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The American dream or nightmare? Understanding the change in perceptions of the American dream

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The American Dream or Nightmare? Understanding the Change in Perceptions of the
American Dream

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Abstract

The American Dream remains at the heart of many Americans' national identity, and is a major theme throughout entertainment and news media, most significantly throughout political elections. It is an ideal uniquely able to ignite emotion in Americans and is something that connects people around the country, while also used as a tactic by politicians because of its impact. Since its origin, though, there has been a decline in belief in the American Dream, specifically among millennials, with growing pessimism in the amount of opportunity there really is in the United States for all. This pessimism is thoroughly explored through the studies of various authors beginning in the 1950s, and also through data conducted this past year asking respondents across the country a variety of questions regarding their sentiments on economic opportunity and American Dream. Through the usage of variables such as age, party identification, opinion on the news, and more, the change in perceptions of the American Dream is examined and uncovered.

Acknowledgements

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“The Epic loses all its glory without the dream.” –James Truslow Adams

Introduction

Dating all the way back to the 1600s, the American Dream has remained a widespread ideal across America, symbolizing opportunity for all. In the late 1800s, people in many parts of the world were coming into the US in record numbers, many sick or dying because of the journey, with the American Dream in their eyes and hearts. This ideal has become more controversial, though, in recent times, as the majority of millennials do not believe in the American Dream anymore (Bump). What was once the land of endless opportunity and a chance for everyone to achieve success is now questioned and many are skeptical of its reality. The idea of endless economic opportunity in America is examined now more than ever, as college students are graduating with crippling debt and inequality still exists for minorities. The American Dream has become a talking point among many politicians and its relevancy in today’s society is stronger than ever. The change in perceptions of the American Dream is seen over time, with regard to age, party identification, and more. Each variable is integral in one’s understanding of the American Dream and will be explored further throughout this paper.

A survey has been conducted for the purpose of this paper, with 972 respondents from across the United States commenting on a variety of questions regarding the American Dream. In total, six questions were asked within Boston University’s Attitudes and Opinions Survey. Respondents were required to define the American Dream, comment on economic opportunity across generations, and reflect on the media’s portrayal of America. The results will be used in comparison with a variety of different variables, specifically age, party

identification, and opinion on the news to uncover the change in perceptions of the American Dream.

Literature Review

The American Dream is an ideal interpreted in a variety of different ways. Many associate the American Dream with equal opportunity for all, while others view it through one's freedoms. James Truslow Adams, the man responsible for coining this national ethos in his book, *The Epic of America*, defined it as "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each accounting to his ability or achievement" (Adams 404). Its origin began as early as the mid-1600s, as "the opportunities of the New World were painted in glowing colors, and those who were sinking in the social and economic scales in England began to look toward it as a land of refuge and of hope" (Adams 30). The dream was fueled by an economic motive that was "unquestionably powerful, often dominant, in the minds of those who took part in the great migration, but mixed with this was also frequently present the hope of a better and a freer life, a life in which a man might think as he would and develop as he willed" (Adams 31). The central theme as Adams' defines the American Dream in his book is the ability to attain success in America regardless of one's status in society. He claims that although it may seem like it at times, the dream "is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position" (Adams 31). This is a sentiment first noted by Adams but engraved in the minds and hearts of Americans throughout generations. Adams does display some doubt in the American Dream, though, and admits "it is a difficult

dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it” (Adams 404). Although Adams believes the “dream has been realized more fully in actual life [in America] than anywhere else, [it is indeed] very imperfect among ourselves” (Adams 405). As powerful and significant the dream has become throughout American history, it presents limitations that many Americans recognize.

Based on personal experience, familial background, and so much more, a person’s idea of the American Dream varies greatly, making the topic divisive and complex. The idea of the dream has evolved throughout history, and may mean something different today than it did at its beginning. In the 1970s, when Richard Nixon was president he is quoted saying the “American Dream does not come to those that fall asleep” (Nixon 1969), while Ronald Reagan said while in office that “the American Dream is not that every man must be level with every other man. The American Dream is that every man must be free to become whatever God intends he should become” (Reagan 1993). In present time, throughout her campaign, Kamala Harris expressed the difference in interpretation of the American Dream, insinuating it was a partisan disparity, saying “Mitt Romney subscribes to the cynical logic that says the American Dream belongs to some of us but not all of us” (Harris 2012). In the end, everyone’s understanding and interpretation of the ideal differs, sometimes significantly, and has evolved greatly from its start in James Truslow Adams’ book *The Epic of America*.

As James Truslow Adams explained in his book, *The Epic of America*, the American Dream is defined in a number of ways, with one facet including the ability to succeed “regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.” He defined what the American Dream is and provided his readers and the public an opportunity to believe in success for everyone. Like what often occurs with the introduction of many ideas, the public

has interpreted Adams' definition numerous different ways, which has led to a diversity in beliefs of what the dream really is, which is expressed throughout research in Political Science. In Leslie McCall's book, *The Underserving Rich*, she writes that "American beliefs are multidimensional, with a bedrock foundation of individualism overlaid with a layer of skepticism about whether the playing field is level in practice" (McCall 153-154). This greatly summarizes the American Dream debate and explains the disparity in opinions of the American Dream in society. An article published in *The Washington Post* estimated that "48% of millennials think the American Dream is dead" (Bump 2015). Part of this can be explained through the skepticism McCall reports regarding inequality of opportunity. She writes that "although Americans extol their country as the land of opportunity in principle, many believe it fails to live up to this promise in practice", which could be due to a number of things, including "barriers to greater opportunity bound up with barriers to greater equality" (McCall 182). There is a widespread belief that inequality of opportunity puts the American Dream at risk, and is a great factor in millennials' growing doubt in the dream.

Inequality of opportunity is a topic intertwined with many issues facing the United States, one involving economic upward mobility and consequently, attitudes towards the American Dream. This idea is discussed at length in James R. Kluegel and Eliot R. Smith's book, *Beliefs About Inequality: Americans' Views of What Is and What Ought to Be*. Kluegel and Smith conducted a questionnaire regarding the availability of opportunity in America, and included in this summary of their assessments was a question concerning general opportunity from the 1952 National Election Survey and 1966 survey of Muskegon, Michigan. The results were "judged by the percentage who endorse the statement that 'there's plenty of opportunity, and anyone who works hard can go as far as he wants'"

(Kluegel 44). The results showed that there was a decline in the strength of belief in opportunity from 1952 to 1966. Kluegel and Smith conducted their own survey in 1986, where they asked a “question that closely parallels that asked in 1952 and 1966 in its incorporation of the statement that ‘everyone who works hard can get ahead’” (Kluegel 44). In this survey, it was found that approximately 70% of respondents agreed with the statement, showing the “strength of belief in the prevalence of opportunity in general has continued to decline” throughout time, as 88% of respondents agreed in 1952 and 78% of respondents agreed in 1966 (Kluegel 45). Despite the steady decline in confidence in opportunity, there is still a vast majority of Americans who believe in fair opportunity in the country. Kluegel and Smith show the trends in views of opportunity and prove there is a decline within society, and they attribute this decline in part to “growing skepticism about the value of education as a means to economic advancement” and “from perceptions that certain groups of Americans lack equal opportunity” (Kluegel 72). Yet, the results from the survey show the optimism still shared among Americans regarding opportunity, with 70% believing in fairness of opportunity. Overall these analyses show that the traditional American optimism about opportunity for economic advancement is “alive and quite well” despite the steady decline (Kluegel 73).

This same idea explored by Kluegel and Smith is tested in Kay Lehman Schlozman and Sidney Verba’s essay, “Class Consciousness and the American Dream”, where a number of questions were asked to respondents in the 1980s regarding economic mobility and the American Dream. Schlozman and Verba define the American Dream as the “belief in individual opportunity for success” (Schlozman and Verba 104). They found that “the American Dream of success has undergone significant alteration in the last century” and

strive to uncover why (Schlozman and Verba 105). Schlozman and Verba decided to explore two relationships: the relationship between occupation level and one's belief in the American Dream, and the relationship between age and one's belief in the American Dream. When testing occupational level versus a person's belief in the American Dream, there was some, but not much variance going from low occupation level to high (109). But, when testing the relationship between age and belief in the American Dream, there was significant difference across ages. When asked to report on the validity of the statement, "The chances for success are distributed fairly", 30% of respondents' under 30 agreed, while more than double the percentage, 63%, agreed for respondents' 55 and over (109). The difference in response depending on age is very telling in the confidence Americans have in inequality of opportunity, as younger respondents were significantly more pessimistic. In addition, when asked to report on fairness of opportunity, 58% of respondents answered it is "unfair", with only 42% responding "fair" (107). Although they are not directly answering the question of whether or not they believe in the American Dream, these results are telling of their perception of Adam's statement in *The Epic of America* and how there is doubt among young Americans that everyone can succeed regardless of "birth or position" after all.

In the 1980s, when Schlozman and Verba conducted their research, the majority of Americans believed that there was unfairness in opportunity. But, there was an overwhelming consensus among the respondents that "the most important factor in determining who gets ahead" is "hard work" (107). What is critical in this study and what translates into present day mindset is two additional questions asked. The first idea respondents were asked to comment on was the "chances for the child of a factory worker to become a business executive or a professional", where the majority of respondents believed

there was “a good chance” (107). But, the follow-up statement was the “chances for the child of a factory worker to get ahead relative to those for the child of a business executive”, and the majority of respondents believed there was “somewhat less” of a chance (107). This is very telling of the perspective of inequality of opportunity during this time and the mindset that has been seen in society today, where there is still belief in the ability to succeed with hard work, but there is an underlying layer of doubt in fairness of opportunity for everyone.

Research in the 50s, 60s, and 80s was conducted regarding the attitudes on fairness of opportunity in America. But, does one’s belief about economic opportunity in America align with their belief in the American Dream today? Many authors have discussed each variable individually and the impact of these beliefs in society, but do they influence one another? These are the questions uncovered through a survey conducted by Boston University, further exploring these issues in present day America.

Research Design

Research question: How do Americans view the American Dream today and what factors influence their beliefs?

Hypothesis 1: Americans view the American Dream with passion and emotion today, but there is a clear increase in pessimism regarding the dream.

Hypothesis 2: The variables age, party identification, and how someone views the news media will have the greatest impact on how an American views the American Dream in society today.

In addition to the work done by Political Science scholars on past perceptions of the American Dream and economic inequality, it was necessary to conduct a survey regarding these issues in present time to accurately analyze Americans’ opinions today. Through Boston University’s survey titled “Attitudes and Opinions”, there were six questions asked to 972 respondents across the United States that are specifically in regards to this paper and aim

to answer my research question. In addition to the six questions asked to each respondent, eight questions designed to understand the respondent's background were asked at the beginning of the survey and are used in my data. The question that was attempted to answer through the survey is how age, party identification, and a number of other variables measured impact respondents' answers to questions on economic opportunity and the American Dream. One caveat to note is that the majority of respondents reported themselves identifying as Democrats. 452 respondents were Democrats, 262 were independents, and 258 were Republicans. This is important to note as there were nearly double the number of Democrats as there were Republicans in the survey, serving as a potential bias.

The first question asked regarding these topics was, "Is there more economic opportunity for an 18-year-old now than there was for an 18-year-old 50 years ago?" Then, respondents were asked to explain "why or why not?", based on their answer of yes or no. Respondents were then asked to answer yes or no to the question, "Do you believe in the American Dream?". They were prompted to explain their answer, and define the American Dream themselves. These questions were asked to properly gauge not just the respondents' opinions on economic opportunity in America and the American Dream, but also how they would define these subjects and their justifications behind the answers. This was important to include in the survey because everyone has their own definition of the American Dream and interprets the subject differently, so the definition and answer will better describe the disparity in responses.

In addition, two other variables tested in the survey were regarding the news media. This was with the aim of understanding whether the media had any influence on the respondents' answers to the questions on economic opportunity and the American Dream.

The first question asked, “How often do you watch the news/view the news on the internet?”, with responses ranging from every day to less than once a month. The question on how often each person watches the news will show if the media could potentially have an influence on respondents’ attitudes. If most respondents report that they watch the news often, it could cause a change in responses to the other questions, and if they do not watch the news then this variable will not be valid. In the same vein, another question was asked regarding the news, specifically, “How do you believe the news portrays issues in America?”. Respondents were prompted to answer either pessimistic or optimistic, to get a sense of how Americans view the media compared to how much they watch the news. What is shown on the news and the tone used has great impact on the attitude of the country as this is how most people are informed about the state of America, and including these two questions focused on the news could be telling of how they answered the questions on economic opportunity and the American Dream, along with the other variables measured such as age, race, gender, party identification, and more.

The data set attained from the survey includes both numerical results and short answer responses. It was necessary to include both types of responses for the purpose of this paper to further identify the differing interpretations of the American Dream, how someone views economic opportunity in society today, and examine the topics deeper than just a yes or no answer. The purpose of the survey is to uncover peoples’ beliefs about these issues today and understand possible reasoning and effects of their opinion through different variables. This is done not just from numerical data points, but open-ended responses to analyze the emotion rooted in the response and common words used in the answers.

The analysis of the data obtained includes correlations between variables as well as various bivariate regressions and multivariate regressions to test my hypothesis and measure its validity. Throughout the data analysis, each test was conducted to see if there was indeed a relationship between how someone felt about economic opportunity today versus 50 years ago for an 18-year-old, and that same person's belief in the American Dream, based on a variety of different variables. The aim of the survey is to measure the relationship between the two variables, and by using regression analysis and a number of graphs, the results are extremely telling.

Data Analysis

To properly analyze all 972 responses to a variety of questions, many different tests were run and Stata was used to display the results in an organized and effective manner. The two questions aimed to be the dependent variables in the survey were the questions "Is there more economic opportunity for an 18-year-old now than there was for an 18-year-old 50 years ago?" and "Do you believe in the American Dream?". With these two questions being the most telling, their mean, standard deviation, minimum response, and maximum response are displayed below to give an overview of the responses. For the question regarding economic opportunity, an answer of "no" to the question of "Is there more economic opportunity for an 18-year-old now than there was for an 18-year-old 50 years ago?" is coded as 1 and an answer of "yes" is coded as 2. For the variable regarding the American Dream, an answer of "no" to the question "Do you believe in the American Dream?" is coded as 1, an answer of "unsure/maybe" is coded as 2, and an answer of "yes" is coded as 3.

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Economic Opportunity	972	1.6893	.4630183	1	2
Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
American Dream	972	2.3817	.8773345	1	3

In addition, the two independent variables were compared to the dependent variables age and party identification in order to answer my research question. Another important variable in this analysis is a respondent's answer to the question "Is the news media pessimistic or optimistic?" These variables were part of the original research question and are assumed to have the most impact on a respondent's answer to the two questions asked. The summary of these three variables is also displayed below. For the variable "age", respondents between 18-34 are coded 1, those 35-54 are coded 2, and respondents 55+ are coded 3. For "party identification", Democrats are coded as 1, Independents are coded as 2, and Republicans are coded as 3. For "opinion on news", those that believe the news is pessimistic are coded 1, respondents who answered unsure or neutral are coded 2, and answers of optimistic are coded 3.

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Age	1,385	1.498917	.6672827	1	3

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Party Identification	972	1.800412	.8314616	1	3

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Opinion on News	972	1.91975	.9343765	1	3

To further analyze the data, a correlation was run to test if the three variables, age, party identification, and opinion on the news had a relationship with the two dependent variables. Age, party identification, and opinion on news were used to properly analyze the research question and the results are below. For the dependent variable of economic opportunity, there was a positive correlation for all three independent variables. For “age”, the older the respondent, the more likely they are to believe there is more economic opportunity today for an 18-year-old than there was 50 years ago. For the variable “Party Identification”, the more Republican the respondent, the more likely they are to believe there is more economic opportunity today for an 18-year-old than there was 50 years ago. For the variable “Opinion on News”, the more optimistic a respondent believes the news is, the more likely they were to believe there is more economic opportunity for an 18-year-old than there was 50 years ago (and vice versa).

	Economic Opportunity	Age	Party ID	Opinion on News
Economic Opportunity	1.0000			
Age	0.0918	1.0000		
Party Identification	0.0180	0.0746	1.0000	
Opinion on News	0.0732	-0.0690	-0.0604	1.0000

The correlations for the variable regarding the American Dream are negative as well. For the “age” variable, the older the respondent, the more likely they believe in the American Dream. For the “party identification” variable, the more Republican the respondent, the more likely they believe in the American Dream. And, for the “opinion on news” variable, the more

optimistic the respondent thinks the news is, the more likely they believe in the American Dream.

	American Dream	Age	Party ID	Opinion on News
American Dream	1.0000			
Age	0.1489	1.0000		
Party Identification	0.0834	0.0746	1.0000	
Opinion on News	0.0977	-0.0690	-0.0604	1.0000

An additional correlation test was run to display all the independent and dependent variables together. There is a positive correlation between a respondents' belief in the American Dream and their belief that there is more economic opportunity now for an 18-year-old than there was 50 years ago, meaning respondents who did believe there is more economic opportunity today were more likely to believe in the American Dream, and vice versa.

	American Dream	Economic Opp.	Age	Party ID	Opinion on News
American Dream	1.000				
Economic Opportunity	0.1731	1.0000			
Age	0.1489	0.0918	1.0000		
Party ID	0.0834	0.0180	0.0746	1.0000	
Opinion on News	0.0977	0.0732	-0.0690	-0.0604	1.0000

In addition to the correlations done, a regression analysis is displayed below with each independent variable measured in the survey to show each variables effect on respondents' answers to the dependent variable questions. The coefficients and standard errors are shown and are telling as to how each variable causes a person's response to the questions on

economic opportunity and the American Dream. Although the coefficients for each regression are not particularly high, there is indeed a relationship between the variables and their influence shown. Aside from the dependent variables' relationship with one another, age has the highest influence on the answer to both questions about economic opportunity and the American Dream, with coefficients of 0.0612 and 0.188 respectively. The second most significant variable in the analysis is the variable, "Opinion on News", with coefficients of 0.03692 and 0.09174 respectively. Also, the variable "Vote in 2016 election" shows significance with coefficients of -0.03796 and -0.08819 respectively. The variable "Party Identification" is used instead throughout this analysis because it too has significance shown through the regression and the coding of the variable is easier to show respondents' party preference. The coding for "vote in 2016 election" is not in chronological order with a range of most liberal candidate to the most conservative candidate, so "party identification" better represents this variable in the analysis. The regression analysis is shown on Page 19 in the charts for questions about both economic opportunity and the American Dream.

Economic Opportunity Regression Analysis	Coefficient	Standard Error
Age	0.06108	0.0213
Race	0.01595	0.0132
Gender	0.00769	0.0326
Education	0.0161	0.01396
Party identification	0.01002	0.0179
Ideology	0.01321	0.01506
Vote in 2016 election	-0.03796	0.01223
Income	0.01349	0.0155
How often someone watches news	-0.01452	0.0093
Opinion on News	0.03629	0.01587
American Dream	0.09134	0.01669

American Dream Regression Analysis	Coefficient	Standard Error
Age	0.1879	0.04
Race	-0.0189	0.0249
Gender	0.011	0.0618
Education	0.0415	0.0264
Party identification	0.08796	0.0338
Ideology	-0.05121	0.0285
Vote in 2016 election	-0.0882	0.02311
Income	0.08101	0.0293
How often someone watches news	-0.0666	0.0175
Opinion on News	0.09174	0.03000
Economic Opportunity	0.32795	0.05997

As seen in the regression analysis above, the dependent variable “American Dream” had higher coefficients for each independent variable than “Economic Opportunity”, and it is a stronger dependent variable that is more telling. The coefficient for the regression of economic opportunity versus American Dream is significant at 0.32795, and even more telling than the coefficient of 0.09134 for the regression of American Dream versus economic opportunity. Therefore, I decided to focus on the “American Dream” variable and run a multivariate regression using “Economic Opportunity” as well as the three variables age, party identification, and opinion of news used throughout. The multivariate regression analysis is shown below using economic opportunity and all three of the variables in three different tables. The R^2 values are included in the tables, and although they are relatively low, there is evidence that belief in the American Dream is influenced by these variables.

Multivariate Regression Analysis of American Dream Using Economic Opportunity and Age		
	Coefficient	Standard Error
Age	0.16926	0.0397
Economic Opportunity	0.30462	0.0596
R-squared = 0.0478		
Multivariate Regression Analysis of American Dream Using Economic Opportunity and Party Identification		
	Coefficient	Standard Error
Party identification	0.08470	0.0333
Economic Opportunity	0.32522	0.0598
R-squared = 0.0364		
Multivariate Regression Analysis of American Dream Using Economic Opportunity and Opinions on News		
	Coefficient	Standard Error
Is news Pessimistic or Optimistic	0.0803	0.0297
Economic Opportunity	0.3161	0.0599
R-squared = 0.0372		

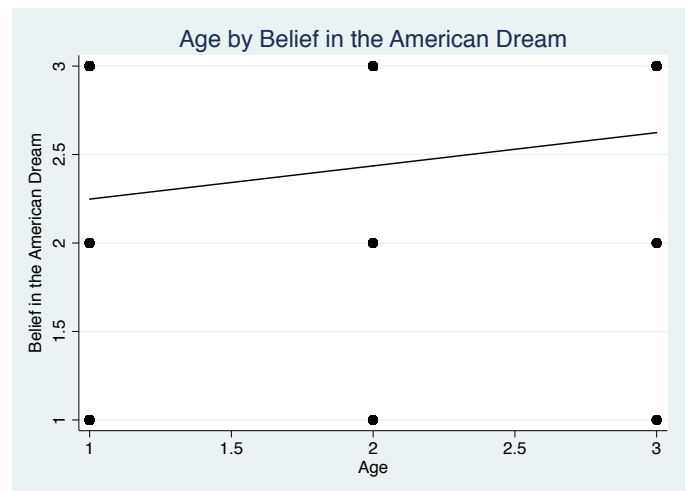
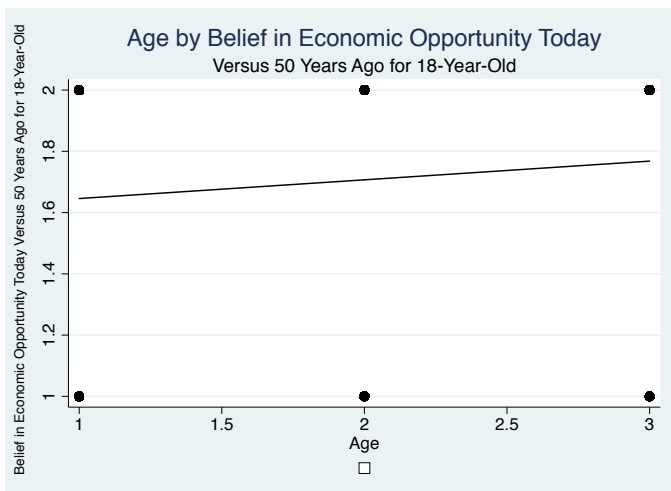
Furthermore, graphs were created using the data from the variables “age”, “party identification”, and “opinion on news” to compare them to the two dependent variables in the analysis. In the graph “Age by the American Dream”, the relationship between age and respondents’ belief in the American Dream is shown with a linear prediction line. The graph shows a strong positive relationship between the variables. The x-axis is coded with numbers from 1-3, 1 being respondents aged 18-34, 2 being respondents aged 35-54, and 3 being respondents 55+. The y-axis is coded with numbers from 1-3, 1 being an answer of “no”, 2 being an answer of “unsure/maybe”, and 3 being an answer of “yes”. The graph “Age by Belief in Economic Opportunity Today Versus 50 Years Ago for 18-Year-Old” shows the relationship between age and respondents’ belief of whether or not there is more opportunity

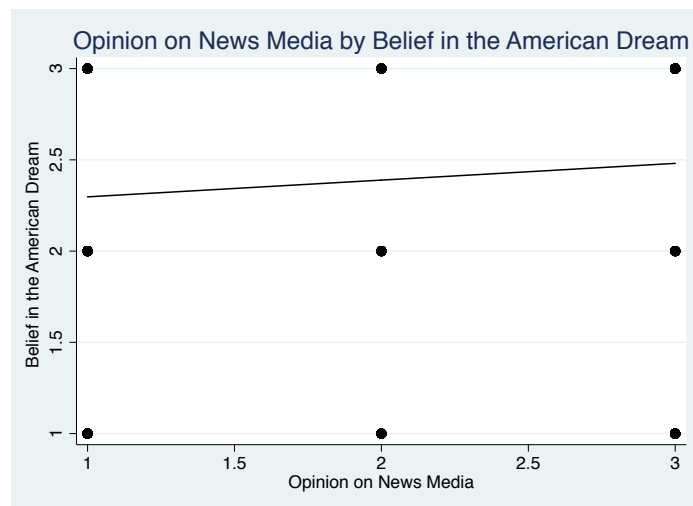
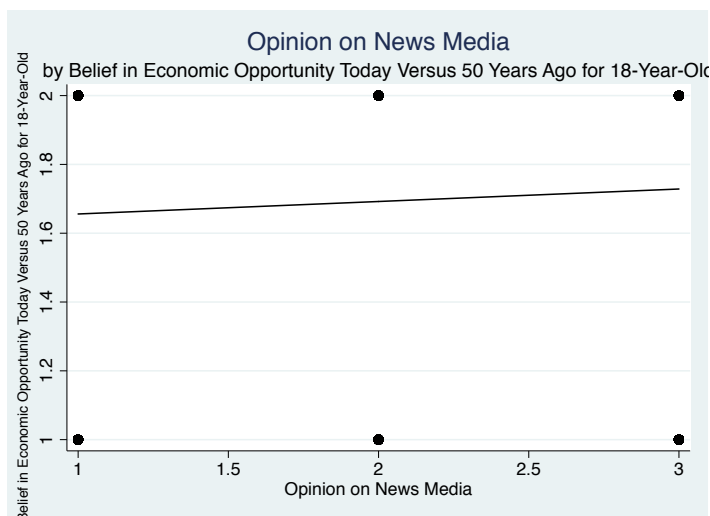
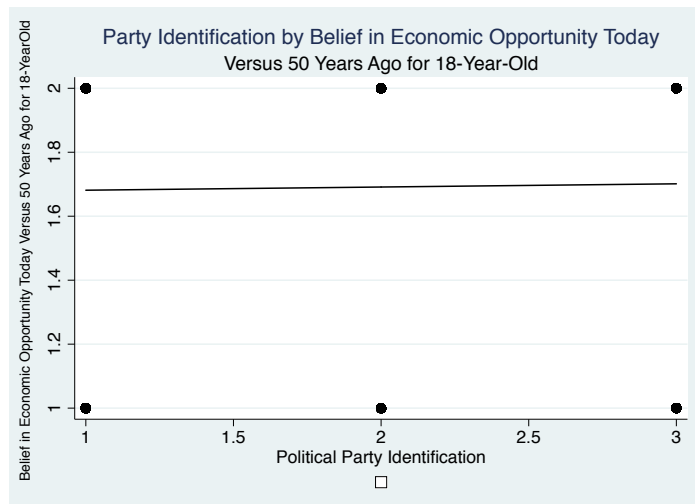
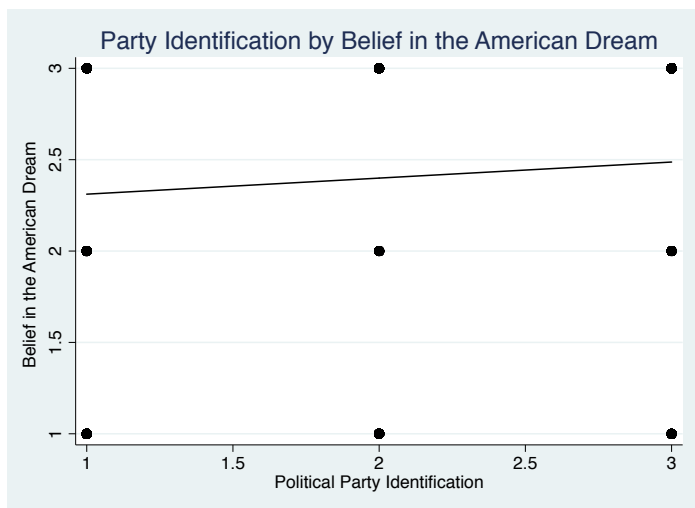
for an 18-year-old today than there was 50 years ago. The graph shows a positive relationship between the variables. The x-axis is coded with numbers from 1-3 as well, 1 being respondents aged 18-34, 2 being respondents aged 35-54, and 3 being respondents 55+. The y-axis is coded with numbers from 1-2, 1 being an answer of “no” and 2 being an answer of “yes”.

The graph “Party Identification by Belief in the American Dream” shows the relationship between party identification and respondents’ belief in the American Dream, and displays a positive relationship. The x-axis is coded with numbers from 1-3, 1 being respondents who identify as Democrats, 2 being Independent respondents, and 3 being respondents who identify as Republicans. The y-axis is coded with numbers from 1-3, 1 being an answer of “no”, 2 being an answer of “unsure/maybe”, and 3 being an answer of “yes”. The graph “Party Identification by Belief in Economic Opportunity Today Versus 50 Years Ago for 18-Year-Old” shows the relationship between party identification and respondents’ belief in whether or not there is more opportunity for an 18-year-old today than there was 50 years ago. The graph shows a positive relationship as well. The x-axis is coded with numbers from 1-3, 1 being respondents who identify as Democrats, 2 being Independent respondents, and 3 being respondents who identify as Republicans. The y-axis is coded with numbers from 1-2, 1 being an answer of “no” and 2 being an answer of “yes”.

The last two graphs shown are regarding the variable “Opinion on News”. In the graph “Opinion on News by the American Dream”, the relationship between the respondents’ feelings towards the news media and their belief in the American Dream is shown with a linear prediction line. The graph shows a positive relationship between the variables. The x-axis is coded with numbers from 1-3, 1 being respondents who think the news is pessimistic,

2 being respondents who are unsure or neutral, and 3 being respondents who believe the media is optimistic. The y-axis is coded with numbers from 1-3 as well, 1 being an answer of “no”, 2 being an answer of “unsure/maybe”, and 3 being an answer of “yes”. The graph “Opinion on News by Belief in Economic Opportunity Today Versus 50 Years Ago for 18-Year-Old” shows the relationship between respondents’ feelings towards the news and respondents’ belief of whether or not there is more opportunity for an 18-year-old today than there was 50 years ago. The graph shows a positive relationship between the variables. The x-axis is coded with numbers from 1-3 as well, 1 being respondents who think the news is pessimistic, 2 being respondents who are unsure or neutral, and 3 being respondents who believe the media is optimistic. The y-axis is coded with numbers from 1-2, 1 being an answer of “no” and 2 being an answer of “yes”. The six graphs explained are displayed below.





In addition to the quantitative data analysis done including correlation analysis, bivariate regression analysis, and multivariate regressions analysis, the survey conducted included open ended questions allowing for qualitative analysis as well. To properly analyze all 972 open ended responses to two different questions, key words were searched for that relate to the overall research question. A follow-up question to what was asked regarding economic opportunity for an 18-year-old today versus 50 years ago allowed respondents to explain their answer of “yes” or “no”. There were a number of common responses including

similar key words and phrases, depending on their answer of either “yes” or “no”. 670 respondents believe there is more economic opportunity today for an 18-year-old than there was 50 years ago, one of the most common explanations being technology. One respondent who answered “yes” explained that “this is the technology age and there is so much more opportunity”, while another respondent said “the invention of social media and technology have opened numerous doors for young people to become more successful”. These responses including technology as an explanation for their answer of “yes” occurred 68 times within the 972 responses, with 73 responses total as 5 people believed the advancement of technology has caused less economic opportunity. Another common response by people who said “yes” to the economic opportunity question was regarding education, with one respondent saying “an 18-year old can be higher educated than an 18-year old 50 years ago”, while someone else said “more schooling is more readily available today”. The term “education” appeared in the responses 52 times, with 34 responses including education in their explanation of their answer of “yes”. In addition, some responses including education referenced women in particular, with one respondent saying “women can get better education, enter more types of employment then they could 50 yrs ago”. 23 different respondents believed that more opportunities for women and minorities in the workplace have led to greater economic opportunities for 18-year-olds now, one person even referencing “the Me Too movement” in their response.

On the contrary, 602 respondents believe there is not more economic opportunity for 18-year-olds now than there was 50 years ago, referencing many different reasoning. One of the most common answers had to do with the economy, answering “bad economy” and “less good paying jobs for 18 year olds”. Another common answer was in regards to education,

and unlike the answers supporting a “yes” response, some people believed “the idea that you have to have a college degree to get any job above working manual labor or in fast food is elitist”, as one respondent explained. 22 different respondents mentioned either education or college debt in their reasoning for answering “no”. Also, there was a significant number of respondents who answered “I don’t know” or “not sure”. 53 respondents admitted they were not sure about whether or not there is more economic opportunity today, but still responded “yes” or “no”, which may have affected the overall results. But, in the end the majority of respondents do believe there is more economic opportunity today for an 18-year-old than there was 50 years ago, citing a variety of different reasons.

In addition to the open-ended question regarding economic opportunity, there were two additional questions asking for a response about the American Dream. The first question was similar to the economic opportunity question, where respondents were asked “Do you believe in the American Dream?” and prompted to answer either “yes” or “no”, and then explain why/why not. Out of the 972 respondents, only 220 actually explained their answer. Some responses were “not sure” or “just do”/ “just don’t”, while others were more descriptive. Many people referenced freedom in their reasoning for believing in the American Dream, with one respondent saying “everyone should pursue life liberty and the pursuit of happiness just not at the expense of someone else”. Other explanations mentioned motivation and believe “it can happen if you are motivated”. For answers of “no”, people often responded with passion, arguing it’s “dead” because “there’s so much struggle for so many immigrants and Americans. The system is not in the peoples’ favor”. The words “dead” and “joke” came up a couple of times, with passion in the responses. The biggest reason for respondents answering “no” was in regards to minorities. There were many

responses saying “the American Dream is not for people of color” and one representative comment of this sentiment is: “The American Dream, I feel only applies to whites, Asians and other foreigners, while black Americans and poor whites are living the American nightmare by living in continuous poverty with no potential upward mobility”. Lastly, 22 responses to this question include “Trump” in their definition or explanation of the American Dream. President Donald Trump is used negatively in the explanations, with respondents saying “I once believed in the dream but do no longer because of President Trump” and “things were on track but they have taken a big step backward since Trump took office”. Overall, respondents’ answers to whether or not they believe in the American Dream often had passion behind them and although many were unsure why they chose their response, the people that did had an explanation that was strong and opinionated.

The last open-ended question asked was “How do you define the American Dream?” in order to measure what the dream means to each person and understand whether their definition affects their beliefs. Most respondents confused this question from the previous one asking to explain their belief in the American Dream, and explains the 220 out of 972 responses to the question. Nevertheless, the common definition for someone who believes in the American Dream, or even someone who doesn’t is “anything is possible” and “success attainable if you work for it”. The majority of respondents (630) do indeed believe in the American Dream, with just 259 not believing. This is reflective in both the explanation of their responses but also each respondents’ definition of the American Dream as most people were unsure and had doubt in its reality but still believed in the overarching idea of the American Dream.

Conclusion and Discussion

My hypothesis was proven true through the data analysis of the survey, as the three most impactful variables on the dependent variables were indeed age, party identification (vote in the 2016 election), and opinion on how the news portrays the country. I originally believed in this hypothesis because I predicted that millennials would have more doubt about economic opportunity in America and have more doubt in the American Dream. I also thought Republicans would be more likely to believe in the American Dream as seen through Trump's entire campaign. The possible bias of many more Democrats taking the survey than Republican may have impacted the data, and with a Republican in office now, I would be excited to conduct this survey while a Democrat was in office to compare the differences.

In addition, what I was most interested and excited to see through the survey was how Americans' perception of the media influenced their belief in the dream. There was significant evidence to show people who thought the news was pessimistic were more likely to not believe in economic opportunity today and discount the American Dream. The media's influence on public opinion is undeniable, and Eunji Kim's essay, "Entertaining Beliefs in Economic Mobility", uniquely tests its influence. Kim's Media & Culture survey she conducted supported his hypothesis that "rags-to-riches entertainment media shapes beliefs in the prospect of upward economic mobility" (Kim 20). She also used a "mobile media laboratory" where she drove around in a van and showed respondents different rags-to-riches TV shows, including *Shark Tank*, *America's Got Talent*, and more. Kim found that "exposure to rags-to-riches entertainment media increases people's beliefs in upward economic mobility" (Kim 27). Kim successfully shows the power of media in evoking emotion in Americans and convincing them of a specific issue. This study inspired me to

include a question on the news media to see if the way someone views the news media had an impact on their optimism in America, and my findings were very similar to Kim's. As a whole, the survey conducted through Boston University displayed the influence of many different variables on a person's belief in the American Dream, the biggest being their belief in economic opportunity today.

The previous research conducted by political scientists about economic opportunity in the United States, the American Dream, and how the public views both issues displays the significance of these issues in the hearts of Americans throughout history. The survey conducted through Boston University and the analysis done using three main variables successfully answered my research question and showed its continuing worth in society today. Countless respondents referenced President Trump or current issues when discussing their opinions, which is something not accounted for in the research by political scientists. The passion and emotion seen through many responses regarding the American Dream reflects its relevance in society and why so many politicians constantly discuss the topic in their speeches to incite this same emotion in the public.

The topics analyzed throughout the survey are integral throughout political debate, and also throughout many politicians' campaigns, as it is often used as a political tactic to resonate with the public. Although most stances made by candidates differ across party, candidates remained pretty consistent regarding their confidence in the American Dream throughout the 2016 presidential election. Discussing the dream, President Donald Trump proclaimed that "the American Dream is dead" and argued that "Obama has destroyed the American Dream" during his campaign (Fox Business 2016). Similarly, Bernie Sanders said that "for many, the American Dream has become a nightmare" in a Senate speech he made

(Sanders 2007). Despite being on completely different sides of the political spectrum, both Trump and Sanders spoke about the American Dream pessimistically and used it as a political tactic to support their policies regarding the economy and immigration. The two candidates who were able to garner the most passionate voters, Trump and Sanders, were both outwardly opinionated about the American Dream and used it often.

The dream's relevance in the election shows James Truslow Adams' ideal is still at the hearts of millions of Americans. In the survey conducted, the vast majority of respondents reported they did believe in the American Dream, yet there were still many who had doubt or thought it was dead. Among millennials especially, there is growing doubt in the dream, and candidates have tapped into these emotions, vowing to "Make America Great Again" (Trump 2017) and exclaiming that the "American Dream is under attack" (Harris 2019). As Adams explains, "if the American Dream is to come true and to abide with us, it will, at bottom, depend on the people themselves" (Adams 410). It will always and forever depend on the people, and growing doubt poses a potential threat to the country. By the way many answered the survey questions and the constant discussion in political debates and campaigns, it seems clear that "the epic loses all its glory without the dream" as there is a constant need to protect and fight for this dream (Adams 412). Indeed, only time will tell.

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