Entertaining Beliefs in Economic Mobility

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September 10, 2018

Abstract

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. Specifically, 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—one original, two nationally representative—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, and stronger among Republicans. My results underscore the long overdue need to expand the scope of political communication research in a high choice media environment. To the extent that belief in economic mobility can legitimize income inequality, my findings also have implications for the study of redistributive democracy and American public opinion more generally.

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Introduction

In no other country is the promise of upward economic mobility as fundamental to national identity as 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), 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" (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. 2017). Millennials are significantly more indebted and less likely to own their homes than baby boomers were at the same age (Pew Research Center 2017). This is not simply an obscure academic trend: 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). Politicians from Bernie Sanders to Donald Trump have voiced their concern that the American Dream is dead or has become a nightmare (Sanders 2016; Trump 2015).

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 optimistic beliefs (CBS News Poll 2016; Gallup Organization 2016; see also 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?

In this paper, I argue that the contemporary media environment provides an important,

and previously overlooked, part of the answer. In the past two decades, there has been a meteoric rise in entertainment 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). Such popularity matters because these programs all share the same 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 what follows, I investigate whether and to what extent these rags-to-riches TV programs affect perceptions of economic mobility. Using comprehensive Nielsen ratings data and an original content analysis, I first demonstrate hat these programs have exploded in popularity in recent years, and that they propagate a narrative emphasizing that hard work produces economic success. Using three national surveys—one original and two nationally representative—I find that exposure to rags-to-riches programs increases perceptions of economic mobility; for heavy viewers, this effect is as powerful as having immigrant parents. I then turn to several original experiments, conducted both online and in a lab-in-the-field setting in rural Pennsylvania, to establish the causal effect of these programs on beliefs in mobility. I find strong evidence of such effects, especially among Republicans.

I conclude with a discussion of the implications of a high-choice media landscape for the study of economic perceptions. Changes in the information environment have caused people to consume more entertainment media, but the focus of traditional political communication scholarship has not kept pace. Little attention has been paid to the type of politically relevant narratives to which Americans are exposed when they watch "non-political" media. To the extent that nothing is more central to the study of politics than economic issues, it is no longer tenable to ignore whole categories of entertainment media programs that affect

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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.

economic perceptions. Further, by affecting beliefs in economic mobility—long known to legitimize income inequality and diminish support for wealth redistribution (Piketty 1995)—rags-to-riches programs impact American politics in the new Gilded Age quite broadly.

Entertainment Media and Sociotropic Perceptions of Economic Mobility

For centuries, many around that world have seen the United States as the "land of opportunity" (i.e., De Tocqueville 1835; Sombart 1906). This narrative fit the reality for a long time: the benefits of economic growth were shared widely among all Americans, and nearly all children who were born in 1940 had a higher income at the age of 30 than their parents had at the same age (Chetty et al. 2017). The distinctly American dream that "even the most lowly can rise, [and] that hard work, ambition, and intelligence pay off" (Lipset 1992, p. xxi) was, by and large, a solid possibility for most Americans.

But recent empirical evidence has exposed the sharp decline of American economic mobility and other cracks in the ladder to success. The proportion of children who earn more than their parents has decreased from approximately 90% to 50% over the past half century, with the largest declines for children born into the middle class (Chetty et al. 2017). The fraction of low-income students at the colleges that have successfully offered pathways to upward mobility fell sharply over the 2000s, intensifying class stratification (Chetty et al. 2017). Concurrently, wealth disparities have vastly increased (Piketty 2014), and economic insecurity has steadily risen since the mid-1980s for most Americans (Hacker, Rehm and Schlesinger 2013).

In this increasingly unequal and stratified America, however, many Americans remain steadfast in their belief that upward economic mobility is possible for anyone who works hard. According to the latest Gallup poll, most Americans are dissatisfied with the current distribution of income and wealth, but are nonetheless content with the state of economic opportunity in America (Gallup Organization 2018). Study after study has shown that con-

temporary Americans vastly overestimate the chances of upward economic mobility (Davidai and Gilovich 2018; Kraus and Tan 2015). Ironically, perceptions that economic success is the result of meritocratic factors has been increasing over the last two decades (Mijs 2017). Further, such beliefs are stronger in local communities with higher income inequality and lower economic mobility (Alesina, Stantcheva and Teso 2018; Solt et al. 2016).

Such economic optimism is a staple element used to explain the uniqueness of American political culture (Cullen 2004; Kluegel and Smith 1986; McCloskey and Zaller 1984; Verba and Orren 1985).[2] Yet this phenomenon is surprising given the widespread political concern about the fading American Dream (Obama 2013; Putnam 2016). The news media has 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). Though scholars of public opinion have routinely accused the news media of distorting citizens' sociotropic economic perceptions—that is, perceptions about national, not their own, economic experiences[3]—(i.e., Mutz 1998), news media coverage cannot explain the sustained belief in economic mobility. If anything, exposure to the news should have heightened citizens' concerns about the prospects of upward mobility, the opposite of the pattern observed.

One overlooked possibility contributing to Americans' beliefs in upward mobility is the rise of entertainment media. Indeed, this idea has a long scholarly lineage. In his seminal book, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How*, Harold Lasswell (1936) asserts that Hollywood films hammer the messages of upward mobility into citizens' brains. Explaining the paradox of why most low-income African Americans believe they can achieve the American Dream, Jennifer Hochschild (1996) claims that "(television) shows with black male leads" are devoted to "portraying the attractions and ignoring the dark side of the American dream" (p. 136).

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[2]Cross-national studies have repeatedly shown that Americans are more optimistic about the prospect of economic mobility than their European counterparts, hence the famous term the "American" Dream (i.e., Alesina, Stantcheva and Teso 2018; Evans and Kelley 2004.)

[3]Citizens' sociotropic perceptions of the national economy have been intensely studied due to their implications for the voting behavior and electoral politics (Holbrook and Garand 1996; Nadeau and Lewis-Beck 2001).

Similar speculations can be found across myriad qualitative cultural and sociological studies, all of which explore the links among American popular culture, belief in the American Dream, and the absence of class conflict in America (Cullen 2004; Murray and Ouellette 2004; Pines 1993; Samuel 2012).

Decades of work on cultivation theory suggest that entertainment media exerts an equally strong, if not a stronger, influence than the news media in shaping some politically relevant attitudes. Many of our attitudes about political issues—those ranging from crime to social welfare—are shaped by exposure to entertainment television (i.e., Carlson 1985; Holbrook and Hill 2005; Morgan and Shanahan 2010). Examples from televised entertainment content are more vivid and accessible than real-world examples (Busselle 2001; Busselle and Shrum 2003). Further, through their narrative presentations of information, viewers experience the phenomenon of "transportation," a cognitive and emotional experience in which viewers immerse themselves in a story (Green, Brock and Kaufman 2004; Shrum 2012). 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; Slater, Rouner and Long 2006).[4] Indeed, a growing body of recent quasi-experimental evidence finds that entertainment media powerfully alters people's behaviors around the world. In Brazil, soap opera viewing has been linked to fertility and divorce rates (La Ferrara, Chong and Duryea 2012), while cable TV entertainment programs impacts pregnancy rates and school enrollment rates in India (Jensen and Oster 2009).

In this study, I argue that rags-to-riches programs, a subset of reality television, should shape viewers' beliefs about upward economic mobility due to three distinctive common features of such programs. 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

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

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 post-secondary 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 including a million-dollar prize, a lucrative contract, a coveted job, or a brand-new house. Entertainment media writ large is 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 the general level of optimism towards life is conceptually different from holding an optimistic view of the US as 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 the rags-to-riches programs tends 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. Many previous studies have examined the effects of a single TV program or a few similarly themed episodes (i.e., Butler, Koopman and Zimbardo 1995; Lenart and McGraw 1989) But because different programs, or different episodes of the same program, typically contain various, sometimes competing, types of messages and plot lines, their net impact has been unclear.

This problem has long plagued research on the effect of non-political media.

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

Before examining the impact of exposure to the rags-to-riches narrative, I first establish 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[5] to identify TV shows that are classified as reality and game shows. These two non-fictional genres were chosen because of their tendency to feature real-life, ordinary people. Out of 8,701 entries of non-fictional entertainment shows that aired between 2015 and 2017, 3,362 Nielsen TV entries are identified as reality and game shows.[6] I narrowed this list to shows that have a competitive format (N = 274), as 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).

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—or 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

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[5]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 ten different websites including IMDb.com, TV.com, TVguide.com, Amazon.com, iTunes, and Wikipedia.

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

Figure 1: Content Analysis Results of Reality/Game Programs (Aired 2015–2017)
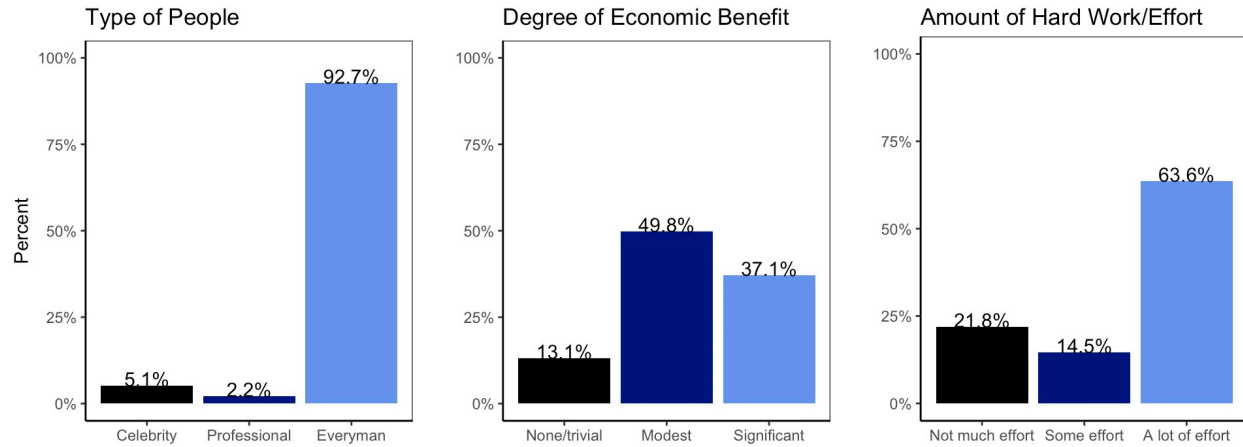

Note: 274 competitive reality/game TV shows were coded for three attributes: type of people (contestants), the degree of economic benefit, and the amount of hard work and effort as opposed to luck required to win. Each attribute has three categories. The panels show the distribution of programs classified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

coded as "a lot of effort," while dating shows or trivia quiz shows were coded as "not much effort." Inter-coder reliability for 100 randomly selected shows was approximately 90%. Figure 1 summarizes the results of the content analysis for each element. About 71.3% of the 274 competitive reality/game shows that aired between 2015 and 2017 have 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 that attracted more than four million viewers, eight in ten featured a rags-to-riches narrative.

Indeed, the popularity of rags-to-riches programs goes hand in hand with a massive increase in the numbers of reality and game programs in the overall media landscape, including programs on popular streaming services such as Netflix and Hulu. Figure 2 shows the growth in the relative share of reality/game shows within the media landscape using all TV programs released between 1960 and 2017 (N=102,523) as recorded in the media database

Figure 2: The Increasing Relative Share of Reality/Game Shows Over Time (1960-2017)
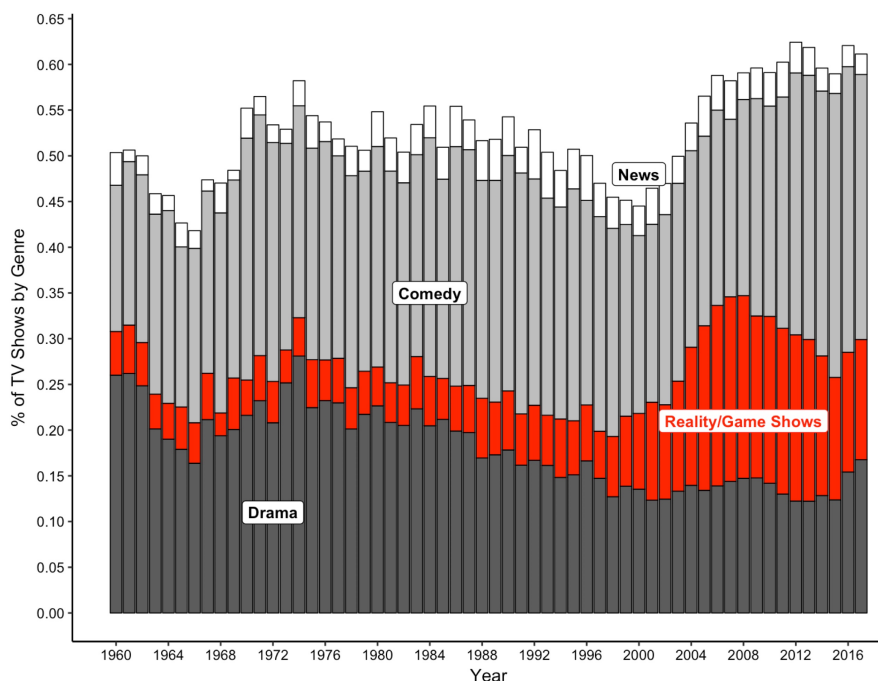
Note: I assessed 102,523 TV programs released between 1960 and 2017 using the Internet Movie Database (IMDb.com), which typically lists up to three relevant genres for each TV program. I calculated the average proportion of each genre per year, and plotted the relative share of the three most dominant genres (comedy, drama, and reality/game) as well as news.

IMDb.[7] Figure 2 shows a clear surge in the number of reality/games shows starting in early 2000; by around 2008, the proportion of these shows outnumbered that dramas.[8] This figure is consistent with many other statistics suggesting that 750 reality programs were aired on prime-time cable in one year (VanDerWerff 2016) and that reality program viewership in popular streaming services has risen more than 100% within the past year (CNN 2018).[9]

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

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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]With the growth of cable television, the ever-increasing competition for a fragmented audience has meant that the cheaper production costs of unscripted shows featuring ordinary people also made great economic sense.

[9]The other study in 2017 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).

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 US adults—four in ten Americans—regularly watched at least one reality TV show (Nielsen 2017). In this high-choice media environment in which many tune out the news (Prior 2007; Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Flaxman, Goel and Rao 2016), rags-to-riches entertainment shows represent an important source of information that can potentially affect beliefs in upward economic mobility.

Do Rags-to-Riches TV Programs Affect Perceptions of Economic Mobility?

The question remains, however, whether such programming actually shapes citizens' perceptions of economic mobility. To begin to address this question, I examine three different national surveys: the Media & Culture Survey that I designed, the 2016 American National Election Studies survey (ANES), and the Institute for the Study of Citizens and Politics (ISCAP) panel survey. I focus on the original Media & Culture survey because it contains the best measures of both perceptions of economic mobility and rags-to-riches programming consumption; I use the other two surveys to verify the robustness of my results. To evaluate the causal effect of exposure to rags-to-riches TV programs on beliefs in upward economic mobility, I also conducted several survey experiments both online and in a lab-in-the-field setting in rural Pennsylvania.

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.[10] 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 $\alpha = 0.86$) 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 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

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[10]See the appendix for sample characteristics.

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 1 reports the percentage of regular viewers for each program.

Table 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.

Figure 3: Overall Consumption of "Rags-to-Riches" TV Programs
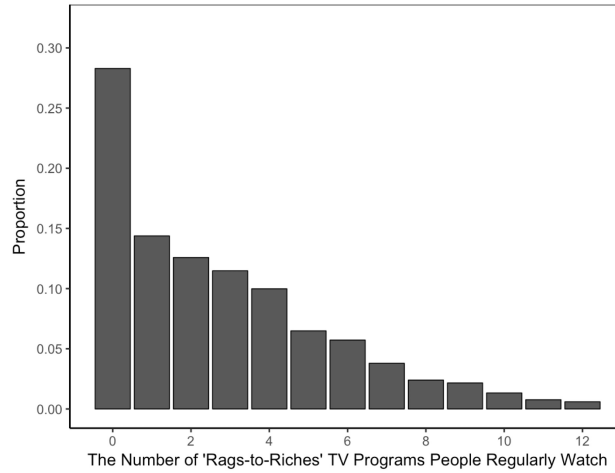
Note: The figure displays the proportion of survey respondents that regularly watches different numbers of rags-to-riches programs. Only 28% of respondents indicated that they do not watch any rags-to-riches program.

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 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 *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 2015), 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 consumptions. 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.[11] Previous studies have shown that low socioeconomic status is often linked to

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[11]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-

Table 2: The Impact of Watching Rags-to-Riches Programs on Belief in Economic Mobiltiy

	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.

more time spent watching television, but the patterns I find here suggest that TV 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 $\alpha = 0.86$). 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

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to-riches narrative (i.e., *The Bachelor*, *Celebrity Family Feud*, *Real Housewives*).

(Lenz and Sahn 2018), I report results with and without different sets of covariates and weights. Table 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 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. 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

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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 displays the full regression results from Model 4 (Table 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 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

Figure 4: The Correlates of Belief in Upward Economic Mobility
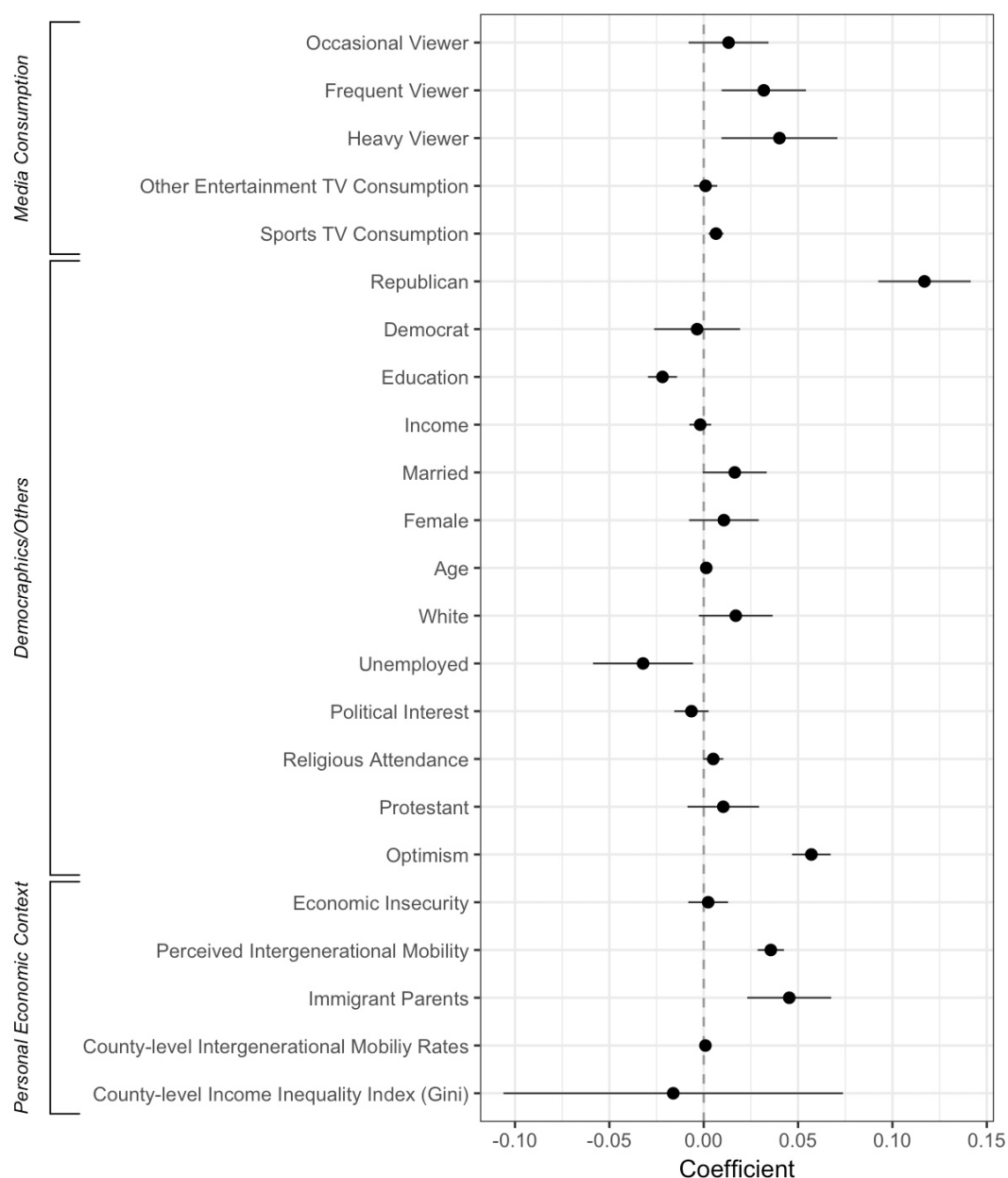
Note: This figure displays the coefficient estimates of an OLS regression model in which I regress perceptions of economic mobility on media consumption, demographic variables, and personal economic context. The black horizontal lines indicate the 95% confidence intervals.

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 estimated the impacts of rags-to-riches media consumption on internal and external attributions of

Table 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.

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, 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.

Studies 2 and 3: 2016 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 identi-fication, 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 justi-fication 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 4 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

Table 4: The Effect of Exposure to Rags-to-Riches Programs on Belief in Economic Mobility in 2016 ANES and 2008-2016 NAES-ISCAP

	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

	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.

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.

Study 4: Experimental Evidence

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.

The vehicle has two separate rooms, each equipped with a TV screen and a chair (Figure 5). 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. I drove to non-political events that attract local residents of various ages, such as farmers' markets, flea markets, and summer festivals. A team of field assistants and I recruited participants on site. They were told that they would be watching entertainment media and asked to share their thoughts in exchange for $10 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

(a) Outside
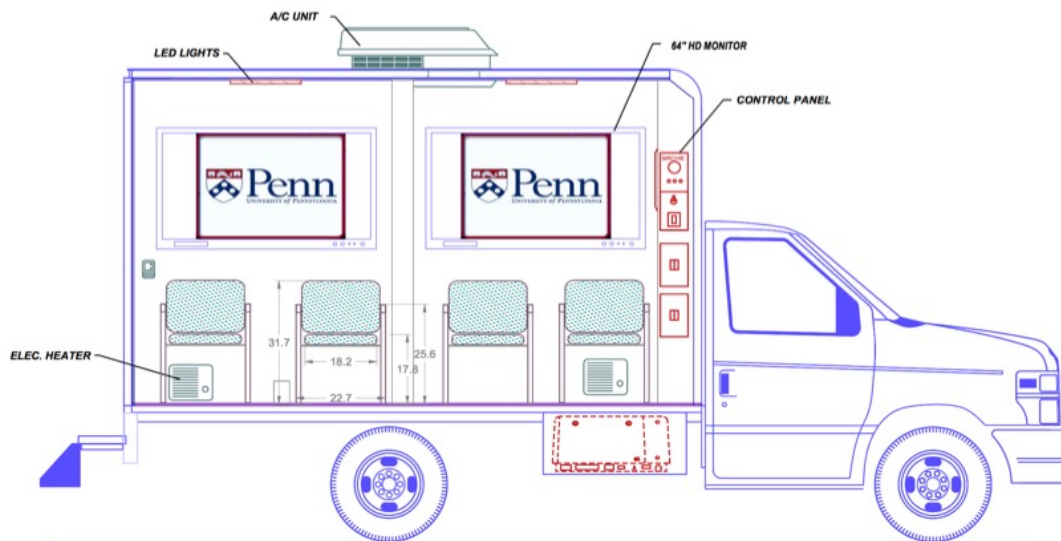
(b) Inside

Figure 5: Photos of the "mobile media laboratory"

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*.[12] 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 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 <

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[12] To develop appropriate experimental stimuli, I 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.

Table 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.

0.001), and showed that people can succeed when they are willing 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 ap-

proximately 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 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 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 6 shows the treatment effects by the pre-treatment perceptions of the extent to which respondents agree with the statement that anyone who

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Table 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

Note:	*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.

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 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.

Taken as a whole, the experimental results show that even watching a short segment

of rags-to-riches entertainment media increases beliefs in economic mobility. Everyone did not respond to the treatment stimuli equally or in the same way. Among Republicans and those who were already optimistic about the American Dream, the treatment effects were much larger. Among non-believers, the treatment decreased their economic optimism. Yet, to the extent that most Americans hold optimistic perceptions of mobility, this means that the widely consumed rags-to-riches entertainment media indeed perpetuates belief in upward economic mobility.

Discussion and Conclusion

What sustains belief in the prospect of upward economic mobility in the era of an "apocalyptic" level of economic inequality? The existing 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 the belief in the American Dream is "just deeply embedded in American mythology...and myths last because they are dreams fulfilled in our imaginations" (Hanson and White 2011, p.7; see also Hochschild 1996; Huntington 1981; McClosky and Zaller 1984; Kluegel and Smith 1986).

I argue that perceptions of economic mobility must be understood alongside the media discourse and environment like any other studies of sociotropic economic perceptions. This article highlights the sheer popularity and availability of TV programs that emphasize how ordinary people who make an effort are rewarded financially, and finds that exposure to rags-to-riches entertainment media increases people's belief in economic mobility using both observational and experimental data. 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.

The possibility that these media effects fade away in a short time, and the duration of entertainment media effects, should be explored in future studies. In the meantime, the methodological advantages of focusing 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 regularly watch a particular news program, it typically covers multiple, differently framed political events. In the current political climate in which highly controversial news stories break on a daily basis, political communication scholars take a great caution in articulating the duration of media effects found in survey experimental settings. Such concerns are alleviated for the types of entertainment media on which I focus in this paper, because these programs are constantly airing.

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 resulted in a trend in which 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) that features software makers who pitch their ideas to the judges to *Shot in the Dark* (Netflix), which highlights freelance journalists who are competing for eventful stories to sell to news channels.

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 economic perceptions, but in mainstream social science research, mass media automatically translates as news media. Despite formidable changes in the media environment, the scholarly 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), declining confidence in the press (Ladd 2011), partisan media consumption (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Levendusky 2013), and the nationalization of local news media (Hopkins 2018), among other considerations. The realm of soft news seems to be the farthest afield that quantitative academics have looked (Baum 2011).

Though there is glaring behavioral evidence that most Americans tune out the news (Bakshy, Messing and Adamic 2015; Flaxman, Goel and Rao 2016), very little attention has been paid to what political content is present in what they are watching instead.[13] Entertainment media is still viewed as "at best a distraction from politics and at worst a cause of active disengagement" and is deemed worthy of studying only when it affects ostensibly political variables (Carpini 2014). But as long as economic perceptions are central to the study of politics, an entire category of non-political programs that affect such perceptions can no longer be dismissed. Furthermore, studying entertainment media consumption may provide answers to many lingering questions about distortions and biases in public opinion. Widespread American misperceptions about the criminal justice system or policing power, for instance, could be better understood when accounting for the fact that America's most popular network TV shows have always been crime series such as *NCIS* and *Criminal Minds* (Byers and Johnson 2009; Cole and Dioso-Villa 2006).

My findings also inform broader discussions of public attitudes toward redistributive democracy. Undergirding long-standing economic theories of redistribution is an assumption that citizens will favor more generous levels of redistribution if they recognize an unfair economic system. This has been repeatedly proven to hold in experimental settings in which people are forced to consume pessimistic, news-like economic information, for example on rising income inequality or declining mobility (Alesina, Stantcheva and Teso 2018). Yet across different observational data, scholars have discovered a "puzzling" phenomenon in which citizens are generally moving away from more egalitarian policy preferences as the income gap widens (Kenworthy and McCall 2008; Kelly and Enns 2010). This seeming paradox can be resolved if we take into account the fact that Americans are reportedly watching four hours of television every day (Koblin 2016) and are receiving distorted information about upward mobility. Belief in economic mobility can powerfully legitimize wealth disparity (Corak 2013;

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[13]Most discussions of the alarming number of Americans who do not read or watch the news is relegated to a few lines in the conclusion section, along with the usual disclaimer that future studies should address the implications of media that people consume the most.

Kluegel and Smith 1986; Shariff, Wiwad and Aknin 2016), and scholars of class and inequality should recognize that non-political mass media cultivate foundational aspects of American politics, such as the beliefs in economic freedom and individualism. If American exceptionalism typically refers to the persistent adherence to egalitarianism, self-determination, and laissez-faire economics, it is important to remember that the United States has exceptional, second-to-none TV consumption rates compared to all other developed economies (OECD 2013).

In the Gilded Age of the late 19th century, Americans read Horatio Alger's "rags-to-riches" dime novels. Today, their counterparts in the new Gilded Age are browsing through hundreds of channels saturated with "rags-to-riches" entertainment programs, and have elected the former host of *The Apprentice* as the head of state. In this era of choice, entertainment media content is what appeals to citizens, as lowbrow as it may seem; the political consequences, however, are anything but trivial.

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