y | N | Y |
| County-level economic context | N | Y | N | Y | N | Y |
| State fixed effect | N | Y | N | Y | N | Y |
| Observations | 3004 | 2998 | 3004 | 2998 | 3004 | 2998 |
| $R^2$ | 0.013 | 0.239 | 0.008 | 0.143 | 0.006 | 0.110 |

*Note*: Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients with associated standard errors in parentheses; $^{\dagger}p < 0.01$; $^*p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$.

## Results

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

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

The top three rows in Columns 1 and 2 show the difference in the probability of believing in upward mobility for occasional, frequent, and heavy viewers compared to those who do not watch any rags-to-riches TV programs.

The gap between nonviewers and occasional viewers was only 1.3 percentage points and was not statistically significant. The gaps between nonviewers and frequent viewers and between nonviewers and heavy viewers, however, were both statistically significant. Those who regularly watch more than six rags-to-riches programs, for instance, were 4 percentage points more likely to believe in the American Dream. Heavy viewers were also more likely than nonviewers to attribute economic success to internal factors. The relationship between exposure to rags-to-riches programs and external attribution was less robust; as Column 6 shows, rags-to-riches media exposure had no explanatory power when I added an array of control variables. In addition, I find that the effects of rags-to-riches TV programs are stronger among those who are less interested in politics (see Appendix F, 11).

To better contextualize the explanatory power of rags-to-riches entertainment media against other factors, Figure 3 shows the predicted change in beliefs in upward mobility from a one-s.d. change in key variables from the regression model reported in Table 2 Column 2. Partisanship clearly matters: being a self-identified Republican is the biggest predictor of beliefs in economic mobility (see also Alesina, Stantcheva, and Teso 2018; Manza and Brooks 2021). Respondents who perceive their life as better than that of their parents and those who have immigrant parents were more likely to believe in the American Dream. This is consistent with existing theories on how upwardly mobile individuals learn from their own experiences and update their economic beliefs about redistributive politics (Piketty 1995). The

**FIGURE 3  Predicted Change in Beliefs in Upward Mobility**
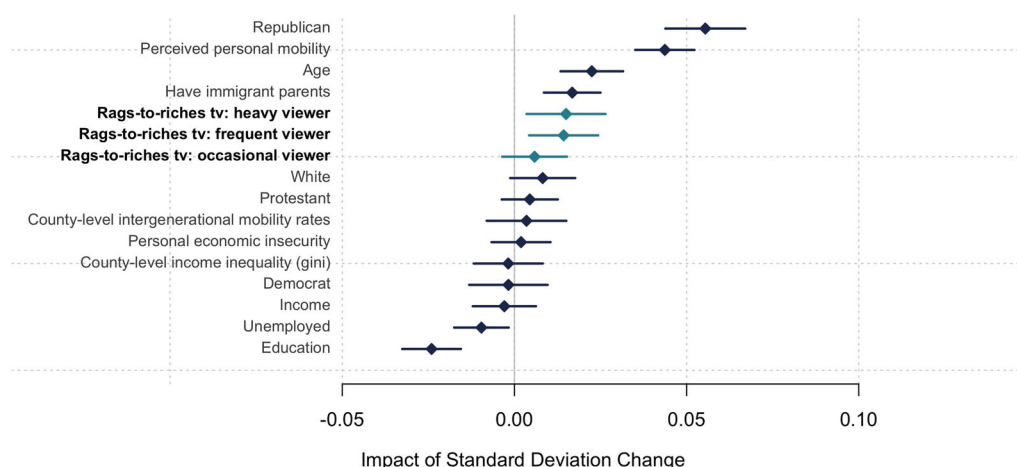


*Note*: The figure shows predicted change in beliefs in upward mobility from a one-s.d. change in each of the key variables from the model reported in Table 1, Column 2. The key independent variables—rags-to-riches media consumption—are highlighted in bold. The full model is reported in Appendix F, 11.

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

These all suggest that both macrostructural forces and personal experiences shape American economic beliefs. Yet it is noteworthy that rags-to-riches entertainment media consumption does play an important role. Indeed, regularly watching six or more TV programs, like *America's Got Talent*, is as powerful as having immigrant parents in shaping beliefs in economic mobility. Its relative predictive power is in stark contrast with the null effects of many other covariates—such as race and income—that have been reported as important in the previous literature (Hochschild 1996). Neither county-level intergenerational mobility rates nor local income inequality had much explanatory power. The pioneering study by Raj Chetty and his colleagues quantified the extent to which children born in the Deep South have starkly lower chances of achieving upward mobility than those from the coastal cities (Chetty et al. 2014). Yet such geographic variation in economic reality seems not to matter much in shaping beliefs in the American Dream.

The main findings here are replicated with two nationally representative surveys.[15] Taken as a whole, these observational findings confirm that rags-to-riches entertainment media is correlated with beliefs in the prospect of upward economic mobility and that economic success is attributed to internal factors.

## Discussion and Conclusion

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

I argue that perceptions of economic mobility must be understood alongside the media discourse and environment, just like any other sociotropic economic perceptions. Unlike much of political science scholarship, which assumes that the news media are the primary source of politically relevant information, I highlight that the media content that Americans watch the

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

most—entertainment media—offers powerful exemplars of upward mobility and serves as an important source of information that affects people's beliefs in the American Dream. Although the findings here are cross-sectional evidence, trends over the last three decades suggest that people who watch a lot of television have become more optimistic about the American Dream (see Appendix L, 20).

The duration of the entertainment media's effects—the possibility that these media effects fade away after a short time—should be explored in future studies. In the meantime, the methodological advantages of focusing on shared rags-to-riches narratives are clear, because these messages remain the same across different episodes and programs. If anything, the sheer availability and popularity of these programs alleviate concerns about external validity. Even if the public's taste for shows that feature ordinary Americans dissipates, the challenges of producing high-cost scripted shows in a fragmented media market have led to expectations that the vast majority of cable TV shows will continue featuring everyday Americans (Ralph Bunche Center 2015). For the same financial reasons, streaming services, such as Netflix, Amazon, and HBO, now produce their own reality programs that have a similar rags-to-riches narrative (e.g., *Making the Cut* and *Next in Fashion*).

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

Though behavioral evidence suggests that most Americans tune out the news (Flaxman, Goel, and Rao 2016; Guess 2020), very little attention has been paid to the political content that is present in what they are watching instead. Entertainment media are still deemed worthy of studying only when they affect ostensibly political variables (Delli Carpini 2014). As long as economic perceptions are central to the study of politics, however, this category of nonpolitical programs that affect such perceptions can no longer be dismissed. Furthermore, studying entertainment media consumption

may provide answers to many questions about distortions and biases in public opinion. Widespread American misperceptions about the criminal justice system, for example, could be better understood if we account for the fact that America's most popular network TV shows have consistently been police procedurals, such as *NCIS* (Byers and Johnson 2009).

My findings also shed light on the continuing debate about why the United States has largely failed to address the rising level of economic inequality. One critical part of the answer is institutional. Government policies that could have addressed the wealth disparity did not materialize because of legislative polarization, institutional features that bias policy outcomes toward the status quo, and a campaign finance system that allows unequal access, to name a few (for a summary, see Bonica et al. 2013). Yet it is the public opinion part of the answer that has intrigued many. Scholars have been perplexed to find that citizens are generally moving away from more egalitarian policy preferences as the income gap widens (Ashok, Kuziemko, and Washington 2016; Kenworthy and McCall 2008), a pattern that defies the predictions of the workhorse political economy model (Meltzer and Richard 1983).

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

My findings here make it clear that rags-to-riches entertainment media are an important cultural force that promote and perpetuate beliefs in upward mobility. The "puzzling" patterns in public attitudes toward redistribution are less so if we take into account the fact that Americans are reportedly watching 4 hours of television every day (Koblin 2016) and are receiving distorted information about upward mobility. Belief in economic mobility can powerfully legitimize wealth disparity (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Shariff, Wiwad,

and Aknin 2016), and scholars of class and inequality should recognize that nonpolitical mass media cultivate foundational aspects of American politics, such as beliefs in economic freedom and individualism. If American exceptionalism includes persistent adherence to egalitarianism, self-determination, and laissez-faire economics, it is important to remember that the United States consumes more TV than any other developed economy (OECD 2013).

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

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# Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.