

# Field of (American) Dreams: Sports and Belief in Meritocracy

ALEX TOLKIN, University of Pennsylvania

American inequality has reached levels not seen since before the great depression. Yet public support for redistribution has not changed in response to this rising inequality. In this paper I examine how watching sports reinforces American attitudes about meritocracy. Using two surveys I demonstrate that greater sports watching is associated with higher belief that hard work and talent are more responsible for success, that economic advancement is possible, that competition is a force for good, and that redistributive taxation is undesirable. I supplement these findings with a survey experiment conducted during the 2021 NBA finals to show that priming sports can reinforce positive attitudes towards the role of competition in society and activate beliefs among sports fans that America is more meritocratic. These findings illustrate the importance of studying how media that has traditionally been thought of as non-political can nevertheless promote narratives which shape political attitudes.

## Introduction

American inequality has risen dramatically in the past several decades, making the nation now nearly as economically unequal as it was just prior to the great depression (Saez and Zucman 2016). Furthermore, economic mobility has fallen precipitously; while once an overwhelming majority of Americans earned more than their parents did, now only half do (Chetty et al. 2017). Yet despite theoretical predictions that this high level of inequality should spark demands for greater wealth redistribution (Meltzer and Richard 1981), calls for redistribution have been remarkably muted (Bartels 2005) and have increased little despite rising inequality (McCall 2013) and economic crises (Soroka and Wlezien 2014). Currently, a majority of Americans say that there is too much inequality in society, but less than half think that reducing inequality should be a major focus of the US government (Horowitz, Igielnik, and Kochhar 2020). What explains the disconnect between a dramatically unequal society and a lack of public urgency to address this gap?

A longstanding explanation for American acceptance of high levels of inequality holds that a core part of American identity and mythos is the “American Dream” of economic advancement. America has long promoted the idea that anyone with positive individual qualities - hard work, skill, determination, and so on - can succeed (Kluegel and Smith 1986; McNamee 2018; Turner 1962). Meritocratic perceptions that success is due to virtue or hard work legitimize high levels

of inequality. In unequal societies, citizens often accept the inequality due to a belief that success is largely a product of individual effort and ability rather than structural advantages (Mijs 2021). In America, the pervasive belief that people who work hard will be successful (and conversely, that successful people work hard) has long been noted (Markovits 2019; McClosky and Zaller 1984; Reynolds and Xian 2014; Tocqueville 1862).

The widely-held American belief in meritocracy manifests in American public opinion in a variety of ways. First, Americans think hard work and effort is critical not just to success, but to being a good person (McClosky and Zaller 1984). Second, Americans view inequality of opportunity as a more unfair than inequality of outcomes (Heiserman, Simpson, and Willer 2020). Finally, this focus on equality of opportunity extends to attitudes about how the government should respond to inequality. When asked whether the government should focus on promoting fair competition or ensuring that all Americans have a decent standard of living, Americans overwhelmingly believe that the government's efforts should be directed to ensuring that competition occurs on a level playing field (Smith et al. 2018).

Yet a puzzle remains: Why has the myth of the American dream endured if it getting ahead has become harder and harder for decades and is now more difficult than ever (Chetty et al. 2017)? One possibility is repeated reinforcement by the media. As early as the 1930s, scholars noted that narrative depictions of the American economy ignored systemic challenges while “motion pictures sustain the thesis of personal responsibility for failure or success” (Lasswell 1936, 31). Fictional narratives have been shown to powerfully influence perceptions of how the world works (Green, Brock, and Kaufman 2004).

Sports are a relatively understudied source of narratives in the political realm. Coverage of sporting contests emphasizes the athlete's effort and talent, justifies why the winner of a game deserved to win, and often highlights the success stories of notable athletes. These messages are all tied to broader ideas about how attainable the “American Dream” is, and whether barriers to achieving it are systemic or personal.

In this paper I expand on previous literature on the connection between sports and meritocracy

over the course of three studies. In the first study, I use replication data from a study on belief in economic advancement to demonstrate that watching sports television is associated with greater belief in the importance of individual attributes for life success. I further show that sports television watching is associated with greater belief in the possibility of economic advancement in general. In the second study I use a different survey to connect sports consumption to policy attitudes. I establish a link between sports watching, belief that competition is good for society, and opposition to redistributive taxation. Finally, using a survey experiment I demonstrate that priming sports increases belief that competition is good among winners of recent games. Priming also boosts belief that America is meritocratic among people who watch lots of sports, regardless of whether their team won or lost.

## **Sports and Political Attitudes**

While news media has received the bulk of attention for how media can influence political attitudes, another strain of research notes how media that is not outwardly political can nevertheless influence public opinion. Cultivation theory argues that perceptions of social reality are influenced by media consumption, even if that media is not reporting news or presenting an explicitly persuasive argument (Gerbner and Gross 1976). Television programs can affect perceptions of the criminal justice system (Mutz and Nir 2010), attitudes towards international relations (Lenart and McGraw 1989), support for capital punishment (Holbert, Shah, and Kwak 2004), and belief in the possibility of economic advancement (Kim 2022). Television news comprises only a small portion of the average American media diet (Allen et al. 2020) and it is increasingly easy for people who are not interested in politics to avoid news media entirely (Prior 2007). In a media environment where people can tune out news, it is critical to understand the effects of non-news media on political attitudes.

In contemporary America, sports are one of the most popular forms of entertainment. 69% of American adults describe themselves as sports fans, 12% report that they watch sports daily, and a majority of adults say that they watch sports at least once a month (Morning Consult 2020). Sports

are the last remaining genre of communal television watching in the current fragmented media landscape. In 2005, 14 out of the top 100 most watched broadcasts were sporting events; in 2015, 93 out of the top 100 were sporting events (Nielsen 2015). Sports are a major topic of discussion and talk. On Facebook, pages devoted to athletes are among the most liked and most engaged-with (Newswhip 2022). Sports consumption is also cross-party, with members of both parties widely engaging with sports pages on Facebook (Praet et al. 2022).

American sports are typically presented in a narrative frame that reinforce the idea that society is meritocratic. In sports broadcasts competition is portrayed as occurring in a fair playing field (Goldman and Papson 1998), where effort and talent lead to success, not privilege or structural advantages (Brohm 1989). When a team or individual is clearly outmatched due to structural disadvantages, such as a football team from a small college facing a school with a well-funded program, this mismatch is frequently portrayed as a heroic underdog story (Sage 1998). The typical portrayal of a successful athlete is of someone who achieves success through hard work and extraordinary effort (Serazio 2019). This emphasis on individual effort being the source of success is generalized from professional athletes to ordinary Americans via processes such as using famous athletes in advertisements. Companies associated with sports such as Nike have long promoted the idea that hard work allowed an athlete to succeed and the same hard work (combined with purchasing Nike products) allows ordinary people to overcome obstacles as well (Andrews 2017; Goldman and Papson 1998).

Exposure to meritocratic messages in sports could influence broader attitudes towards meritocracy if people assume that the economy works similarly to sports, where stronger competitors emerge on top due to their work ethic and talent. People use strategies such as heuristics to approximate what opinions they have given incomplete information (Lau and Redlawsk 2001; Tversky and Kahneman 1974). One classic heuristic is to apply existing, readily available knowledge to unfamiliar questions (Sternberg 1977). For example, in interviews asking about their political beliefs respondents frequently refer to topics they are more familiar with even if those are only at best tangentially related to the political question asked (Cramer and Toff 2017). On complex policy ques-

tions, even people with minimal political knowledge can successfully link those questions to topics they are more familiar with (Schlesinger and Lau 2000).

Despite extensive analysis of how sports are presented and the messages implicit and explicit in such presentations, there is surprisingly little empirical evidence that these messages influence political attitudes. In fact, one prominent line of research has argued that while sports can influence political outcomes, this influence has nothing to do with the messages embedded in sports coverage. Rather, this work argues that sporting victories and losses make people more or less happy, and thus more or less satisfied with the status quo (Busby, Druckman, and Fredendall 2017; Healy, Malhotra, and Mo 2010). This analysis of sporting events views them as quasi-random apolitical occurrences, comparing them to other localized apolitical shocks to public happiness such as shark attacks (Arndt, Jensen, and Wenzelburger 2021; Healy and Malhotra 2013).

A noteworthy research project that establishes a link between sports specifically and political attitudes is Emily Thorson and Michael Serazio's survey of sports fans and political attitudes. They found that people who were more intense sports fans (people who followed more sports or engaged in fan behavior such as wearing team jerseys) were more likely to attribute economic mobility to individual effort (Thorson and Serazio 2018). While this research demonstrates a that watching sports predicts believing that success is a product of individual effort, it leaves room for many additional questions. First, does this association between sports watching and belief in the importance of individual factors for advancement extend to other beliefs about inequality in America? Second, is sports watching associated not only with differences in attitudes about meritocracy and inequality, but also differences in support for policies meant to address these issues? Finally, does sports watching actually *cause* these attitudes? I address these three questions in three next three studies.

## **Study 1: Sports Watching and Belief in Meritocracy**

In the first study, I elaborate on the relationship between watching sports and belief in the importance of individual virtues enabling people to overcome challenges. Here, I use a survey to measure the association between sports viewership and attitudes related to meritocracy in order to test

two hypotheses.

### *Hypotheses*

First, in line with previous work (Thorson and Serazio 2018) I test whether people who watch more sports are more likely to attribute success to individual virtues, such as work ethic and ability. This is a baseline test to confirm existing findings before expanding their conclusions.

*H<sub>1</sub>: Consuming more sports television is positively associated with attributing success to personal virtues*

Second, I expand on this finding by testing whether people who watch more sports expect that economic advancement is more achievable. Coverage of sporting events often portrays successful athletes as possessing superhuman talent, determination, effort, and so on (Wann et al. 2001). It may be that sports watchers think that individual effort and ability is important for success, but such success is hopelessly out of reach for ordinary people. On the other hand, athletics and sportswear companies have long promoted the idea that with sufficient effort ordinary people can be successful the same what that athletes are (Andrews 2017; Goldman and Papson 1998). Because extensive messaging linked to sports promotes the idea that hard work will lead ordinary people to triumph, I expect that people who watch sports will be more optimistic about the possibility of economic advancement.

*H<sub>2</sub>: Consuming more sports television will be associated with greater belief in the possibility of economic advancement*

### *Data + Measures*

Data for this study comes from a survey conducted in August 2018 by Survey Sampling International (SSI) as part of Eunji Kim's investigation into the effect of reality television on belief in economic mobility (Kim 2022). Her variable of interest was consumption of reality television programs, but Kim also surveyed whether respondents viewed a number of other television programs, including ten sports shows. This survey data is now available as replication data for her study (Kim

2021). I conduct similar analyses to Kim's study, except using the sports consumption variables in the dataset as the independent variable of interest instead of the reality TV consumption variables.

To measure sports consumption I took the sum of the number of sports shows that each respondent reported regularly watching out of ten sports shows included in the survey. To measure belief in personal virtues leading to success I used Kim's four item index assessing how much people agree with earned or inherent personal virtues explain why people thought that some did better than others ( $\alpha .71$ ):

- Some people work harder than others
- Some people are more talented than others
- Some people are more ambitious and determined than others
- Some have a good education

Finally, to measure belief in economic mobility I used Kim's four item belief in economic mobility index ( $\alpha .86$ ), assessing the extent to which people agreed with the following four statements:

- Anyone who works hard has a fair chance to succeed and live a comfortable life.
- It is possible to start out poor in this country, work hard and become well-off.
- The United States is no longer the land of opportunity (reverse coded)
- Most people who want to get ahead can make it if they're willing to work hard.

Both indexes were rescaled to vary between 0 and 1, so that the results represent the relationship between watching one additional sports show and the percentage change in belief in personal virtue and economic advancement or the belief in the possibility of economic mobility.

Because this survey was designed specifically to test possible explanations for belief in meritocracy, it includes a large number of control variables that relate to possible alternative causes of a belief in meritocracy. I included a standard batch of demographics (education, income, marital status, gender, age, race) as well as factors that have been offered as possible reasons why one might be more likely to believe in the possibility of economic advancement: political party, ideology, political

interest, protestant religious affiliation, immigrant parents, inter-generational mobility in one's local area, and level of inequality in one's local area. Finally, to test if people who watch sports watch other programs which promote messages of meritocracy (such as reality television) I include the measures for watching reality TV as well as other popular TV programs. See appendix for details on all question wording.

### *Results*

To test hypothesis 1, I regressed belief in the importance of individual virtues for economic advancement on level of sports watching with and without controls. In line with past findings linking sports fandom to belief in the importance of individual effort and ability (Thorson and Serazio 2018), hypothesis 1 is supported. Without controls, regularly watching an additional sports show is associated with a 1.1% greater belief in the importance of individual virtues ( $p < .001$ ) and with controls, an additional sports show is associated with a 0.6% greater belief in the importance of individual virtues ( $p < .001$ ). These findings support the idea that sports coverage in the United States contains messages about how individual effort and ability enables people to overcome obstacles.

To test hypothesis 2, that higher levels of sports watching is associated with increased belief in the possibility of economic advancement, I repeat the analysis with perceptions of the ability of Americans to do better economically as the DV. Results are reported in table 2. Hypothesis 2 is clearly supported. Without controls, regularly watching one additional sports show is associated with a 1.5% increase in belief in the possibility of economic advancement ( $p < .001$ ). Including controls for a variety of factors that would predict economic mobility, watching an additional sports show is associated with a 0.7% increase in belief in the possibility of economic advancement ( $p < .01$ ). In both cases, people who watch more sports television think it is easier to move up the economic ladder.

Overall, these results support past research that people who watch more sports believe more in the importance of individual virtues for predicting success. This belief appears to extend to a broader belief that economic advancement is attainable, so long as one works hard. In the next

Table 1: Watching more Sports Programs Predicts Attributing Success to Personal Virtues

	Personal Virtue Explains Success	
	Simple Model	Complex Model
Intercept	0.747 (0.005) ***	0.590 (0.051) ***
<b>Sports Shows Watched</b>	0.011 (0.002) ***	0.006 (0.002) ***
Reality Shows Watched		0.009 (0.002) ***
Other Shows Watched		−0.003 (0.003)
Democrat		−0.018 (0.010)
Republican		0.030 (0.011) **
Education		−0.003 (0.003)
Income		0.002 (0.003)
Married		0.007 (0.008)
Female		0.013 (0.008)
Age		0.002 (0.000) ***
White		0.008 (0.009)
Unemployed		−0.015 (0.012)
Political Interest		0.017 (0.004) ***
Protestant		0.022 (0.008) **
Immigrant Parents		0.023 (0.010) *
Intergenerational Mobility (county)		−0.001 (0.001)
GINI coefficient (county)		−0.023 (0.035)
Num.Obs.	3004	2998
R2	0.016	0.103
R2 Adj.	0.016	0.098
AIC	−1228.8	−1475.1
BIC	−1210.8	−1361.0
Log.Lik.	617.412	756.557
F	48.590	20.131

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Table 2: People Who Watch More Sports Think it is Easier to Get Ahead

	Belief in Economic Mobility	
	Simple Model	Complex Model
Intercept	0.649 (0.006) ***	0.530 (0.060) ***
<b>Sports Shows Watched</b>	0.015 (0.002) ***	0.007 (0.002) **
Reality Shows Watched		0.009 (0.002) ***
Other Shows Watched		-0.001 (0.003)
Democrat		-0.004 (0.012)
Republican		0.131 (0.013) ***
Education		-0.022 (0.004) ***
Income		0.008 (0.003) *
Married		0.022 (0.009) *
Female		0.014 (0.010)
Age		0.002 (0.000) ***
White		-0.016 (0.010)
Unemployed		-0.047 (0.014) ***
Political Interest		0.003 (0.005)
Protestant		0.020 (0.010) *
Immigrant Parents		0.054 (0.012) ***
Intergenerational Mobility (county)		-0.001 (0.001)
GINI coefficient (county)		0.013 (0.041)
Num.Obs.	3004	2998
R2	0.022	0.148
R2 Adj.	0.022	0.143
AIC	-131.9	-512.6
BIC	-113.9	-398.5
Log.Lik.	68.970	275.296
F	67.328	30.504

\* p < 0.05, \*\* p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.001

study, I assess whether these beliefs translate into policy preferences.

## Study 2: Sports Watching and Policy Preferences

While watching sports is associated with a greater belief in the importance of individual effort and the possibility of economic mobility, does this translate to policy preferences? Past work has found that support for redistributive policies is influenced by both the perceived intractability and causes of inequality. Opposition to redistribution is correlated with a belief that economic mobility is possible (Alesina, Stantcheva, and Teso 2018). Furthermore, if people believe that inequality stems from differences in effort, they are more likely to favor lower levels of taxation and oppose government efforts to redistribute wealth (Alesina and Angeletos 2005; Kluegel and Smith 1986).

### *Hypotheses*

In Study 1 I demonstrated that sport viewing is positively associated with the belief that economic mobility is possible and that individual differences are responsible for differences in success; I thus expect that sports viewing will be negatively associated with support for redistributive policies.

*H<sub>1</sub> : Consuming more sports television will be associated with lower support for government efforts to redistribute wealth*

American beliefs about competition depend on the sort of competition that they envision. For example, Americans express more favorability towards competition among small businesses than big ones (McClosky and Zaller 1984). Sports are an arena where competition is portrayed as exciting and enjoyable, as opposed to mundane competition of everyday life which is often exhausting and challenging (Markovits 2019). Therefore, I expect that watching more sports will be associated with greater belief that competition is good for society.

*H<sub>2</sub> : Consuming more sports will be associated with greater belief in the benefits of competition*

## *Data + Measures*

Data for this study came from two waves of nationally-representative panel survey data collected by Amerispeak/the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. The dependent variable of interest (sports consumption) was only asked in one wave, meaning it was not possible to test the effect of individual-level changes in sports consumption. Instead, I analyzed the data as a standard regression, just one where variables for each respondent were collected at two different points in time.

To assess sports consumption, respondents were asked how frequently they watched 10 different sports on a five-point scale. Every sport was highly correlated with every other sport, so I averaged all of the sports consumption measures to create a sports consumption index ( $\alpha.81$ ). To assess policy preferences I used two questions designed to tap attitudes towards redistributive taxation. One asked whether respondents favored the government spending more tax money on providing a social safety net while the other asked if taxes should be cut, even if that meant reducing government programs or services. These two items were negatively correlated but not sufficiently to create a strong index, so I evaluated them independently. To measure attitudes about the virtues of competition, the survey used the standard question employed by the World Values Survey (Haerpfer et al. 2020). Respondents were asked to place their views of competition on a ten-point scales with anchors of “Competition is good. It stimulates people to work hard and develop new ideas” and “Competition is bad. It brings out the worst in people.” Higher values represented higher belief in the benefits of competition.

As controls I included typical demographics of party, ideology, education, income, age, and race. The demographic and policy variables were asked in October 2020 while the sports consumption and belief in competition variables were asked in April 2021.

## *Results*

Table 3 shows results for hypothesis 1, that increased sports consumption is associated with decreased support for redistributive policies. Hypothesis 1 is partially supported. With and without

Table 3: Sports Consumption Predicts Attitudes Towards Spending

	Increase Safety Net		Cut Taxes	
	Simple	Complex	Simple	Complex
Intercept	3.593*** (0.069)	5.216*** (0.141)	2.681*** (0.071)	1.897*** (0.146)
Sports Consumption	0.026 (0.038)	0.030 (0.035)	0.124** (0.039)	0.103** (0.036)
Democrat		0.394*** (0.053)		-0.430*** (0.054)
Republican		-0.135* (0.057)		0.240*** (0.058)
Ideology (5 level)		-0.382*** (0.024)		0.387*** (0.025)
Female		0.022 (0.043)		-0.116** (0.044)
Education (4 level)		-0.097*** (0.028)		-0.093** (0.029)
Income (18 level)		-0.029*** (0.006)		0.006 (0.006)
Black		0.271*** (0.080)		0.153 (0.083)
Hispanic		-0.006 (0.065)		0.102 (0.067)
Num.Obs.	2817	2764	2817	2764
R2	0.000	0.235	0.004	0.244
R2 Adj.	0.000	0.233	0.003	0.241
AIC	9201.4	8318.0	9412.3	8505.4
BIC	9219.2	8383.2	9430.1	8570.6
Log.Lik.	-4597.702	-4148.014	-4703.158	-4241.704
F	0.458	94.017	10.042	98.637

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Table 4: Sports Viewership Predicts Belief Competition is Good for Society

	Belief in Competition	
	Simple Model	Complex Model
Intercept	7.080 (0.112) ***	5.627 (0.246) ***
<b>Sports Consumption</b>	0.233 (0.061) ***	0.138 (0.061) *
Democrat		-0.011 (0.092)
Republican		0.523 (0.098) ***
Ideology (5 level)		0.319 (0.041) ***
Female		-0.573 (0.075) ***
Education (4 level)		0.167 (0.049) ***
Income (18 level)		0.030 (0.010) **
Black		0.054 (0.140)
Hispanic		-0.371 (0.113) **
Num.Obs.	2812	2757
R2	0.005	0.112
R2 Adj.	0.005	0.109
AIC	11 905.7	11 344.7
BIC	11 923.5	11 409.8
Log.Lik.	-5949.858	-5661.344
F	14.339	38.641

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

controls, greater sports watching is significantly ( $p < .01$ ) associated with increased support for cutting taxes even if it means a reduction in government services. However, increased sports watching is not significantly associated with attitudes towards increasing the social safety net. Notably, while these questions tap support for policies associated with redistribution, they do not explicitly ask about conventional measures such as support for increasing tax rates on the wealthy or increasing spending on the poor (McCall and Kenworthy 2009). This may explain the inconsistencies in results and the relatively weak correlation between the two items.

Next, table 4 shows results for hypothesis 2, that increased sports watching is associated with increased beliefs in the benefits of competition. Here, hypothesis 2 is supported. People who watch more sports believe that competition is more helpful to society. While this relationship was less significant when control variables were included, it remained significant at a  $p < .05$  level.

Overall, people who watch more sports not only believe that economic advancement is more at-

tainable than those who do not watch sports, and economic success is a product of individual effort and ability. These beliefs are also reflected in attitudes on the benefits of competition in society and towards policies meant to address inequality. In the next study I examine whether watching sports causes these attitudes.

### **Study 3: Effects of Priming Sports on Attitudes**

The previous two studies demonstrated that people who watch more sports have a variety of beliefs and policy preferences that are compatible with a highly unequal society. However, because the previous two studies were associational it is unclear if watching sports caused those attitudes or if there is some confounding variable at play. To test whether sports caused changes in attitudes, I primed respondents in three cities to think about sports. In the three cities where respondents were sampled from, one's NBA team had won an important game the previous day, one's team had lost a game the previous day, one's team did not play.

#### *Hypotheses*

Competition in sports is entertaining and winners are presented as having deserved their success. I expect that people who are primed to think about sports will think about the positive aspects of competition rather than the negative ones.

*H<sub>1</sub> : Priming sports will increase belief that competition is good for society*

I expect that the effects of priming sports will be different depending on two factors: First, whether a respondent's preferred team won or lost. Second, the extent to which the respondent watches sports. While overall, I predict that priming sports will increase the belief that competition is good for society, among people whose team just lost I expect the prime will have the opposite effect. Winning produces a feeling of triumph and losing a feeling of dejection (Duina 2010). These changes are not just psychological but biological. Vicarious enjoyment of victory or disappointment in defeat can alter testosterone levels, whether the match in question is a sporting event or even a presidential election (Bernhardt et al. 1998; Stanton et al. 2009).

*H<sub>2</sub> : The effect of the prime will be moderated by whether the respondent's team just lost, with winners believing competition is better for society and losers believing competition is worse for society*

Third, I expect that priming sports will make people think that America is more meritocratic. Sports often feature stories of successful athletes and their notable work ethic, practice regimen, and so on. For example, a major storyline during the 2021 NBA finals was the success of Bucks superstar Giannis Antetokounmpo, the son of refugees who grew up selling trinkets on the street. Giannis is already the subject of a biography detailing his rags-to-riches story (Fader 2021) as well as an upcoming Disney movie (Otterson 2021).

*H<sub>3</sub> : Priming sports will increase belief that America is meritocratic*

Finally, I expect that the effect of the prime on beliefs America is meritocratic will be moderated by the extent to which respondents are familiar with sports. People who watch more sports will have been exposed to more messages and narratives that emphasize the power of individual effort and possibility of personal advancement. On the other hand, those who have watched fewer sports are unlikely to make the deeper connections to narratives present in sports and further link that to meritocracy more generally.

*H<sub>4</sub> : The effect of the prime on perceptions of meritocracy will be moderated by the amount each respondent watches sports, with people who watch more sports more affected and respondents who watch less sports less affected*

#### *Data + Measures*

Data for this comes from a survey conducted by the survey company Forthright in July 2021 during the 2021 NBA finals. In the finals the Milwaukee Bucks defeated the Phoenix Suns in a 6-game series to win their first championship in 50 years. Survey participants were recruited from Milwaukee, Phoenix, and Orlando (a city with an underwhelming NBA team that did not make the playoffs). The survey was planned to run in two waves; one conducted after a Phoenix victory and the other after a Milwaukee victory. This design was intended to assess the impact of winning versus losing on attitudes towards competition. Unfortunately, the survey was first fielded after

Milwaukee's Game 3 victory, and Milwaukee swept all the remaining games. The second wave was conducted after Milwaukee's Game 6 victory which sealed the championship, and I combined all responses from both games into a single data set. In total, 623 respondents participated in the combined two-wave survey.

While it was not possible to measure attitudes in each city after a Milwaukee loss versus after a Milwaukee win, there was a manipulation embedded in the survey. Survey questions were asked in two blocks in a random order. One block asked questions about sports consumption, and the other asked questions about political attitudes. The order randomization meant that half of the respondents answered questions about sports before answering questions about their political attitudes. Questions earlier in a survey have long been known to prime attitudes which can affect later responses (Tourangeau, Rips, and Rasinski 2000; McFarland 1981). Because of the question order, this survey can test the effect of priming thinking about sports by comparing respondents who answered the sports questions prior to the political questions versus those who answered the political questions prior to the sports questions. Additionally, the unique study population enables tests of several interactions: Between priming sports and a major win/loss, as well as an interaction between priming sports and overall level of sports consumption.

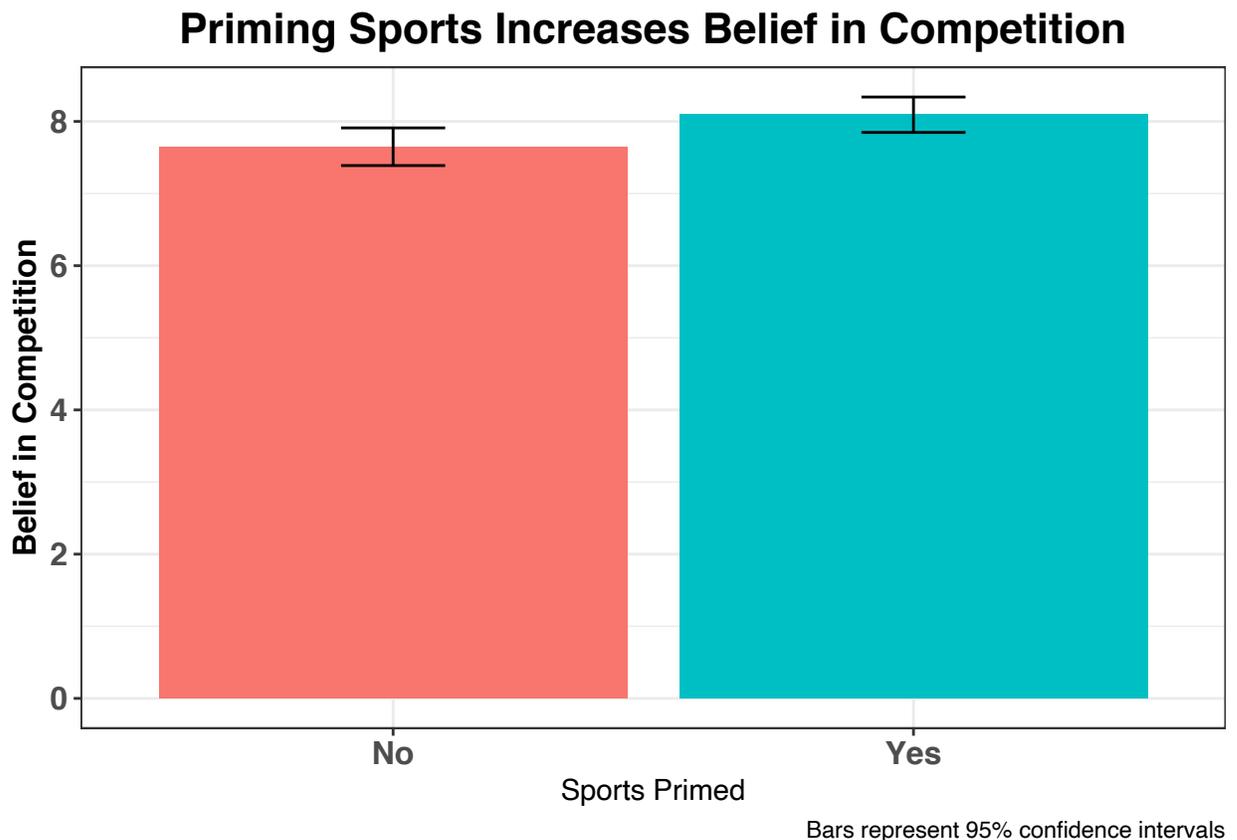
To measure belief in competition I once again used the World Values Survey measure. To measure sports fandom I use two measures. As a loose measure of a respondent's current interest in sports I asked whether each respondent watched the previous night's NBA finals game. As a measure of sports fandom in general, I also asked each respondent how frequently they watched football, basketball, and baseball, then took the average of their reported viewership of the three most popular sports in America. To measure belief that America was meritocratic I used a 4-item scale ( $\alpha$  .83) adapted from Heiserman, Simpson, and Willer's study of perceptions of American meritocracy (Heiserman, Simpson, and Willer 2020) measuring agreement with the following four items:

- In America, anyone who is willing and able to work hard has a good chance of succeeding
- In America, the poor are poor because they don't try hard enough to get ahead
- In America, individual ability and motivation are rewarded

- In America, a person's success is due to their own choices

### Results

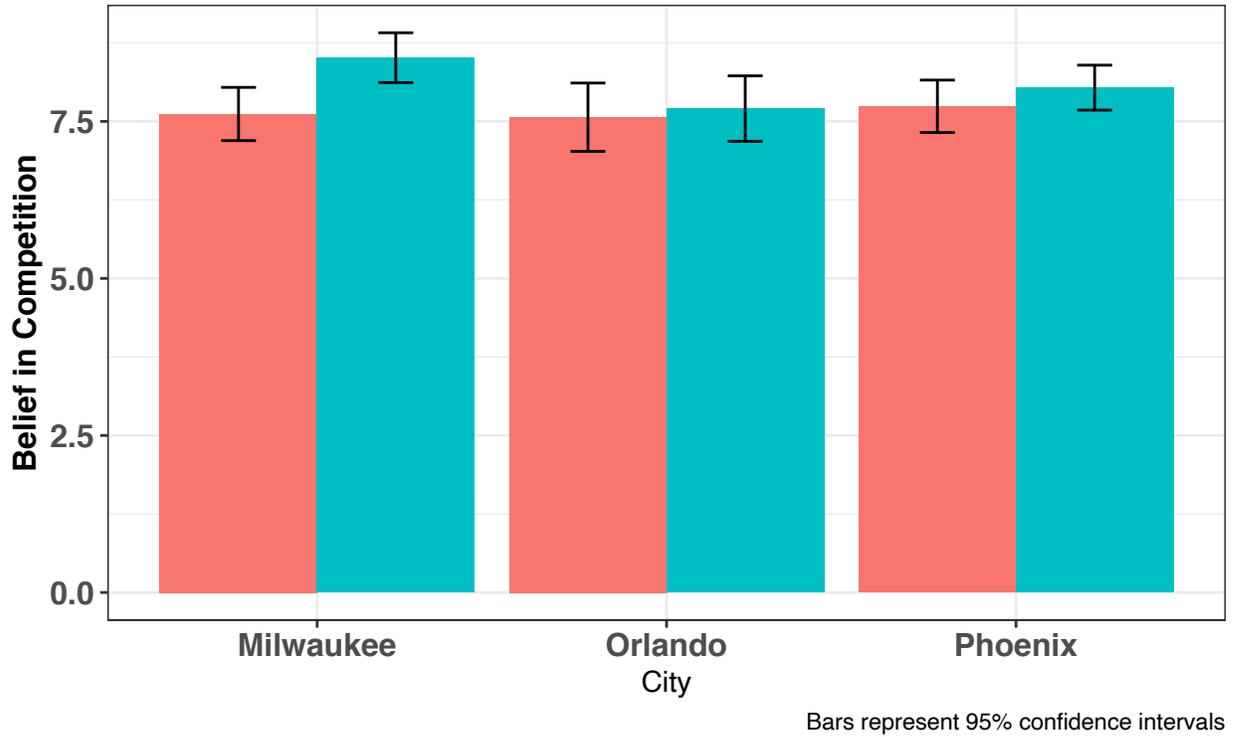
I first test hypothesis 1, that priming sports will increase the belief that competition is beneficial for society. Figure 1 demonstrates that hypothesis 1 is supported. People who filled out the sports section of the survey first expressed .4 points higher belief that competition was good for society ( $p < .05$ )



To test hypothesis 2 I divide respondents by city to see if those whose team won the previous night reacted differently to the prime compared those whose team lost the previous night. Figure 2 demonstrates that priming sports led to significantly ( $p < .01$ ) higher belief that competition is good for society among Milwaukee respondents. However, contrary to expectations, priming people in Phoenix to think about sports did not cause a decrease in belief that competition was good. In fact, respondents in all three cities expressed greater belief that competition was beneficial to society if

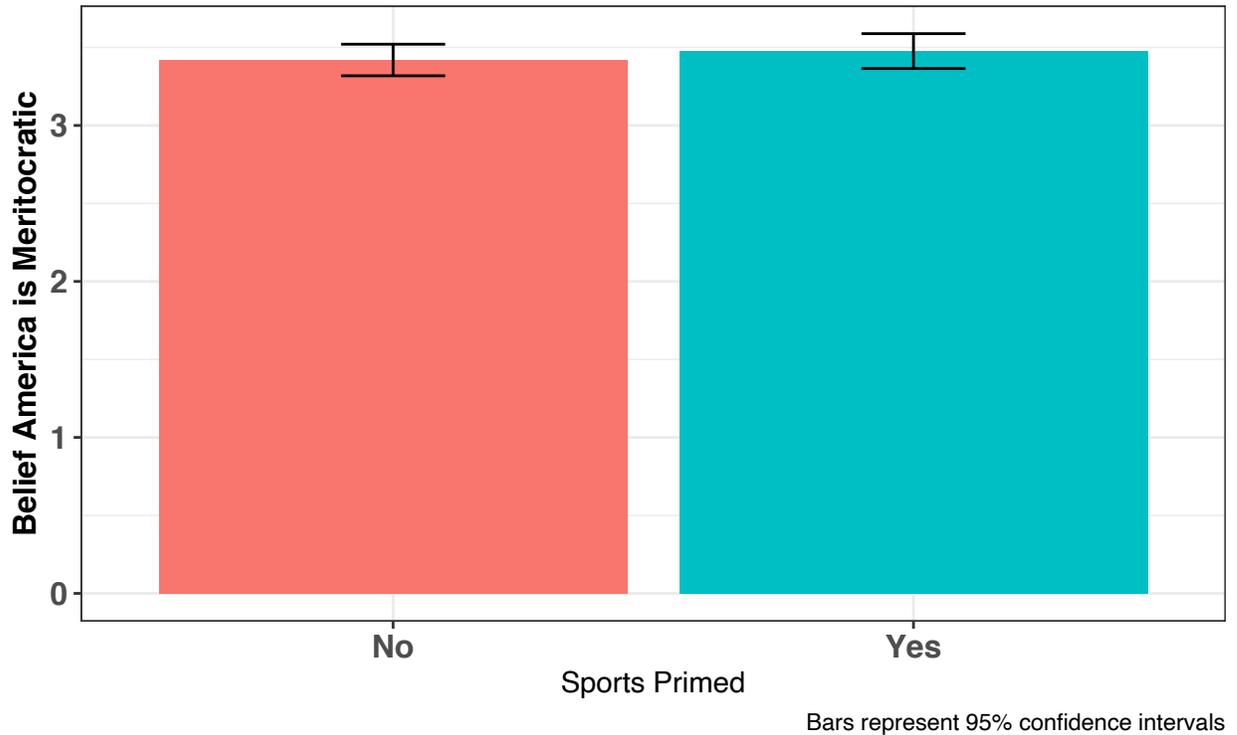
they had been primed to think about sports, although this difference was only significant in Milwaukee.

### Belief in Competition Increases When Sports Primed in Winning City



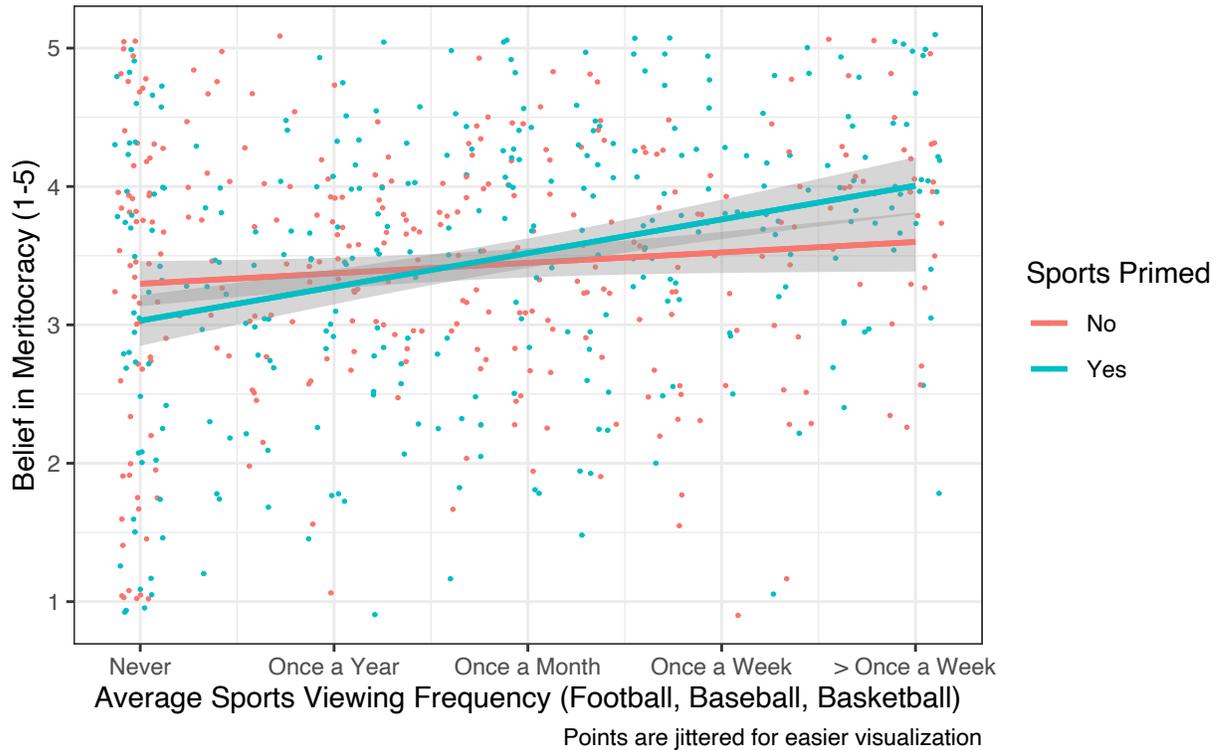
Third, I test whether priming sports increased a belief that America is meritocratic. Figure 3 demonstrates that hypothesis 3 is not supported. There was no significant difference in beliefs that America was meritocratic among those who were primed to think of sports versus those who were not.

## Priming Sports Does Not Significantly Increase Belief America is Meritocratic



Finally, I turn to hypothesis 4, that the prime will be moderated by the amount of sports that people watch. Figure 4 demonstrates that there was a significant interaction between the level of sports watching and the effect of the prime. While in aggregate priming sports had no effect on beliefs that America was meritocratic, it had a significantly larger positive effect on those who watched more sports.

## Effect of Priming Sports On Belief in Meritocracy Depends on Frequency of Sports Viewers



Overall, my findings are largely in line with my expectations. People who were primed to think about a sports after their team just won were more positive about competition than those who were not primed. Interestingly, those who were primed after their team just lost showed no decrease in the belief that competition was good for society. This implies that sports have an asymmetrical effect, making winners feel good about their victory while losers accept their defeat. Priming sports also made those who watched lots of sports believe America was more meritocratic, implying that it is the narratives in sports rather than simply winning or losing that promote meritocratic ideas.

## Conclusion

This paper addresses the puzzle of why Americans have been skeptical of redistributive policies even as wealth is increasingly concentrated in a small elite. The concept of the “American Dream” remains a potent and influential idea that shapes American attitudes towards inequality and redistribution (Hanson and White 2011). Yet ideas and ideals are not sustained indefinitely without sup-

port.

This paper examines how entertainment media can contain deeply embedded narratives which influence political attitudes. Sporting competitions present a comforting environment where the playing field is mostly fair and where winners' success is ascribed to their hard work and talent. Corporations use sports to advertise the idea that ordinary people can emulate their favorite athletes and enjoy success as well.

This paper continues to a line of research on how people take messages from one domain and apply those messages to the political realm (Bougher 2012). While winning at sports is different from being economically successful, the messages in sports about hard work and effort fit in to the overall narrative of the American Dream. In a time where economic advancement is harder than it has been for generations, sports still provides examples of people who rise to the top on their merits and teams who win exciting victories.

Overall, this speaks to the importance of examining media beyond conventional news programs for political messages. News fluctuates depending on the issue of the day, while other media genres may offer more consistent messaging. Exploring the effects of these sorts of seemingly apolitical media offers a fruitful avenue for understanding other seeming paradoxes of American public opinion.

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