Books

How Reality TV Oversells the American Dream

Shows like *American Idol* and *MasterChef* give viewers an inflated sense of their own economic prospects, finds Columbia political scientist Eunji Kim.

Winter 2025-26



Yuganov Konstantin / Shutterstock

Americans enjoy less economic mobility today than they have in decades, and far less than people in Canada and Western Europe. Yet we still believe in the American dream, with large percentages saying that anyone in the US can get ahead by working hard and playing by the rules.

One reason for the disconnect, according to Columbia political scientist Eunji Kim, is the television we watch. Her research shows that watching TV programs built around underdog success stories — especially reality shows like *American Idol*, *MasterChef*, and *Shark Tank*, which collectively draw tens of millions of viewers each season — is associated with having an inflated sense of your own economic prospects.

Past studies have shown that Americans' beliefs about our chances for success are most strongly influenced by where we live. But Kim's data, gathered in a series of large empirical studies, suggests that our choices of TV shows and movies may be even more important.

In a new book that collects her recent research on the topic, *The American Mirage*, Kim argues that scholars who study US public opinion tend to overlook the influence of popular entertainment and overemphasize issues like partisanship in the news media. Most Americans don't follow the news closely, she notes, but we do spend hours each day watching shows that shape their perceptions of the world.

"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," she writes. "The appeal of these rags-to-riches stories easily bypasses entrenched partisan loyalties, serving as a heavy counterweight to public understanding of economic reality."

This article appears in the Winter 2025-26 print edition of Columbia Magazine *with the title "Now streaming: The American dream."*

Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >