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1

Pictures in Our Head

IT'S EVERYWHERE.

Wars often lean on public favor. In the throes of the Civil War, the time of clashing convictions, a singular piece of entertainment media took center stage in shaping the nation's conscience. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became a beacon, trailing only the Bible in its literary popularity for the century. The whispered tales of Abraham Lincoln attributing the war's spark to this fiction may be clouded in historical debate, but its weight in the narrative of American history is undeniable.

Fast-forward more than a century, and another form of entertainment media was accredited as a force for sweeping political change. Albeit not triggering a civil war, the trailblazing sitcom *Will & Grace* portrayed two gay men who did not pretend to be anything other. In understanding the rather dramatic shift of American sentiment toward the LGBTQ community, we can turn to a presidential hypothesis: "I think *Will & Grace* probably did more to educate the American public than almost anything anybody has ever done so far," posited Joe Biden in his *Meet the Press* interview.

Prosecutors, attorneys, and judges often blame another popular prime-time show, CBS's top-rated drama *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, for allegedly "driving jury verdicts all across America" (Cole and Dioso 2006; Roane and Morrison 2005). Many argue it created unreasonable expectations about slam-dunk forensic evidence, leading jurors to wrongfully acquit guilty defendants without airtight scientific proof.

These effects are widely believed to be impacting the administration of justice, a point recognized by both the US Supreme Court and the American Bar Association (Shelton 2008).

On another front, we can turn to Aaron Sorkin's popular TV show, *The West Wing*. Its cultural influence was so deep-rooted that fans named their children, pets, and even tech gadgets after its characters. Many contend the show reshaped how America envisioned its highest office, that an "incurable case of West Wing fever" basically hamstrung the Democratic Party with an obsession over grand political monologues and a brand of centrist politics reminiscent of the Clinton era (St. James 2019). At the bare minimum, the series' reach crossed the Atlantic, influencing political strategy in the British Parliament—birthed from an episode titled "A Good Day."

As the nation grapples with undeniable evidence of police brutality, many critics have pointed out how the cultural archetype of the heroic police officer still looms large. Popular cop TV shows—from *Law and Order* and *Hill Street Blues* to *Blue Bloods* and *Chicago P.D.*—have vividly portrayed law enforcement heroes, diverse in creed and color. Conventional wisdom posits that this half-century of "copaganda" taught Americans to valorize the police, leaving lasting impressions on their perceptions of the criminal justice system (Grady 2021).

The luminous screens of Disney+ flicker with tales of the past—princesses whose salvation comes only upon finding a handsome prince and receiving "love's true kiss." Concerned parents see more than mere fairy tales; they notice a dated legacy, one that risks instilling antiquated gender roles in young minds. The tacit consensus is that these anti-feminist movies have been ruining generations with their sexist characterizations, echoing myriad unforeseen political ramifications.

Entertainment media also seems undeniably linked with racial politics. Progressive voices laud the winds of change, as *The Little Mermaid* introduces a princess of color and *Black Panther* shines a light on African heritage. Conversely, the haunting specter of old-world biases in classics like *Gone with the Wind* evokes trepidation, prompting entities like Warner Media to momentarily shelve them from platforms like HBO Max—"to create a more just, equitable, and inclusive future."

The myriad folk hypotheses that have emerged are, perhaps, humans' intuitive response to the profound sway of entertainment. Entertainment provides a lens through which we understand who we are and who others are, tells us what is to be celebrated or shunned, held dear or discarded, and furnishes a shared culture for souls near and far. Indeed, it is rather hard not to believe it influences our politics.

But it's nowhere.

Notwithstanding the colorful arrays of folk hypotheses, the assertion that entertainment media influences our political attitudes is often met with skepticism, if not outright rejection. We tend to think of our political beliefs as well-reasoned and carefully considered or, at worst, determined by what's happening around us. In this hyper-politicized world full of partisan news media, it seems implausible that something as frivolous as the latest reality TV show from Netflix, cop shows, and superhero movies, to name just a few, could possibly affect something as profound as people's political attitudes.

This is a reasonable viewpoint shared by the vast majority of political observers and scholars of public opinion. Though the amount of Americans' entertainment media consumption is impossible to ignore, perhaps because of the sheer quantity and overwhelming diversity of its content, the prevailing assumption has been that the political consequences of nonpolitical media for public opinion would be trivial. The political content of entertainment programs was deemed "too sporadic to produce large-scale message effects of the sort described by the classic persuasion paradigm" (Bennett and Iyengar 2010, 35) or a force that simply dilutes news media effects (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013). The end result of such skepticism was the marginalization of entertainment media in the map of political science, while news media of all shades always took center stage.

Yet the vast literature on news media effects sits alongside a somewhat uncomfortable yet unyielding truth in the pantheon of political science: most Americans pay scant attention to politics (Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964; Lippmann 1922; Schumpeter 1950). This predilection has only intensified due to the seismic changes in the information

environment, a transformation perhaps best encapsulated by one word—*choice*. In the bygone broadcast era dominated by just three network channels, even those apathetic to politics unwittingly absorbed a steady dose of news by default (Prior 2007; Williams and Delli Carpini 2011). In retrospect, it was a peculiar time when Walter Cronkite’s voice echoed throughout homes nationwide, and *60 Minutes* stood as the ratings juggernaut. America today, however, is a different nation. The bewildering amount of entertainment choices has liberated most citizens from consuming news (Computational Social Science Lab 2024; Toff, Palmer, and Nielsen 2023; Villi et al. 2022).

While the question of what shapes public opinion has perennially intrigued generations of political scientists, the tectonic shift in the media environment mandates that we finally confront an undeniable blind spot: the neglect of the palpable truth that most Americans, in the cadences of their daily lives, are primarily immersed in entertainment media. A realistic theory of public opinion shouldn’t be predicated on the echo chambers of scholarly assumptions. Rather, it must root itself in human experiences—in the media that draws their gaze, in the narratives and tales that captivate their nonpartisan hearts and minds. And that’s precisely the essence of this book.

Rethinking the American Viewer

In search of expressions that capture incompetence, we need look no further than the seminal texts in the study of American public opinion, filled with rather scathing reviews on civic capacity. To Walter Lippmann, the author of the magnum opus *Public Opinion* (1922), the unattainable ideal of the informed citizens was likened to expecting “a fat man to try to be a ballet dancer.” Converse (1964) finds that connections in mass belief systems were not just lacking but triply lacking: most citizens are not able to link between opinions on issues, preferences to political ideologies, and their own positions taken at different times. His conclusion? Most people have the opposite of political attitudes—“non-attitudes.” Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock (1991) coined the term “minimalism” to describe the long-standing finding that “the public’s knowledge of

politics was paper thin, its views on public issues arranged higgledy-piggledy, its understanding of political abstractions like liberalism or conservatism as a rule superficial or nil” (3).

Yet the same American public—once even referred to as “a bunch of ignoramuses” (Whitney and Wartella 1988, 9)—is also credited with making meaningful political decisions, composing an “apparently functional public” (Taber 2003, 433). When the economy is downturned, the public tends to penalize the incumbents, holding them accountable. Similarly, an array of events—natural disasters, political scandals, or foreign policy mishaps—usually result in a palpable decline in approval ratings for those in power. Particularly when viewed from the aggregate level, it seems that there is rationality in the collective decisions of the public (Page and Shapiro 1992).

How is it possible that citizens manage to make informed decisions when they know so little about politics? This paradox—famously referred to as “Simon’s puzzle,” named after Herbert Simon’s theory of bounded rationality (Sniderman et al. 1991)—has fueled academic debates so vibrant they’ve become the dreaded highlight of every passing exam in graduate schools.

However, perhaps one of the most well-known answers comes from Anthony Downs. In *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957), he writes that it is difficult for voters to estimate the expected utility they would get from acquiring knowledge about public affairs. The cost of being informed often outweighs the potential benefit, as a single vote is unlikely to change an election outcome. Therefore, rational voters don’t actively seek out political information. Yet, they are still somewhat informed about politics. Downs explains such phenomena by suggesting that political knowledge is often acquired as a by-product of other activities. A trip to the gas station, for instance, may also become a lesson in inflation economics. Someone might visit an online news site for sports updates but pick up some political headlines in the process. Scrolling through social media news feeds might inadvertently expose someone to political information.

Precisely because much of political learning is serendipitous rather than intentional, what people learn is deeply conditioned by the

information environment. Yet, as our media environment has evolved, offering an ever-widening array of choices, a paradoxical shift has emerged. The very richness of this information ecosystem allows those apathetic to politics to cocoon themselves in a world free from the din of political debates and breaking news (Williams and Delli Carpini 2011). This pattern, with profound consequences for polarization, is exactly what Markus Prior (2007) documents in *Post-Broadcast Democracy*. He finds that those who favor entertainment over news typically sidestep most political information, barring only a few exceptions like the terrorist attack of 9/11.

What has followed Prior's field-defining book is an overwhelming array of behavioral evidence on news avoidance, irrespective of media modes and platforms (Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic 2015; Computational Social Science Lab 2024; Mukerjee, Jaidka, and Lelkes 2022; Nyhan et al. 2023; Tyler, Grimmer, and Iyengar 2022; Wojcieszak et al. 2022). The latest studies that utilize digital tracing data, for instance, find that most Americans do not live in partisan echo chambers, mainly because they don't watch much news to begin with (Guess 2021; Peterson, Goel, and Iyengar 2021). When less than 4% of web traffic consists of news websites—a quantity “nearly unnoticeable in the overall information and communication ecology of most individuals”—the news effects outside the artificial settings imposed by researchers are often minimal or null (Wojcieszak et al. 2022).

So then, what drives public opinion, given the paucity of “politically relevant” information? Of course, there's an undeniable influence of social identities, from race and gender to political allegiance and sexual orientation (Achen and Bartels 2017; Jardina 2019; Karpowitz and Mendelberg 2014; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Mason 2018; McClain et al. 2009). Yet these factors alone can't account for the considerable variance within each group.

Intriguingly, what has emerged is a strand of research that documents the impact of rather fleeting events or utterly arbitrary factors in shaping mass opinion and political behaviors. Consider, for instance, the effects of polling locations. American voters are assigned to vote at specific venues such as local churches or schools. It turns out that those who vote in

schools are notably more inclined to support school funding initiatives due to “contextual priming” (Berger, Meredith, and Wheeler 2008).

Even chance encounters, like observing someone in apparent poverty in the streets of Boston, reportedly reshape attitudes on wealth redistribution (Sands 2017). Similarly, the political effects of exposure to a Muslim celebrity athlete (Alrababah et al. 2021), playing a sports game with players of different religions (Mousa 2020), or having a half-hour perspective-taking conversation (Kalla and Broockman 2023), have all been meticulously documented in the pages of prominent social science journals. Scholars even found evidence of how shark attacks (Achen and Bartels 2017) or lousy weather affected people’s voting behaviors, concluding that “The Republicans Should Pray for Rain” (Gomez, Hansford, and Krause 2007).

It is not hard to recognize that much more systematic than the political impacts of shark attacks or random encounters with out-group members would be the influence of entertainment media, given its ubiquity in our daily lives. Perhaps the glaring irony is that, while political scientists have no trouble believing the powerful impact of ostensibly arbitrary or seemingly irrelevant events on public opinion, they have been reluctant to study the media that citizens primarily consume. At most, entertainment media has attracted research attention when the content is delivered in a form that academics are familiar with—soft news, for instance (Baum 2003; Baumgartner and Morris 2006; Feldman and Young 2008; Prior 2003; Zaller 2003).

While there are a few notable studies on the effects of edutainment (Green 2021; Green, Wilke, and Cooper 2020; Paluck and Green 2009), the impact of entertainment media largely remains a peripheral topic in mainstream political science. The gargantuan consumption of nonpolitical media has always sparked debates more attuned to how voters make political decisions given limited information (Kuklinski and Quirk 2000; Lau and Redlawsk 1997; Popkin 1991), rather than how entertainment media affects mass attitudes and behaviors (Delli Carpini 2014).

Indeed, the usual tendency has been to look down upon citizens’ “lowbrow” media tastes, treating them with suspicion and worry. In

The American Commonwealth, for instance, James Bryce (1889, 776) pens his concerns about the entertainment media of his time. He's somewhat aghast at the "profusion of new frothy or highly spiced fiction," which cost little more than a dime but seemingly had the power to tarnish the intellectual appetite of an entire public. It's intriguing to ponder his reaction to modern America, where average citizens often dedicate as much time to television as they do to their daily profession (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2023).

It is not difficult to find the echoes of Bryce's sentiments among contemporary political scientists, albeit with much more nuance. In reviewing the political effects of soft news, for instance, prominent public opinion scholar Susan Herbst (2006) nudges us to "most difficult of all, try to accept unusual forms of political discourse as important ones." Yet her plea includes a wry acknowledgment of just how "repulsive, inaccurate, or banal" some of these media "stimuli" might be, different from more "respectable" ones. It's a dance as old as time: each generation wrestling with the media that defines it, asking where and how the line between "politics" and "clutter" is drawn.

Yet there is more at stake than merely recognizing the impact of nonpolitical media. In sober moments, many public opinion scholars would acknowledge its undeniable pull. The challenge lies much more in the daunting task of navigating entertainment media's vast and varied content. The prevailing notion that its political consequences would be trivial seems less anchored in empirical evidence and more a reflection of an uncharted theoretical expanse. The need for new exploration feels urgent today—in a nation sharply etched in hues of red and blue.

The Power of Entertainment Narratives in Polarized America

In the television industry, ratings are often the most valued currency. In political discourse, however, the sheer quantity of onlookers pales in significance. Instead, its composition holds sway. Consider the likes of news and talk programming such as *Fox & Friends* and *Morning Joe*.

These morning shows from the partisan media bastions reel in, on average, a modest audience of 1.2 million—a mere sliver when compared to the *Sunday Night Football* aficionados, who number around 24 million, or the throngs who subscribe to Taylor Swift’s YouTube channel, at a staggering 53.8 million.

Yet among their loyal viewers is an influential regular: none other than President Donald Trump. One intriguing analysis that draws connections from Trump’s tweets during his first term as president indicates that he might watch television nearly as much as an average American aged 50–64—around a few hours daily at a minimum (Bump 2017). If such partisan broadcasts, with their relatively niche followings, can still command the undivided attention of a president, then their influence on the political landscape is undeniable. Scholars of news media turn to this same line of reasoning. The dedicated few who religiously tune in to partisan broadcasts are the passionate front-row clique, vocal enough to set the tone for the entire show or fervent enough to storm the Capitol. Hence, news matters.

It needs no explanation that the subset of individuals who enthusiastically tune in to news differs from the rest of America. The proliferation of media choices in today’s information-rich environment has accentuated such disparities: while the majority might drift toward indifference, a niche segment dives deeper (Prior 2013). The human tendency to seek out information that aligns with preexisting beliefs isn’t novel, but the abundance of choice certainly amplifies this bias, both in media selection and in information assimilation (Lelkes, Sood, and Iyengar 2017; Levendusky 2013a). These shifts in the media ecosystem have unfolded alongside the deepening polarization of American politics, leaving little doubt that the most dedicated news consumers are the main culprits (Krupnikov and Ryan 2022).

The nation’s partisan reality carries profound implications for the study of media effects. It might sound self-evident, but for any information to shape our minds and influence our beliefs, we must first receive it. Once received, we decide whether or not to accept this information. If accepted, it’s stored within our cognitive framework, which later influences decisions and shapes opinions. This simple yet potent process of

how public opinion is formed—the tripartite sequence of receive, accept, and sample—is elegantly distilled into the now seminal theory penned by John Zaller (1992).

Yet the evolving landscape of American politics has introduced new wrinkles. The evident trends of rising news avoidance and deepening polarization complicate the straightforwardness of the Zallerian process. Most people might not actively pursue news, but when they do, their preferences lean heavily toward content that resonates with their preexisting beliefs, revealing the pronounced effect of partisan filters. This entrenchment of partisan identity, coupled with selective exposure, facilitates motivated reasoning, leaving scant room for political persuasion. And the implications? Eminent scholars, who have pivoted to study the enduring legacies of historical institutions over contemporary influences, encapsulate the current state of American political behavior scholarship thus: “Large shifts in the political attitudes and behaviors of Americans are rare, costly, and short-lived” (Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen 2018, 14).

On the contrary, entertainment media forms don’t appear to be wrestling with the same dilemmas. The sheer volume of entertainment content consumed by Americans ensures the “receive” stage of the model is consistently met; its chronic accessibility means that the considerations formed by entertainment media are easier to “sample” at the time of decision making. Moreover, because the primary motivation for consuming entertainment is enjoyment rather than explicit political learning, the content often bypasses the partisan filters that might hinder the “accept” phase in the news domain.

When individuals immerse themselves in these narratives, the power of transportation—the ability to become lost in a story or see the world through a character’s eyes—often results in the messaging sidestepping the usual counterarguments. In simpler terms, resistance diminishes. Diving a bit into the psychology of narrative persuasion, when people are deeply engaged or involved in the stories, they become more emotionally, but less critically or analytically, involved (Green, Strange, and Brock 2002; Hamby, Brinberg, and Jaccard 2016). This immersion leads them to use simpler rules to decide whether they agree with the

message. For instance, people rely on cues that are triggered by peripheral aspects of the communication, such as a character's likeability or the aesthetics of the narrative. This kind of persuasion is less about the message's content and more about its presentation, making entertainment media uniquely positioned to influence mass opinions and behaviors. And their potent power carries important implications, particularly when entertainment media provides information that contradicts the stories that news media offers.

In a nation where the chasm of partisanship seems to shadow even our choices of cars and coffee, there remains a singular sanctuary of unity: Americans' shared love for entertainment. Within this universal passion lies an uncharted realm of persuasion—or, at the very least, the cipher to the many lingering puzzles of American public opinion that an exclusive focus on news media or elite-driven political communication cannot unravel.

Spotlight: The Most American Narrative in the Age of Inequality

This book is fundamentally about the “pictures in our heads,” painted by the formidable brushstrokes of entertainment media that, in turn, shape public opinion. But to truly grasp its profound influence, we delve into a puzzle that stands tall, one that challenges the conventional explanations solely anchored in news media and elite discourse. It is a phenomenon that is, at its heart, quintessentially American, making it worthy of a spotlight.

The riddle starts with the seminal prediction laid out by the workhorse political economy model (Meltzer and Richard 1983). It forecasts a seemingly inevitable trajectory: as income inequality swells, citizens should be clamoring for greater redistribution, pushing the government to take corrective policy actions. Contemporary experimental findings align well with these theoretical predictions. When survey participants are informed about the diminishing prospects of the American Dream or escalating income disparities, they do indeed lean toward more

progressive redistributive policies. And yet, the real-world data defy these tidy expectations. As wealth disparities widen and upward mobility dwindles, public enthusiasm for redistribution has paradoxically receded (Ashok, Kuziemko, and Washington 2016; Kelly and Enns 2010; Kenworthy and McCall 2007).

Confronted with this theory-defying trajectory of public sentiments, scholars often lean into a familiar tune—the American Dream. They evoke stories of a nation unfettered by feudal chains, of pioneers conquering boundless frontiers, suggesting that the unwavering optimism in the prospect of upward mobility is just part of the nation’s unique political culture. This explanation, unfortunately, feels eerily akin to the unsatisfactory response we receive when we envy European colleagues embarking on their summer vacation, only to be met with their out-of-office message promising a reply when the leaves fall. Why don’t Americans have long vacations? Ah, they say, it’s just the American way.

The allure of cultural explanations, especially when confronting complex phenomena, is undeniable. They offer a comforting lens to interpret the world, even if they seem to obfuscate more than elucidate. Americans’ beliefs in economic mobility in this new Gilded Age is a case in point. Under its grim shadows, politicians across the partisan spectrum raise alarms about how the American Dream turned into a nightmare, and news media has diligently etched these worries into the annals of national discourse. In a twist that leaves ivory-tower academics scratching their heads, however, sobering media coverage about declining mobility seems to just barely register in public minds.

Yet once we shift our gaze away from the news, we quickly realize that a parallel narrative unfolds nightly on television nationwide, recounting a different tale of America. These are not the chronicles of seasoned journalists but entertaining stories curated for prime time—stories of ordinary Americans succeeding due to their hard work and talent through powerful vocals, mesmerizing dance moves, or some other entrepreneurial talent. Popular reality TV shows ranging from *America’s Got Talent* and *American Idol* to *Shark Tank* and *MasterChef* each peddle their own flavor of “rags-to-riches” narratives, easily attracting viewership numbers that any news producer can only envy.

This tale spun by entertainment media—that the American Dream is alive and well—is directly counter to the somber headlines touted by the news media. The difference, however, isn't merely about contrasting moods, but their reach and impact. The narratives promoted by these entertainment shows project a different kind of economic reality into the living rooms of a much larger cross-section of America. Importantly, these messages are often received uninterrupted and largely unchallenged. While news gets tangled in the usual partisan filters, the appeal of these rags-to-riches stories easily bypasses entrenched partisan loyalties, serving as a heavy counterweight to public understanding of economic reality.

Such a potent narrative, emblematic of meritocratic success, can influence broader perspectives on economic divides (Lamont 2019). The meritocratic ideology is typically known to glorify the winners in the economic system, increase tolerance for income inequality, and dampen mass support for policies that could help those left behind (Kluegel and Smith 1981; Shariff, Wiwad, and Akinin 2016). Now, consider this against the backdrop of the astounding amount of American TV consumption, surpassing all other developed economies (OECD 2013), and the “puzzling” patterns in public attitudes toward redistribution are no longer so. If American political culture usually includes persistent adherence to individualism and exceptionalism, it's worth noting that it is likely nurtured, in no small part, by the nation's unparalleled appetite for entertainment and the narratives it promotes.

In the Gilded Age of yesteryear, Horatio Alger's tales of personal triumph from obscurity to prosperity captivated American hearts and minds. Today, Americans are not leafing through dime novels but are instead entranced by the glowing screens, where hundreds of programs teem with modern renditions of Alger's stories. But while these shows are often dismissed as mere entertainment, their impact resonates profoundly, shaping not just prime-time chatter but the very core of our political discourse. As we navigate the subsequent chapters, we will be reminded how the entertaining narratives we eagerly consume leave their mark on America.

Overview

The main theme of this book, as hinted in the subtitle, is entertainment media—an unusual protagonist for a political science book. This rarity deserves an elaboration. Chapter 2, accordingly, begins with the known territory of news media. Since our lived experiences are so limited, often we get to know what is happening in the world through mass media (see also Anderson 1983). Not surprisingly, the media effects have been central to studies of mass political behavior. Chapter 2 charts its transformation over recent decades. An illuminating trove of behavioral data reveal that, despite the increase in America's engagement with all forms of media, there isn't a proportional uptick in news consumption. Rather, an ever-expanding buffet of media offerings seems only to fortify a collective aversion to news. Parallel to this drift away from news, partisan divisions have deepened, pervading every facet of our political discourse. Among the small subset who consume news, partisan priors often determine what they consume and how they interpret information. The sobering upshot? Persuasion, in this media landscape, becomes an elusive prize. Indeed, a suite of recent empirical studies that examine the impact of news media on public opinion report disappointing null or small, costly, and fleeting effects.

The seminal theory of public opinion formation famously posits a sequence: people must receive, and then accept, information, and for such considerations to remain top-of-mind (Zaller 1992). Where news avoidance and intensifying polarization obstruct this process, entertainment media presents an intriguing counterpoint. The sheer volume of its consumption, unburdened by partisan overtones, establishes a fertile ground for shaping public opinion. Further, the power of narratives takes hold while engaging and immersive human stories transport the audience, reducing the tendency to counterargue or dismiss new information. Both the frequency with which we engage with entertainment media and its vivid imageries and storylines mean that information from the source is readily accessible.

Chapter 2 then unpacks the implications of sidelining entertainment media in the study of politics, framing the discussion around three

distinct scenarios. The first scenario involves topics exclusively covered by news media, such as the unfolding of breaking events. The second scenario addresses instances where news and entertainment media converge, offering synchronized narratives that reinforce each other. The third, and most critical, scenario explores situations where news and entertainment media present conflicting information. In light of America's lopsided consumption of entertainment media, its impact extends beyond merely diluting the influence of news media; it has the potential to distort public opinion in the opposite direction of elite-driven political communication. The rest of the chapter charts the methodological challenges of quantifying the impact of entertainment media on public opinion, not to daunt but to illuminate the path ahead for future explorations.

Chapter 3 begins with a curious puzzle in the study of American public opinion: a public whose belief in upward mobility remains robust, despite the sustained alarms about the fading American Dream from the nation's intellectual vanguard. Yet a pivot in focus offers revealing insights. Amidst the cacophony of entertainment channels, the narratives that captivated Americans over the past two decades are the uplifting tales of upward mobility. This chapter deconstructs the "rags-to-riches" trope, identifying its three central pillars: the presence of the ordinary protagonist, the tangible financial gain, and a meritocratic ethos. A meticulous content analysis reveals how this narrative has become the bedrock of many widely popular reality TV shows. Notably, their magnetic pull transcends partisan divides, underscoring the potential for persuasion that can transcend the usual partisan blinders.

Yet the challenges of establishing causality loom large. because, at the end of the day, those who choose to watch reality TV shows—albeit most Americans—are different from those who don't. Chapter 4, therefore, marshals a colorful array of experimental evidence. Instead of relying solely on online experiments, I took the research on the road, quite literally. I drove a truck, retrofitted into a roving research lab, and crisscrossed diverse towns—from bustling blueberry festivals to local farmers' markets in the suburbs of New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Both online and lab-in-the-truck experiments confirmed that even brief exposure to

“rags-to-riches” TV indeed colors mass perceptions about economic mobility. The chapter then segues into a serendipitous natural experiment. By a quirk of fate, some Americans found themselves more inclined to watch *American Idol*, influenced by the success of contestants who hail from their towns. Drawing from a survey coincidentally timed with the climax of show’s sixth season, I found that those with greater exposure to *Idol* were more likely to espouse beliefs in meritocracy, particularly among those who prefer entertainment to news.

But just how potent are these media effects? After all, the real world hums incessantly with noises and distractions. Thus, chapter 5 ventures beyond the world of causal inference and dives into observational data. Here, the influence of rags-to-riches narratives is pitted against the demographics and various socioeconomic factors. Surprisingly, the sway of the entertainment media exerts a pull rivaling traditional metrics like income or race. For heavy viewers, for instance, the entertainment media effect is as powerful as that of having immigrant parents shaping beliefs in upward mobility. Notably, lived experiences—whether someone resides in areas of stagnant economic mobility or glaring inequality—seem to cast no discernible effects on beliefs in the American Dream. This rift between economic reality and beliefs underscores, yet again, the outsized role of media in molding public sentiments. When a dazzling array of entertainment media constantly sells a narrative of upward economic mobility in Americans’ living rooms, it serves as a heavy counterweight to public understanding of economic reality.

A keen reader would be curious about the normative ambivalence of distorted perceptions regarding upward mobility. After all, isn’t America better off? Aspirations and optimism have long fueled innovation and entrepreneurship. Chapter 6 therefore turns to the ever-tricky question of “so what?” examining the downstream consequence of the meritocratic narratives on redistributive policy preferences. Turning to the surveys, as well as to online and lab-in-the-truck experiments, I find that exposure to rags-to-riches programs increases people’s tolerance of income inequality and decreases demand for government-led redistribution. Notably, stories that challenge racial stereotypes have their own potent effect, revealing the complex role of race in policy attitudes in America.

Chapter 7 is the finale, yet it isn't so much a conclusion as it is a prologue to what lies ahead—precisely because the impact of rags-to-riches narrative stands as a singular exploration, just a gateway into the uncharted territories of entertainment media's wide-ranging influence. We first turn to the electoral consequences of entertainment media. While the powerful force of calcified partisan identity suggests that the impact of entertainment media on voting behavior may be negligible, I turn to the example of *The Apprentice* and explore how it served as a catalyst for Donald Trump's unprecedented political trajectory. The increasingly blurred boundaries between entertainment and politics suggest the complex intertwining of the two is ripe for future inquiries.

We then explore the long-overdue need to unify the studies of entertainment media effects and those of lived experiences and geographic context. Whether it is the portrayal of police in popular police dramas or the integration of progressive racial themes in children's content, entertainment media can be a force that shapes our perceptions of police brutality and racial attitudes, but its effects could be conditioned by prior contact with police or day-to-day exposure to racial out-groups. The wide spectrum of entertainment media effects stretches to encompass even the nationalistic propaganda in authoritarian regimes and the newly emerging micro-narratives in short-form videos in social media. These examples beckon scholars to challenge the rigid yet arbitrary boundaries of the study of politics, emphasizing the urgency of recognizing the looming shadow of entertainment's influence.

These observations also underscore that studies of public opinion—including analyses of news effects or the impact of any elite-driven communication—must carefully consider real-world media exposure. While the idealistic visions of a populace devouring quality journalism, fact-checking at every turn, and engaging with hard-hitting news are alluring, the stark reality remains: much of American life is apolitical. By turning our gaze to the media most citizens consume, we will achieve a richer understanding of the nature and origins of public opinion and, hopefully, derive more attuned prescriptions. Such a task becomes paramount as we consider an emerging generation, one without recollections of traditional broadcast news, nurtured instead by the likes of

Netflix, TikTok, and YouTube. These platforms, primarily driven by entertainment and algorithmically designed that way, represent a media landscape that pioneering public opinion scholars could scarcely have imagined.

Before the closing credits, this book asks one fundamental question. What is politics? To many, the term evokes familiar images: the stately façade of the White House, fervent politicians with their unimpressive campaign ads, and the winding queues of voters on Election Day. But politics is much more than that. It encompasses our faith in meritocracy, our judgments about who deserves compassion, and our ever-evolving attitudes toward those who are different from us. These are just a few of the myriad beliefs forming the very foundation of American politics. Thus, by definition, entertainment media that shapes these beliefs is inherently political. Its consequences are often unseen—yet deserve to be seen.

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