

# Entertaining Beliefs in Economic Mobility

Eunji Kim<sup>†</sup>

## 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 Americans' 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. National surveys as well as online and lab-in-the-field experiments 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 are watching instead of news can powerfully distort economic perceptions and have important implications for public preferences for redistribution.

---

<sup>\*</sup>The author is grateful to Larry Bartels, Michael X. Delli Carpini, Josh Clinton, Danny Donghyun Choi, Jamie Druckman, Daniel Q. Gillion, Andy Guess, Jessica Feezell, Daniel J. Hopkins, Yue Hou, Cindy Kam, Yphtach Lelkes, Matt Levendusky, Michelle Margolis, Marc Meredith, Diana C. Mutz, Rasmus T. Pedersen, Spencer Piston, Markus Prior, Hye Young You, Danna Young, and participants at the 2018 MPSA and APSA meetings. Kathleen Hall Jamieson of the Annenberg Public Policy Center generously shared the Nielsen ratings data. This research was funded by the University of Pennsylvania's Institute for the Study of Citizens and Politics (ISCAP) and the 2018 GAPSA-Provost Fellowship for Interdisciplinary Innovation. This paper received APSA's 2020 Paul Lazarsfeld Best Paper Award, Wilson Carey McWilliams Best Paper Award, ISPP's 2020 Roberta Sigel Early Career Scholar Paper Award, and ICA's 2019 Top Student Paper Award in Political Communication.

<sup>†</sup>Corresponding Author. Assistant Professor of Political Science, Vanderbilt University

## Introduction

The promise of upward economic mobility is fundamental to national identity in the United States. In a land free of a feudal past, Americans were “apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their hands” (de Tocqueville 1835, p.206), believing that if they worked hard, their economic circumstances would improve. This belief that hard work guarantees success is such a cornerstone of the American ethos that it has become known as the American Dream (Cullen 2004; Hartz 1955; Huntington 1981; Lipset 1997; McClosky 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 percent (Chetty et al. 2017). In this age of intensifying class stratification, concerns about the fading American Dream have certainly dominated public discourse. Politicians from Joe Biden to Donald Trump have argued that the American Dream needs to be restored (Biden 2020; Trump 2020).

Nevertheless, many Americans continue to view the United States as the land of opportunity and believe that people can achieve upward mobility through hard work. Recent polls, for instance, show that around 70 percent 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 the 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; see also Cheng and Wen 2019). 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; Toff and Kalogeropoulos 2020). In the past two decades, this overlooked part of the media landscape has featured many entertainment programs that offer powerful exemplars of real-life Americans succeeding because of their hard work and talent. Shows that illustrate an ordinary person on

a trajectory of upward economic mobility—what I term “rags-to-riches” programs<sup>1</sup>—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) and contestant vote totals that exceed 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, attributions people make about wealth and poverty, and redistributive policy preferences. 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 an original national survey, 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 and that these effects are more pronounced among those who are less interested in politics. I also find that neither local economic context nor personal experiences explains much of the variation in beliefs in upward mobility. I then report on several original experiments, conducted both online and in a lab-in-the-field setting in suburban New Jersey and Pennsylvania, that assess the causal effect of these programs on beliefs in the American Dream. I find strong evidence of such effects, especially among Republicans. Supplementary analysis suggests that the narrative emphasis on meritocracy influences how people think about whether the rich deserve their wealth, increases people’s tolerance of income inequality, and lowers public support for further redistribution.

I conclude by discussing the implications of the post-broadcast media environment for the study of public opinion. Despite the startling extent of entertainment media consumption, little attention has been paid to the politically relevant narratives to which Americans are exposed when they watch “non-political” media. Entertainment media has attracted research attention only when the contents are delivered in a form that scholars are familiar with—in the form of soft “news”, for instance (Baum 2011; Baumgartner and Morris 2006; Young 2019). It is still mostly viewed as a force that simply dilutes news media effects (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013). But when entertainment media consistently offers positive and vivid exemplars of upward mobility to citizens who opt out of consuming counter-narratives from the news, it

---

<sup>1</sup>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.

can powerfully distort mass economic perceptions. Further, by affecting beliefs in economic mobility—which are well known to legitimize income inequality and diminish support for wealth redistribution (Piketty 1995)—the rags-to-riches narratives that prevail in the contemporary media environment exert a conservative influence over American politics in this new Gilded Age.

## **Media Exemplars and Perceptions of Economic Mobility**

Where do beliefs in upward economic mobility come from? Canonical writers from Alexis de Tocqueville (1835) to Werner Sombart (1906) have proposed that widespread belief in economic mobility is a reason why Americans lack class consciousness and tolerate wealth disparities, but we rarely attempt to explain variations in these sentiments. Literature has pointed to path-dependent historical factors, such as the Protestant work ethics or waves of frontier settlement (Cullen 2004; 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<sup>2</sup> requires dissecting the economic information that people regularly consume and the types of exemplars it provides. Building on long-standing public opinion scholarship that considers mass media to be the primary driver of sociotropic economic perceptions (Hetherington 1996; Mutz 1998; Nadeau et al. 1999; Soroka 2014), I consider how individual-level variations in perceptions of economic mobility are a function of exposure to mass media and the exemplars it offers. To keep my hypotheses parsimonious, I follow the conventional conceptualization in which the news and entertainment media are the two main building blocks of the mass media system. I consider the extent to which these two types of media are relevant to understanding beliefs in the American Dream, paying particular attention to the types of accessible exemplars each provides.

In sync with the news media's well-known tendency to over-report negative economic information (Soroka 2006; Soroka and McAdams 2015) and the worsening economic realities of the new Gilded Age, it would come as no surprise that the news media typically offers information about downward economic mobility (See Appendix C for the dominantly negative sentiment in NYT coverage of economic mobility from 1980-2020). Indeed, the news media has devoted considerable attention to rising income inequality,

---

<sup>2</sup>I focus on sociotropic perceptions because citizens' economic perceptions about collectives—as opposed to egotropic perceptions—play a central role in shaping political attitudes (Feldman 1984; Kinder and Kiewiet 1981; Weatherford 1983)

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). News consumption should have heightened citizens' concerns about the prospects for upward mobility, yet we still observe sustained belief in economic mobility.

In the meantime, what 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 2001; Busselle and Shrum 2003). This idea indeed has a long scholarly lineage. For instance, Harold Lasswell's (1936) seminal book *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* asserts that Hollywood films hammer messages of upward mobility into citizens' brains. Explaining the paradox of why most low-income African Americans believe they can achieve the American Dream, Jennifer Hochschild (1996) claims that “(television) shows with black male leads” are devoted to “portraying the attractions and ignoring the dark side of the American dream” (p. 136). Similar speculations can be found across myriad qualitative cultural and sociological studies that explore the 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).

Though entertainment media is a much-overlooked source of economic information, decades of work on cultivation theory suggest that entertainment media exerts at least as much influence as the news media on shaping 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, Carlson 1985; Holbrook and Hill 2005; Morgan and Shanahan 2010). Further, through their narrative presentations of information, viewers experience the phenomenon of “transportation,” a cognitive and emotional experience in which viewers immerse themselves in a story (Green, Brock and Kaufman 2004; 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).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, a growing body of quasi-experimental evidence finds that entertainment media powerfully alters citizens' socio-political behaviors around the world. In Italy, exposure to entertainment TV led to voting for the populist party (Durante, Pinotti and Tesei 2019), while cable TV entertainment programs impact school enrollment rates in India (Jensen and Oster 2009).

Taken together, these theories tell us that the two types of media—news and entertainment—are push-

---

<sup>3</sup>Several experimental studies have demonstrated that non-political media influence real-world political attitudes (Mulligan and Habel 2011; Mutz and Nir 2010.)

ing perceptions of economic mobility 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. Testing this requires that 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, I propose that three components—the presence of ordinary people, visible financial gains, and narrative emphasis on meritocracy—constitute a “rags-to-riches” narrative that dominates parts of the entertainment media.

Rags-to-riches programs, a subset of reality television, have three distinctive components that I hypothesize to shape viewers’ beliefs about upward economic mobility. First, they feature ordinary American citizens, not hired actors or celebrities. Successful entertainment content requires relatable characters and believable storylines, elements that even children can list (Moyer-Gusé 2008). Featuring ordinary Americans dramatizes the representation of reality and offers a convenient point of identification for the viewer. Watching a working-class janitor or waitress become a celebrity overnight or earn most of a year’s income in one month suggests that these things can happen to anyone, not just to those from wealthy families or who have a post-secondary education. These glorified everymen can serve as a social reference group and provide viewers with more relatable vicarious experiences (Papacharissi and Mendelson 2007; Reiss and Wiltz 2004)

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

Third, rags-to-riches shows tend to emphasize that economic outcomes are determined by hard work and merit by portraying their beneficiaries as deserving. The notion of meritocracy is deeply embedded in the American Dream, and these programs tend to highlight people’s economic hardships and challenges

in order to lionize their later success.<sup>4</sup> 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 non-political media. In the next section, I establish the premise of this study by using detailed Nielsen ratings data, a comprehensive online entertainment media database, and original content analyses to demonstrate that rags-to-riches programs have become a ubiquitous part of the American media landscape over the last two decades.

## The Rise of “Rags-to-Riches” Entertainment Programs

Ranging from *The American Idol* to *Shark Tank*, TV programs that feature real-life, ordinary Americans—widely referred to as reality TV shows—have been a ratings juggernaut and dominated the American media market during the past two decades (DeVolld 2016; Livingstone 2017; VanDerWerff 2016). 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 (Plante 2017; Rosa 2019; Yahr, Moore and Chow 2015).<sup>5</sup>

These observations can be empirically confirmed. Figure 1 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 *IMDb*, one of the most comprehensive media databases.<sup>6</sup> There is a clear surge in the number of reality/games shows starting in early 2000; by around 2008, one in five newly released programs is a reality TV.

---

<sup>4</sup>Contestants routinely 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. See examples in Appendix D.

<sup>5</sup>The prediction is that there will be even more reality TV programs because of financial constraints (Paterson 2020).

<sup>6</sup>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. This dataset includes not only programs available on mainstream media but also those on popular streaming services such as Netflix, HBO, and Hulu.

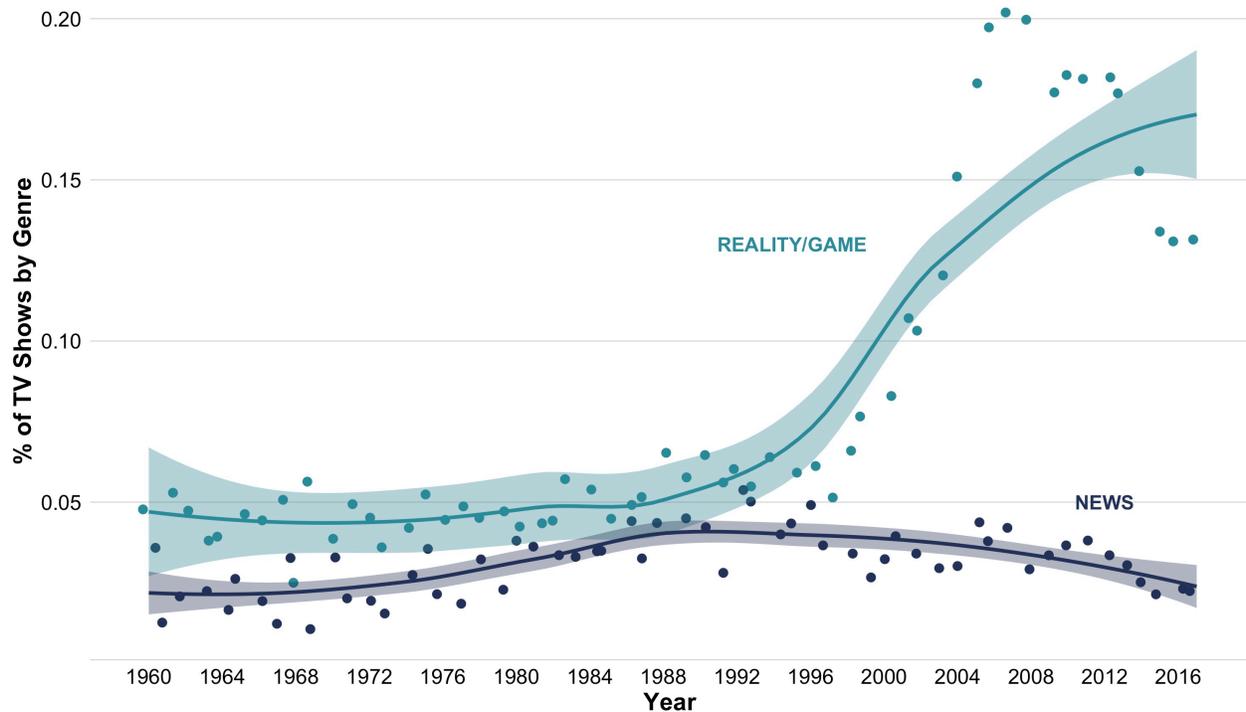


Figure 1: The relative share of news shows and reality/game shows over time (1960-2017). I assessed 102,523 TV programs released between 1960 and 2017 using the Internet Movie Database (IMDb.com), which typically lists up to three relevant genres for each TV program. I calculated the average proportion of each genre per year and plotted the relative share.

Figure 1 is consistent with many other statistics suggesting that 750 reality programs were aired on prime-time cable in 2015 (VanDerWerff 2016) and that reality program viewership in popular streaming services rose more than 100 percent from 2017 to 2018 (CNN 2018).<sup>7</sup> In the meantime, the relative share of news programs has remained stable. While the absolute amount of news programming has increased in recent decades, this has not increased the relative share of such programming in the overall media supply (Van Aelst et al. 2017). Indeed, even though there is more political information available than ever before, there is an even greater increase in nonpolitical media content, such as sports and entertainment. This decreasing share of news programming means that it is now easier to consume media while avoiding political news altogether (Newman et al. 2019; Prior 2007; Schröder and Ørsten 2016).

Granted, not all of these reality TV shows broadcast narratives of upward mobility. Those that feature stories about the undeserving rich<sup>8</sup> would not have the same implications for real-world phenomena as “rags-to-riches” TV programs that feature ordinary hard-working Americans. But, with the exception of

<sup>7</sup>The pandemic also led to the increase in reality TV viewership across networks and channels (Aurther N.d.; Jones 2020).

<sup>8</sup>In *The Economic Other*, Condon and Wichowsky (2020) argue that the reality TV genre primarily offers the chance for an unmediated contact with the wealthy while real-world opportunities to interact with them is increasingly rare.

*Desperate Housewives* in the 2004-2006 and 2007-2008 TV seasons, all the reality shows that were among the top-ten most watched programs from 2000 to 2017 had a competitive format that featured a narrative of the American Dream (See Appendix B). *The American Idol*, for instance, was the most watched program for eight consecutive seasons, from 2003 to 2011. None of the top-ten most watched TV shows over the last two decades was a news program; in stark contrast, *60 Minutes* (CBS) was a top-ten show for twenty-three seasons in a row from 1977 to 2000.<sup>9</sup>

To better establish that the rags-to-riches narrative is widespread, I conducted a content analysis focusing on the three components I argue are essential to cultivating beliefs in upward mobility: whether the TV program featured (1) ordinary Americans (2) working hard to (3) achieve considerable economic benefits. First, I coded whether a program 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 (e.g., a recording deal, a business contract, or a contestant's own TV show; or cash prizes, such as one million dollars) are coded as significant benefits. Booby prizes, bragging rights or a paid date night were coded as trivial benefits. Finally, I indicated the extent of hard work and effort that each show required in order to win. Programs that are clearly merit-based and dramatize the process of working hard—ranging from *Shark Tank* (ABC) to *MasterChef* (FOX)—were coded as “a lot of effort,” while dating shows or trivia quiz shows were coded as “not much effort.” Inter-coder reliability was approximately 90% (Appendix A).

I matched Nielsen ratings data from September 2015 to August 2017 with the *Encyclopedia of Television Shows 1925–2016* (Terrace 2012, 2017) and the *TV Tango.com* database to identify TV shows that are classified as reality and game shows. Of the 8,701 entries of non-fictional entertainment shows that aired between 2015 and 2017, Nielsen identified 3,362 as reality and game shows. I narrowed this list to shows that have a competitive format, because the ideology of meritocracy and the self-made person is closely tied to competition and amplified in the face of unequal outcomes (McNaMee and Miller Jr 2014). Figure 2 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 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

---

<sup>9</sup>See <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/60-minutes-milestones/>

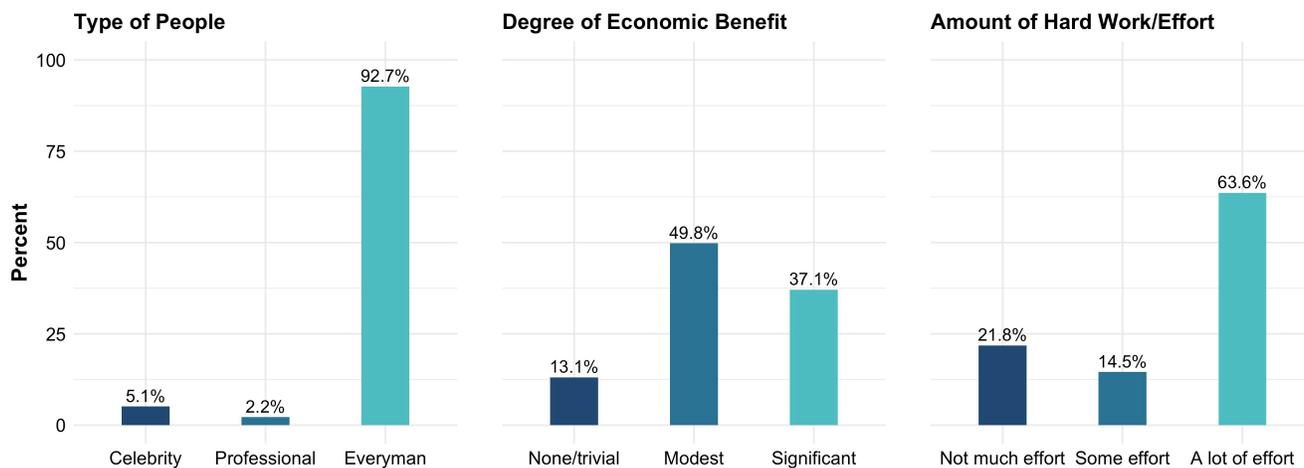


Figure 2: Content analysis results of reality/game programs aired 2015-2017. *Note:* 275 competitive reality/game TV shows were coded for three attributes: type of people (contestants), the degree of economic benefit, and the amount of hard work and effort as opposed to luck required to win. Each attribute has three categories. The panels show the distribution of programs classified into each category. Appendix A reports the full coding instructions.

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 regular viewers, eight in ten featured a rags-to-riches narrative. To put their popularity in perspective, consider that Fox News attracts four 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 ten 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 more audience than any of the cable TV news programs (Porter 2020; Pucci 2020).

## Observational Data and Results

Having established the prevalence of rags-to-riches programming, I turn now to whether such programming actually shapes citizens' perceptions of economic mobility. First, to establish a correlation between the two, I designed a national survey that Survey Sampling International (SSI) administered to 3,000 US residents in August 2018.<sup>10</sup> I present full details of the survey in Appendix E and summarize key elements here. My goals in this step were to demonstrate that the effects of rags-to-riches entertainment media are observable among the general population and that these effects can be distinguished from those of expo-

<sup>10</sup>SSI used targeted recruitment to ensure that the survey sample closely matched US Census benchmarks for education, income, age, gender, geography, and race/ethnicity.

sure 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. Respondents indicated the extent to which they agreed with each of four statements that measure belief in economic mobility: (1) "The United States is 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 agreed with each statement. I averaged these four questions into one 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  $\alpha = 0.71, 0.63$ ) that ranged from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating beliefs that economic success is a result of internal or external 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 thirty TV programs, which included twelve rags-to-riches reality programs, eight reality/game shows that featured celebrities or ordinary Americans who were not competing for economic benefits, and ten sports programs. They were asked to mark all programs that they have regularly watched. The twelve rags-to-riches programs were selected based on three criteria. First, they all illustrated the three components I argue are essential to affecting beliefs in upward mobility: they featured (1) ordinary Americans (2) working hard to (3) achieve considerable economic benefits. Second, the size of their two-year average audience, according to Nielsen ratings data, was larger than one million. Third, these shows all aired in 2018.

For ease of interpretation, the key independent variable, *Rags-to-Riches Media Consumption*, is con-

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

The other programs were included to address alternative hypotheses and spurious relationships. I included ten 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 feature celebrities, or spotlight ordinary people who are not necessarily hard working and are not perceived to have gained economic benefits. These were included to address the possibility that people who like to watch reality programs, regardless of their content and overarching narrative, have unobservable differences that make them more likely than non-viewers to believe in the prospect of upward economic mobility. I again referred to the Nielsen data to decide which shows to include.

Consistent with the high Nielsen ratings of the programs included in the survey, 85% of survey respondents indicated that they regularly tuned into at least one of the thirty programs and 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. Overall, the mean number of rags-to-riches programs was 2.80 and 2.84 for Republicans and Democrats, respectively, which is not statistically significantly different ( $p=0.735$ ).

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, and (3) not being able to afford the cost of education for themselves and their family members. Respondents were also asked whether they think their current standard of living is better than that of 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 (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' local economic contexts shape their perceptions of economic mobility and belief in meritocracy (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 asserted 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. In other words, the survey design included many alternatives to rags-to-riches media consumption that, according to existing theories and studies, can affect sociotropic perceptions of economic mobility.

### 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 attribute to economic success. Columns (1), (3), and (5) of Table 1 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.<sup>11</sup>

Table 1: The impact of rags-to-riches TV on 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 (0.012)	0.013 (0.011)	0.006 (0.010)	0.013 (0.010)	-0.004 (0.009)	-0.007 (0.009)
Frequent Viewer (3-5 Programs)	0.047*** (0.012)	0.032** (0.011)	0.008 (0.010)	0.017+ (0.010)	0.009 (0.009)	0.005 (0.010)
Heavy Viewer (6+ Programs)	0.076*** (0.013)	0.040* (0.016)	0.052*** (0.011)	0.052*** (0.014)	0.039*** (0.011)	0.014 (0.013)
Controls Included:						
Other media consumption	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y
Demographics	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y
Personal economic context	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y
County-level economic context	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y
State fixed effect	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y
Observations	3,004	2,998	3,004	2,998	3,004	2,998
R <sup>2</sup>	0.013	0.239	0.008	0.143	0.006	0.110

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

The 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 sta-

<sup>11</sup> Given the growing concern over researchers' discretionary choices in the use of covariates, I report results with and without different sets of covariates.

tus, 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 non-viewers and occasional viewers was only 1.3 percentage points, and was not statistically significant. The gaps between non-viewers and frequent viewers and between non-viewers and heavy viewers, however, were both statistically significant. Those who regularly watch more than six rags-to-riches programs, for instance, were 4 percentage points more likely to believe in the American Dream. Heavy viewers were also more likely than non-viewers to attribute economic success to internal factors. The relationship between exposure to rags-to-riches programs and external attributions was less robust, and as Column 6 shows, rags-to-riches media exposure had no explanatory power when I added an array of control variables.

To better contextualize the predictive power of rags-to-riches entertainment media against other covariates, Figure 3 shows the predicted change in *Internal Attribution* from a one-standard deviation change in each variable by respondents' level of political interest. The figure demonstrates age is a powerful predictor of the tendency to attribute economic success to internal dispositions such as hard work and individual will, but variables such as income and education have no explanatory power. Among those who are not interested in politics, neither life-shaping experiences of having immigrant parents nor race matter much. Having a higher level of economic insecurity is positively correlated with a stronger belief in internal attribution.

Most importantly, the effects of rags-to-riches TV programs are stronger among those who are less interested in politics, and its effect among heavy viewers is more powerful than the effect of being a self-identified Republican. Taken as a whole, these observational findings support my hypothesis 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. The fact that these effects are more powerful among those who are not interested in politics—and hence not likely to consume much news—is also

consistent with my hypothesis. However, these findings neither come from a probability sample nor establish causality. To address these concerns, Appendix G replicates the main findings using two nationally representative surveys,<sup>12</sup> while the next sections turn to experimental methods.

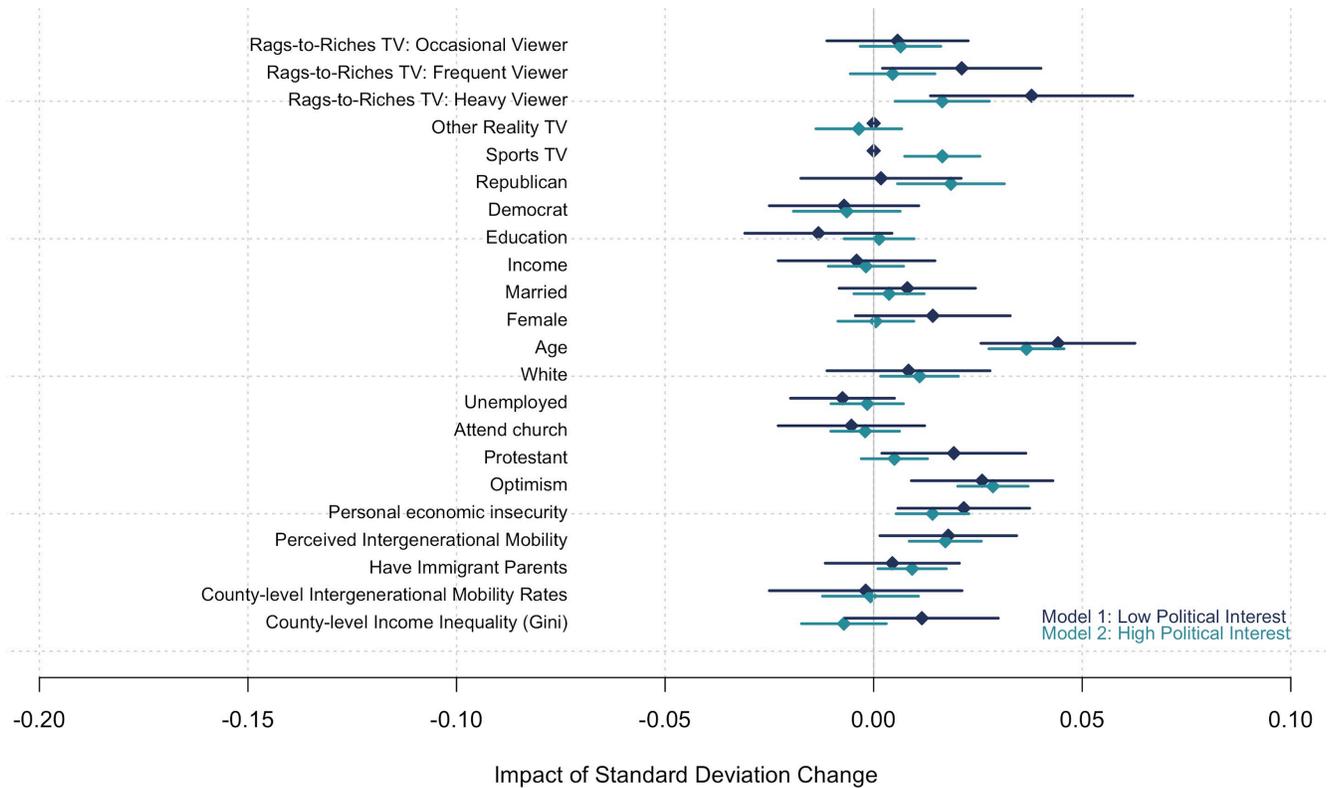


Figure 3: Marginal effects on internal attributions of economic success by level of political interest. *Note:* The figure shows predicted change in internal attributions of economic success from a one-SD change in each variable. Positive values indicate a greater likelihood to attribute economic success to internal factors. Navy dots on the upper lines indicate the estimates among those who are less interested in politics; turquoise dots on the lower lines indicate the estimates among those who are more interested in politics.

## Experiment I: The Treatment Effects of Rags-to-Riches TV

To explore the causal effects of rags-to-riches entertainment media, I conducted online and lab-in-the-field experiments, which took place in October 2016 and in July-September 2018 respectively. I recruited 763 respondents online through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk and 203 respondents offline in suburban New Jersey and Pennsylvania. To obtain enough sample variations in partisanship, Bucks, Lehigh, Northampton, and Salem counties were chosen based on their 2016 presidential election results.<sup>13</sup> For the lab-

<sup>12</sup>Though they have a far less detailed information on entertainment media consumption, they do allow me to replicate the finding with a nationally-representative data.

<sup>13</sup>47.8%, 45.9%, 50.0%, and 55.6% of the total county votes, respectively, were cast for Donald Trump.

in-the-field experiments, I used a mobile media laboratory as shown in Figure 4. The vehicle had two separate rooms, each equipped with a TV screen and a chair. I drove to non-political events that attract local residents of various ages, such as farmers' markets, flea markets, and summer festivals. A team of field assistants and I recruited participants on site. They were told that they would be watching entertainment media and asked to share their thoughts in exchange for \$10 compensation in cash (See Appendix H for more descriptions on logistics and procedures).<sup>14</sup>

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 prospect of upward economic mobility. To increase the efficiency of the experimental design by further accounting for pre-existing tendencies to believe in upward economic mobility, this survey included partisan identification, a system justification scale, and an optimism scale, characteristics that were expected to enhance the likelihood of believing in upward economic mobility after being exposed to experimental stimuli.

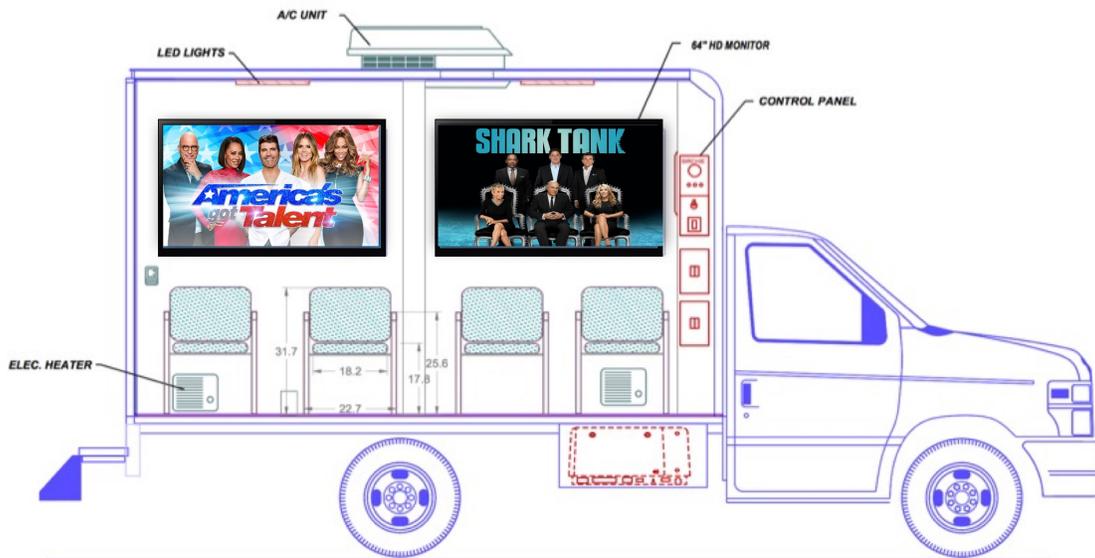
### *Treatments*

Given that the purpose of this experiment was to test the effects of media content 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*. These four shows were chosen after I conducted a pilot test using fourteen different TV shows that featured ordinary Americans achieving economic gains (See Appendix I for more details).

The *Shark Tank* treatment featured two young entrepreneurs who were pitching their start-up business product to a panel of judges who were business investors. They explained how they developed the idea of caffeinated chewing 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,

---

<sup>14</sup>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. A quote from a local newspaper that covered the lab-in-the-field experiment in New Jersey well captured the challenges: “Some of the shoppers at the Cowtown Flea Market on Saturday breezed right past [Author's Name], barely listening to her pitch beside the fried fish vendor. But others heard what [Author's Name] said — \$10 for 10 minutes of their time inside a big box truck — and laughed out loud in disbelief?”



Inside



Outside

Figure 4: The mobile media laboratory

he was featured with his newborn baby and told how he will be able to pay for a high-quality education for his son if he wins. The treatment video ends with him finishing an obstacle course in record-breaking time. The *Toy Box* treatment showed an elderly female toymaker pitching a multilingual doll she invented to representatives of major toy-making companies. She explained how she spent years developing this toy and faced many financial challenges in the process. The video ends with her doll being endorsed and chosen by the judges.

Although these shows have different formats and contestants, the treatments—all edited to last less than five minutes—highlighted a very similar storyline of upward economic mobility. To ensure that the treatment effects were driven by an upward economic mobility message rather than the particularities of reality TV shows, I included a control media treatment that lacked a narrative of economic mobility. The control treatment contained scenes from *Cesar 911*, a reality TV show that featured a young woman seeking advice about her dog's aggressive behavior. The dog behavior authority 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. Manipulation checks successfully demonstrated that the treatment actually conveyed the components that I hypothesized to be necessary to a belief in upward economic mobility.<sup>15</sup>

### *Results*

My experiment shows that exposure to rags-to-riches entertainment media increases people's beliefs in upward economic mobility. As shown in Table 2, in the full-sample models with covariates (Columns 2 and 6), watching a rags-to-riches program, even just for five minutes, makes people approximately 5.5 to 6.7 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, which is a substantial effect. A general level of optimism 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.

I also find heterogeneous treatment effects by Party ID. The effects of rags-to-riches TV are statistically

---

<sup>15</sup>IRB Protocol 828418. Institution name is redacted for a blind review.

Table 2: The effect of rags-to-riches TV on belief in economic mobility

	Mturk Sample (2016)				Lab-in-the-field Sample (2018-2019)				
	All	Dem	Rep	All	Dem	Rep	All	Dem	Rep
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Rags-to-Riches TV Treatment	0.061*** (0.013)	0.055*** (0.011)	0.011 (0.017)	0.150*** (0.020)	0.090** (0.028)	0.067** (0.025)	0.061 (0.037)	0.085+ (0.047)	
Party ID		-0.024*** (0.007)				-0.022** (0.007)			
Optimism Index		0.025*** (0.006)	0.020* (0.009)	0.032** (0.012)		0.051** (0.018)	0.064* (0.028)	0.019 (0.030)	
System Justification Scale		0.091*** (0.007)	0.092*** (0.010)	0.071*** (0.013)		0.101*** (0.018)	0.142*** (0.028)	0.085** (0.031)	
Intercept	0.527*** (0.009)	0.239*** (0.031)	0.203*** (0.034)	0.211*** (0.051)	0.672*** (0.020)	0.269** (0.086)	-0.037 (0.127)	0.403* (0.152)	
Observations	763	763	348	161	203	203	109	50	
R <sup>2</sup>	0.030	0.326	0.250	0.443	0.048	0.310	0.333	0.274	

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 6-8 also included survey date/location fixed effects. Party ID is a continuous variable with higher value indicating strong Democrat. + p< 0.1, \* p<0.05; \*\* p<0.01; \*\*\* p<0.001

significant among Republicans (Columns 4 and 8), but not among Democrats (Columns 3 and 7). Given that the “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” dictum is associated with Republican ideology, this suggests that the treatment video resonate more strongly among those who already believe in the importance of economic individualism. Similarly, I find that among those who tend to defend and rationalize existing social systems (Jost, Banaji and Nosek, 2004), the treatment effects are larger (Appendix K).<sup>16</sup>

It is worth noting that I conducted a conservative test: while my participants only watched a single five-minute clip of rags-to-riches entertainment media, many Americans choose to watch these programs for more than an hour every evening, as Nielsen ratings data confirm. Overall, this experiment finds results that closely mirror those of the observational analysis in the previous section, which suffered from the possibility of omitted variables and the issues of reverse causality.

Yet these first experimental results do not tell us which component of the rags-to-riches programs matters the most. It cannot distinguish between the effects of the meritocratic narrative and those of simply gaining financial benefits. This distinction is essential for understanding the political implications of the rags-to-riches entertainment media in the new Gilded Age. Decades of political psychology literature tells us that when hard-working, talented people are getting ahead, it changes what people think about the deservingness of the poor, wealth disparity, and redistribution (Gilens 2009; Markovits 2020; McCall 2013; McCoy and Major 2007; Rowlingson and Connor 2011; Schneider and Ingram 1993). Hence, the next experiment aimed to specifically isolate the effects of *merit-based* rags-to-riches programs.

<sup>16</sup>Because of the logistical challenges of lab-in-the-field experiments and time constraints, I did not collect demographic variables. Therefore, it is difficult to know whether these effects might differ by income, race, or gender. Plans for the additional lab-in-the-field experiments, this time in the Deep South, were disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Experiment II: Probing the Mechanism of Meritocracy

Sociotropic perceptions about upward economic mobility are fundamentally linked to ideas about how people get ahead. Although scholars across disciplines conceptualize economic mobility in different ways (Benabou and Ok 2001; Marx and Engels 1942; Sombart 1906), studies of perceptions about economic mobility typically tap people's beliefs in meritocracy (McNaMee and Miller Jr 2014). Disentangling this meritocratic mechanism is particularly important because merit and hard work affect how people think about whether the rich deserve what they earned or whether the poor deserve to receive social welfare. Indeed, political psychologists have accumulated an extensive literature on how this deservingness heuristic serves as a primary driver of people's opinions about redistribution. When welfare recipients are portrayed as making little effort to lift themselves by their own bootstraps, they are considered undeserving and public support for expanding social welfare is lower (Gilens 2009; Oorschot 2000).

To disentangle the effects of the meritocratic narrative in “rags-to-riches” TV programs on policy preferences, I conducted additional lab-in-the-field experiments at a farmer's and flea market in Quakertown, Pennsylvania, in March and April 2019, again using the mobile media laboratory.<sup>17</sup> I constructed two treatments using different rags-to-riches TV shows. The *America's Got Talent* video was the same one I used in the previous experiment. The *Shark Tank* video clip featured a White, middle-aged contestant, Aaron Krause, who pitched the idea for a smiley-faced cleaning sponge. After emphasizing how hard he worked to get where he is now, he secured the investment he needed.

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

---

<sup>17</sup>Similar to the previous experiments, respondents received \$10 compensation in cash for their participation. All respondents were asked a set of questions about their general attitudes about the prospect of upward economic mobility, income inequality, and redistribution. Party ID was measured as a pre-treatment covariate.

The first two outcomes measured what people think leads to some people being rich and others being poor. Respondents were asked to choose between whether they think that some people are rich because they worked harder than others or because they had more advantages than others (*The Rich Work Hard*). They were also asked to choose between whether they think that some people are poor because of lack of effort on their own part or because of circumstances beyond their control (*The Poor Lack Effort*). In addition, respondents were asked a series of questions about their attitudes toward income inequality. They indicated the extent to which they agreed that the income gap between the rich and poor is a serious problem, income inequality is a desirable feature of modern society because people make different contributions, and high-income earners in our society generally deserve their pay. These three questions are coded to range from 0 to 1 (greater tolerance with income inequality) and are averaged together into *Inequality Tolerance* (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .73$ ).

The last dependent variable uses four questions to measure attitudes toward government-led redistribution. Respondents indicated the extent to which they agreed that the government should increase tax rates on Americans earning more than \$250,000 a year, reduce the gap between the rich and the poor, reduce assistance to the unemployed, and expand federal rental assistance program to high-poverty neighborhoods. These four questions are coded to range between 0 and 1, with higher numbers indicating the most conservative response, and averaged together into *Anti-Redistribution* (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .68$ ).

To ensure that my treatments would have their intended effects, I conducted manipulation checks and verified that the treatment priming did convey the meritocratic components that I hypothesized to be important for people's attitudes toward income inequality and redistribution (See Appendix J).

### *Results*

My experiments show the extent to which merit-based rags-to-riches TV programs influence people's attitudes toward attribution of economic success, income inequality, and redistribution, as displayed in Table 3. Columns 1 and 2 show the results on the attitudes toward the rich and poor. When respondents were limited to two choices— whether they thought that some people are rich because they worked hard or because they were lucky— exposure to merit-based rags-to-riches TV programs had substantial effects: it increased the perception that the rich people are rich because of hard work and talent by around 17.5 percentage points (with pre-treatment covariates).

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

Table 3: The treatment effect of merit-based rags-to-riches TV on redistribution-related attitudes

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

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

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

Consistent with my expectations, merit-based rags-to-riches TV programs have significant treatment effects on people's attitudes toward income inequality and redistribution. People in the treatment condition were approximately 10 percentage points more likely to tolerate income inequality and around 8 percentage points more likely to be opposed to redistribution. Granted, there is no reason to believe that people who participated in the lab-in-the-field experiments were representative of the general adult population in America. Households in Quakertown, PA, have a slightly lower median annual income (\$54,068) than the national average (\$ 60,336), and it is a racially homogeneous suburban town where 86.5% of residents are White. Although I did not collect data on participants' income, people who shop at the flea market may not be the richest residents. Further, the small sample size prevents me from investigating possible heterogeneous effects.

The experimental finding here is not conclusive, but it sheds useful light on the psychological mechanism articulated in previous studies that links meritocracy with tolerance of income inequality and lower support for redistribution (Costa-Lopes et al. 2013; Kluegel and Smith 1981; Mijs 2019; Piketty 1995; Reynolds and Xian 2014).

## Discussion and Conclusion

What sustains belief in the prospect of upward economic mobility in an era with an “apocalyptic” level of economic inequality? 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; McCloskey and Zaller 1984; Kluegel and Smith 1986).

I argue that perceptions of economic mobility must be understood alongside the media discourse and environment, just like any other studies of sociotropic economic perceptions. Unlike much of political science scholarship, which assumes that the news media is the primary source of politically relevant information, I highlight that the media content that Americans watch the most—entertainment media—offers powerful exemplars of upward mobility and serves as an important source of information that affects people’s beliefs in the American Dream. Using an array of different media data sources, this article confirms the popularity and availability of TV programs that offer a vivid exemplars of ordinary, hard-working Americans who are rewarded financially, and it uses both observational and experimental data to find that exposure to rags-to-riches entertainment media increases people’s belief in the American Dream and promotes internal attributions of wealth. These effects are mainly driven by Republicans and those who are less interested in politics. Additional lab-in-the-field experiments shed light on the psychological mechanism linking merit-focused narratives and redistributive policy preferences.

The duration of entertainment media effects—the possibility that these media effects fade away in after 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 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 for 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 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 HBO now produce their own reality programs that have a similar rags-to-riches narrative (e.g., *Making the Cut* (Amazon), *Next in Fashion* (Netflix)).

My results underscore the overdue need to expand the scope of political communication and public opinion research beyond news. The mass media has long been known to influence citizens’ sociotropic perceptions, but mainstream social science research usually equates mass media with news media. Despite

dramatic changes in the media environment, the scholarly focus on news has remained intact. The most prominent works of political communication in recent years confirm a focus on traditionally defined “political” aspects. Scholars have richly documented the political consequences of dwindling news audiences (Prior 2007), declining confidence in the press (Ladd 2011), partisan media consumption (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Levendusky 2013), the nationalization of local news media (Hopkins 2018), social media platform (Settle 2018), and fake news (Guess, Nyhan and Reifler 2020) among other considerations. The realm of soft news seems to be the farthest afield that quantitative academics have looked (Baum 2011; Young 2019).

Though behavioral evidence suggests that most Americans tune out the news (Bakshy, Messing and Adamic 2015; Flaxman, Goel and Rao 2016; see also Guess 2020), very little attention has been paid to what political content is present in what they are watching instead. Entertainment media is still viewed as “at best a distraction from politics and at worst a cause of active disengagement” (p. 852) and is deemed worthy of studying only when it affects ostensibly political variables (Delli Carpini 2014). As long as economic perceptions are central to the study of politics, however, this 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 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 if we account for the fact that America’s widely popular network TV shows have consistently 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 on rising income inequality or declining mobility (Alesina, Stantcheva and Teso 2018). Yet across different observational data, scholars have been puzzled 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; Kelly and Enns 2010; But see also Franko 2016; Newman 2020). 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; Kluegel and Smith 1986; Shariff, Wiwad and Akinin 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 includes the persistent adherence to egalitarianism, self-determination, and laissez-faire economics, it is important to remember that the United States consumes more TV than any other developed economy (OECD 2013).

In the Gilded Age of the late 19th century, Americans read Horatio Alger's rags-to-riches dime novels. Today, their counterparts in the new Gilded Age are browsing through hundreds of channels saturated with rags-to-riches entertainment programs, and 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.

## References

- Alesina, Alberto, Stefanie Stantcheva and Edoardo Teso. 2018. "Intergenerational mobility and preferences for redistribution." *American Economic Review* 108(2):521–54.
- Anzuoni, Mario. 2016. "The most American pop culture phenomenon of them all." <https://theconversation.com/the-most-american-pop-culture-phenomenon-of-them-all-56555>. (Accessed on 04/15/2020).
- Arceneaux, Kevin and Martin Johnson. 2013. *Changing minds or changing channels?: Partisan news in an age of choice*. University of Chicago Press.
- Ashok, Vivekinan, Ilyana Kuziemko and Ebonya Washington. 2016. "Support for redistribution in an age of rising inequality: New stylized facts and some tentative explanations." *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity* 2015(1):367–433.
- Aurther, Kate. N.d. "HGTV, TLC, Bravo Say Their Reality TV Stockpile Can Outlast Coronavirus - Variety." <https://variety.com/2020/tv/news/reality-tv-coronavirus-cable-tlc-bravo-hgtv-1203550807/>. (Accessed on 09/25/2020).
- Bakshy, Eytan, Solomon Messing and Lada A Adamic. 2015. "Exposure to ideologically diverse news and opinion on Facebook." *Science* 348(6239):1130–1132.
- Baum, Matthew A. 2011. *Soft news goes to war: Public opinion and American foreign policy in the new media age*. Princeton University Press.
- Baumgartner, Jody and Jonathan S Morris. 2006. "The Daily Show effect: Candidate evaluations, efficacy, and American youth." *American Politics Research* 34(3):341–367.
- Benabou, Roland and Efe A Ok. 2001. "Social mobility and the demand for redistribution: the POUM hypothesis." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 116(2):447–487.
- Biden, Joe. 2020. "Happy Fourth of July Speech." Campaign Speech by Joe Biden for the Fourth of July.
- Busselle, Rick W. 2001. "Television exposure, perceived realism, and exemplar accessibility in the social judgment process." *Media Psychology* 3(1):43–67.

- Busselle, Rick W and LJ Shrum. 2003. "Media exposure and exemplar accessibility." *Media Psychology* 5(3):255–282.
- Butler, Lisa D, Cheryl Koopman and Philip G Zimbardo. 1995. "The psychological impact of viewing the film "JFK": Emotions, beliefs, and political behavioral intentions." *Political Psychology* pp. 237–257.
- Byers, Michele and Val Marie Johnson. 2009. *The CSI effect: Television, crime, and governance*. Lexington Books.
- Carlson, James M. 1985. *Prime time law enforcement: Crime show viewing and attitudes toward the criminal justice system*. Praeger New York.
- Cheng, Siwei and Fangqi Wen. 2019. "Americans overestimate the intergenerational persistence in income ranks." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116(28):13909–13914.
- Chetty, Raj, David Grusky, Maximilian Hell, Nathaniel Hendren, Robert Manduca and Jimmy Narang. 2017. "The fading American dream: Trends in absolute income mobility since 1940." *Science* 356(6336):398–406.
- CNN. 2018. "Inside Netflix's new push into reality TV." <https://www.cnn.com/videos/cnnmoney/2018/04/17/netflix-uns scripted-shift-to-reality-tv-dnt.cnn>. (Accessed on 06/17/2020).
- Cole, Simon A and Rachel Dioso-Villa. 2006. "CSI and its effects: Media, juries, and the burden of proof." *New England Law Review* 41:435.
- Concha, Joe. 2019. "Fox News hits highest viewership in network's 23-year history." <https://thehill.com/homenews/media/476220-fox-news-hits-record-high-viewership-in-networks-23-year-history>. (Accessed on 06/17/2020).
- Condon, Meghan and Amber Wichowsky. 2020. *The Economic Other: Inequality in the American Political Imagination*. University of Chicago Press.
- Corak, Miles. 2013. "Income inequality, equality of opportunity, and intergenerational mobility." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 27(3):79–102.
- Costa-Lopes, Rui, John F Dovidio, Cícero Roberto Pereira and John T Jost. 2013. "Social psychological perspectives on the legitimation of social inequality: Past, present and future." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 43(4):229–237.

- Cromewell, Rich. 2015. "How 'American Idol' Captured The American Dream." <http://thefederalist.com/2015/05/12/how-american-idol-captured-the-american-dream/>. (Accessed on 04/10/2019).
- Cullen, Jim. 2004. *The American dream: A short history of an idea that shaped a nation*. Oxford University Press.
- Davidai, Shai and Thomas Gilovich. 2018. "How should we think about Americans' beliefs about economic mobility?" *Judgment and Decision Making* 13(3):297–304.
- de Tocqueville, Alexis. 1835. *Democracy in America*. Saunders and Otley.
- Delli Carpini, Michael X. 2014. The political effects of entertainment media. In *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication*. Oxford University Press.
- DeVolld, Troy. 2016. *Reality TV: An insider's guide to TV's hottest market: 2nd Edition*. Michael Wiese Productions Studio City, CA.
- Diermeier, Matthias, Henry Goecke, Judith Niehues and Tobias Thomas. 2017. "Impact of inequality-related media coverage on the concerns of the citizens." *DICE Working Paper* .
- Dilliplane, Susanna, Seth K Goldman and Diana C Mutz. 2013. "Televised exposure to politics: New measures for a fragmented media environment." *American Journal of Political Science* 57(1):236–248.
- Durante, Ruben, Paolo Pinotti and Andrea Tesei. 2019. "The political legacy of entertainment TV." *American Economic Review* 109(7):2497–2530.
- Elber, Lynn. 2018. "'America's Got Talent' Continues Ratings Dominance; Nielsen Week In Review." <https://www.shootonline.com/news/americas-got-talent-continues-ratings-dominance-nielsen-week-review>. (Accessed on 07/20/2020).
- Eshbaugh-Soha, Matthew and Ronald J McGauvran. 2018. "Presidential Leadership, the News Media, and Income Inequality." *Political Research Quarterly* 71(1):157–171.
- Feldman, Stanley. 1984. "Economic self-interest and the vote: evidence and meaning." *Political Behavior* 6(3):229–251.

- Flaxman, Seth, Sharad Goel and Justin M Rao. 2016. "Filter bubbles, echo chambers, and online news consumption." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 80(S1):298–320.
- Franko, William W. 2016. "Political context, government redistribution, and the public's response to growing economic inequality." *The Journal of Politics* 78(4):957–973.
- Gallup Organization. 2019. "Most Americans See American Dream as Achievable." <https://news.gallup.com/poll/260741/americans-american-dream-achievable.aspx>. (Accessed on 08/20/2020).
- George Washington University Battleground Poll. 2018. "George Washington University Battleground Poll." <https://www.tarrance.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/BG-63-slides.pdf>. (Accessed on 07/20/2020).
- Gilens, Martin. 2009. *Why Americans hate welfare: Race, media, and the politics of antipoverty policy*. University of Chicago Press.
- Green, Melanie C, Timothy C Brock and Geoff F Kaufman. 2004. "Understanding media enjoyment: The role of transportation into narrative worlds." *Communication Theory* 14(4):311–327.
- Guess, Andrew M. 2020. "(Almost) Everything in Moderation: New Evidence on Americans' Online Media Diets." *American Journal of Political Science* .
- Guess, Andrew M., Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler. 2020. "Exposure to untrustworthy websites in the 2016 US election." *Nature Human Behaviour* 4(5):472–480.
- Hanson, Sandra and John White. 2011. *The American Dream in the 21st Century*. Temple University Press.
- Hartz, Louis. 1955. *The liberal tradition in America: An interpretation of American political thought since the Revolution*. Vol. 46 Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Hetherington, Marc J. 1996. "The media's role in forming voters' national economic evaluations in 1992." *American Journal of Political Science* 40(2):372.
- Hochschild, Jennifer L. 1996. *Facing up to the American dream: Race, class, and the soul of the nation*. Princeton University Press.

- Holbrook, R Andrew and Timothy G Hill. 2005. "Agenda-setting and priming in prime time television: Crime dramas as political cues." *Political Communication* 22(3):277–295.
- Hopkins, Daniel J. 2018. *The Increasingly United States: How and Why American Political Behavior Nationalized*. University of Chicago Press.
- Huntington, Samuel P. 1981. *American politics: The promise of disharmony*. Harvard University Press.
- Jensen, Robert and Emily Oster. 2009. "The power of TV: Cable television and women's status in India." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 124(3):1057–1094.
- Jones, Alice. 2020. "The power of reality TV in a pandemic age - BBC Culture." <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20200417-the-power-of-reality-tv-in-a-pandemic-age>. (Accessed on 09/25/2020).
- Jones, Calvert and Celia Paris. 2018. "It's the End of the World and They Know It: How Dystopian Fiction Shapes Political Attitudes." *Perspectives on Politics* 16(4):969–989.
- Jost, John T, Mahzarin R Banaji and Brian A Nosek. 2004. "A decade of system justification theory: Accumulated evidence of conscious and unconscious bolstering of the status quo." *Political Psychology* 25(6):881–919.
- Kelly, Nathan J and Peter K Enns. 2010. "Inequality and the dynamics of public opinion: The self-reinforcing link between economic inequality and mass preferences." *American Journal of Political Science* 54(4):855–870.
- Kenworthy, Lane and Leslie McCall. 2008. "Inequality, public opinion and redistribution." *Socio-Economic Review* 6:35–68.
- Kinder, Donald R and D Roderick Kiewiet. 1981. "Sociotropic politics: the American case." *British Journal of Political Science* 11(2):129–161.
- Kluegel, James R and Eliot R Smith. 1981. "Beliefs about stratification." *Annual Review of Sociology* 7(1):29–56.
- Kluegel, James R and Eliot R Smith. 1986. *Beliefs about inequality: Americans' views of what is and what ought to be*. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.

- Koblin, John. 2016. "How Much Do We Love TV? Let Us Count the Ways." <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/01/business/media/nielsen-survey-media-viewing.html>. (Accessed on 07/20/2020).
- Kraus, Michael W and Jacinth JX Tan. 2015. "Americans overestimate social class mobility." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 58:101–111.
- Ladd, Jonathan M. 2011. *Why Americans hate the media and how it matters*. Princeton University Press.
- Lasswell, Harold D. 1936. *Politics: Who gets what, when, how*. New York: Whittlesey House.
- Lenart, Silvo and Kathleen M McGraw. 1989. "America watches" Amerika:" Television docudrama and political attitudes." *The Journal of Politics* 51(3):697–712.
- Levendusky, Matthew. 2013. *How partisan media polarize America*. University of Chicago Press.
- Lipset, Seymour Martin. 1997. *American exceptionalism: A double-edged sword*. WW Norton & Company.
- Livingstone, Josephine. 2017. "We Are Living in a Golden Age of Reality Television." <https://newrepublic.com/article/142126/living-golden-age-reality-television>. (Accessed on 09/25/2020).
- Markovits, Daniel. 2020. *The meritocracy trap: How America's foundational myth feeds inequality, dismantles the middle class, and devours the elite*. Penguin Books.
- Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. 1942. *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: Correspondence, 1846-1895*. New York: International Publishers.
- McCall, Leslie. 2013. *The undeserving rich: American beliefs about inequality, opportunity, and redistribution*. Cambridge University Press.
- McCloskey, Herbert and John Zaller. 1984. *The American Ethos: Public Attitudes Toward Democracy and Capitalism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- McClosky, Herbert and John Zaller. 1984. *The American ethos: Public attitudes toward capitalism and democracy*. Harvard University Press.
- McCoy, Shannon K and Brenda Major. 2007. "Priming meritocracy and the psychological justification of inequality." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 43(3):341–351.

- McNaMee, Stephen J and Robert K Miller Jr. 2014. *The Meritocracy Myth*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Mijs, Jonathan JB. 2019. "The paradox of inequality: income inequality and belief in meritocracy go hand in hand." *Socio-Economic Review* .
- Morgan, Michael and James Shanahan. 2010. "The state of cultivation." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 54(2):337–355.
- Moyer-Gusé, Emily. 2008. "Toward a theory of entertainment persuasion: Explaining the persuasive effects of entertainment-education messages." *Communication Theory* 18(3):407–425.
- Mulligan, Kenneth and Philip Habel. 2011. "An experimental test of the effects of fictional framing on attitudes." *Social Science Quarterly* 92(1):79–99.
- Murray, Susan and Laurie Ouellette. 2004. *Reality TV: Remaking television culture*. NYU Press.
- Mutz, Diana C. 1998. *Impersonal Influence: How Perceptions of Mass Collectives Affect Political Attitudes*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mutz, Diana C and Lilach Nir. 2010. "Not necessarily the news: Does fictional television influence real-world policy preferences?" *Mass Communication and Society* 13(2):196–217.
- Nadeau, Richard, Richard G Niemi, David P Fan and Timothy Amato. 1999. "Elite economic forecasts, economic news, mass economic judgments, and presidential approval." *The Journal of Politics* 61(1):109–135.
- Newman, Benjamin J. 2020. "Inequality Growth and Economic Policy Liberalism: An Updated Test of a Classic Theory." *The Journal of Politics* 82(2):765–770.
- Newman, Benjamin J, Christopher D Johnston and Patrick L Lown. 2015. "False consciousness or class awareness? Local income inequality, personal economic position, and belief in American meritocracy." *American Journal of Political Science* 59(2):326–340.
- Newman, Nic, Richard Fletcher, Antonis Kalogeropoulos and Rasmus Nielsen. 2019. *Reuters Institute digital news report 2019*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

- OECD. 2013. "OECD Communications Outlook 2013." [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/science-and-technology/oecd-communications-outlook-2013\\_comms\\_outlook-2013-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/science-and-technology/oecd-communications-outlook-2013_comms_outlook-2013-en). (Accessed on 01/20/2019).
- Oorschot, Wim van. 2000. "Who should get what, and why? On deservingness criteria and the conditionality of solidarity among the public." *Policy & Politics* 28(1):33–48.
- Papacharissi, Zizi and Andrew L Mendelson. 2007. "An exploratory study of reality appeal: Uses and gratifications of reality TV shows." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 51(2):355–370.
- Paterson, Tim. 2020. "The future of TV will have a lot of reality TV." <https://digiday.com/future-of-tv/future-tv-will-lot-reality-tv/>. (Accessed on 09/25/2020).
- Piketty, Thomas. 1995. "Social mobility and redistributive politics." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 110(3):551–584.
- Piketty, Thomas. 2014. *Capital in the 21st Century*. Harvard University Press.
- Pines, Christopher L. 1993. *Ideology and False Consciousness: Marx and His Historical Progenitors*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Plante, Chris. 2017. "The golden age of reality TV is already here." <https://www.theverge.com/2017/1/3/14126346/the-bachelor-nick-abc-preview-survivor-reality-tv-peak>. (Accessed on 04-17-2018).
- Porter, Rick. 2019. "TV Ratings: 'The Voice' Thumps Series-Low 'American Idol.'" <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/voice-beats-american-idol-tv-ratings-monday-march-18-2019-1195622>. (Accessed on 04/18/2019).
- Porter, Rick. 2020. "Cable News Sets Ratings Records in April." <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/cable-news-sets-ratings-records-april-1292329>, journal=The Hollywood Reporter. (Accessed on 08/18/2020).
- Prior, Markus. 2007. *Post-broadcast democracy: How media choice increases inequality in political involvement and polarizes elections*. Cambridge University Press.

- Pucci, Douglas. 2020. "Wednesday Final Ratings: 'Chicago Fire' Eighth Season Finale on NBC Hits Series-High in Viewership." <https://programminginsider.com/wednesday-final-ratings-chicago-fire-eighth-season-finale-on-nbc-hits-series-high-in-viewership/>. (Accessed on 08/18/2020).
- Ralph Bunche Center. 2015. "2015 Hollywood Diversity Report: Flipping the Script." <https://bunchecenter.ucla.edu/2015/02/25/2015-hollywood-diversity-report/>. Accessed on 04/17/2018).
- Reiss, Steven and James Wiltz. 2004. "Why people watch reality TV." *Media Psychology* 6(4):363–378.
- Reynolds, Jeremy and He Xian. 2014. "Perceptions of meritocracy in the land of opportunity." *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 36:121–137.
- Rosa, Christopher. 2019. "This Decade Was a Golden Age for Reality TV." <https://www.glamour.com/story/the-decade-in-reality-tv>. (Accessed on 04-16-2018).
- Rowlingson, Karen and Stuart Connor. 2011. "The 'deserving' rich? Inequality, morality and social policy." *Journal of Social Policy* 40(3):437–452.
- Samuel, Lawrence R. 2012. *The American Dream: A Cultural History*. Syracuse University Press.
- Schneider, Anne and Helen Ingram. 1993. "Social construction of target populations: Implications for politics and policy." *American Political Science Review* 87(2):334–347.
- Schröder, Kim Christian and Mark Ørsten. 2016. The nature of news avoidance in a digital world. In *Reuters Digital News Report 2016*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.
- Schwarz, Hunter. 2015. "RIP 'American Idol': The show that proved how bad Americans are at voting." <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/05/11/rip-american-idol-the-show-that-gave-us-an-easy-shorthand-for-americans-not-voting/>. (Accessed on 04/17/2018).
- Settle, Jaime E. 2018. *Frenemies: How social media polarizes America*. Cambridge University Press.
- Shariff, Azim F, Dylan Wiwad and Lara B Akin. 2016. "Income mobility breeds tolerance for income inequality: Cross-national and experimental evidence." *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 11(3):373–380.

- Shrum, LJ. 2012. *The psychology of entertainment media: Blurring the lines between entertainment and persuasion*. Taylor & Francis.
- Slater, Michael D, Donna Rouner and Marilee Long. 2006. "Television dramas and support for controversial public policies: Effects and mechanisms." *Journal of Communication* 56(2):235–252.
- Sombart, Werner. 1906. *Why Is There No Socialism in America*. New York: ME Sharpe.
- Soroka, Stuart N. 2006. "Good news and bad news: Asymmetric responses to economic information." *The journal of Politics* 68(2):372–385.
- Soroka, Stuart N. 2014. *Negativity in democratic politics: Causes and consequences*. Cambridge University Press.
- Soroka, Stuart and Stephen McAdams. 2015. "News, politics, and negativity." *Political Communication* 32(1):1–22.
- Stiglitz, Joseph E. 2012. *The price of inequality: How today's divided society endangers our future*. WW Norton & Company.
- Terrace, Vincent. 2012. *Encyclopedia of Television Shows, 1925 through 2010*. McFarland.
- Terrace, Vincent. 2017. *Encyclopedia of Television Shows: A Comprehensive Supplement, 2011-2016*. McFarland.
- Thorson, Emily A and Michael Serazio. 2018. "Sports fandom and political attitudes." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 82(2):391–403.
- Throne, Will. 2019. "TV Ratings: 'America's Got Talent' Premieres Low, Wins Tuesday." <https://variety.com/2019/tv/news/americas-got-talent-premiere-ratings-low-1203227825/>. (Accessed on 04/18/2019).
- Toff, Benjamin and Antonis Kalogeropoulos. 2020. "All the News that's Fit to Ignore: How the Information Environment Does and Does Not Shape News Avoidance." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 84(S1):366–390.
- Trump, Donald J. 2020. "2020 Republican National Convention Speech." [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\$RhL9iFkBaus&ab\\$\\_\\$channel\\$=\\$C-SPAN](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=$RhL9iFkBaus&ab$_$channel$=$C-SPAN). Nomination Acceptance Speech by President Trump at the 2020 Republican National Convention (Accessed on 09/24/2020).

- Van Aelst, Peter, Jesper Strömbäck, Toril Aalberg, Frank Esser, Claes De Vreese, Jörg Matthes, David Hopmann, Susana Salgado, Nicolas Hubé, Agnieszka Stepińska et al. 2017. "Political communication in a high-choice media environment: a challenge for democracy?" *Annals of the International Communication Association* 41(1):3–27.
- VanDerWerff, Todd. 2016. "750 reality TV shows aired on cable in 2015. Yes, 750." <https://www.vox.com/2016/1/7/10728206/reality-shows-how-many-peak-tv>. (Accessed on 08/29/2018).
- Verba, Sidney and Gary R Orren. 1985. *Equality in America: The view from the top*. Harvard University Press.
- Weatherford, M Stephen. 1983. "Economic voting and the "symbolic politics" argument: A reinterpretation and synthesis." *American Political Science Review* 77(1):158–174.
- Wolak, Jennifer and David AM Peterson. 2020. "The Dynamic American Dream." *American Journal of Political Science* .
- Yahr, Emily, Caitlin Moore and Emily Chow. 2015. "How we went from 'Survivor' to more than 300 reality shows: A complete guide." <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/entertainment/reality-tv-shows/>. (Accessed on 04-16-2018).
- YouGov. 2020. "Is the American Dream still attainable?" <https://today.yougov.com/topics/politics/articles-reports/2020/07/18/american-dream-attainable-poll-survey-data>. (Accessed on 09-15-2020).
- Young, Dannagal Goldthwaite. 2019. *Irony and outrage: The polarized landscape of rage, fear, and laughter in the United States*. Oxford University Press.