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**Perceptions of U.S. Social Mobility Are  
Divided (and Distorted) Along Ideological Lines**

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**Abstract**

The ability to move upward in social class or economic position (i.e., social mobility) is a defining feature of the “American Dream,” yet recent public opinion polls indicate that many Americans are losing confidence in the essential fairness of the system and their opportunities for financial advancement. In two studies, we examined Americans’ perceptions of both current levels of mobility in the U.S. and temporal trends in mobility, and compared them with objective indicators to determine perceptual accuracy. Overall, participants underestimated current mobility and erroneously concluded mobility has declined over the past four decades. These misperceptions were more pronounced among politically-liberal participants than among politically-moderate or conservative ones. These perception differences were accounted for by liberals’ (relative) dissatisfaction with the current social system and rejection of social hierarchies and inequality. The discussion addresses potential limitations of this research and implications for theories of political ideology.

## **Perceptions of U.S. Social Mobility Are Divided (and Distorted) Along Ideological Lines**

The “American Dream,” the notion that any individual can—with hard work, perseverance, and sound judgment—move up the social ladder, defines the United States’ national ethos. But data from multiple sources suggests that belief in unbounded social mobility is naïve. One’s starting position clearly predicts one’s finishing rank: the correlation between parent’s income level and their children’s income level later in life is approximately  $r = .5$  (Sawhill, 2008). In cross-national comparisons of intergenerational mobility rates, the United States falls at about the median, lagging behind many European nations including Denmark, France, and Sweden (Corak, 2006). Moreover, many are beginning to doubt that America is the “land of opportunity” envisaged by its founders: a recent Gallup poll (Dugan & Newport, 2013) found that only 52% of Americans agreed that there is plenty of opportunity for the average person to get ahead in life—down from 81% a mere 15 years earlier, and the lowest level in over six decades.

In addition, fewer Americans—including those in the middle class—believe they can maintain their standard of living, and are less hopeful that their children’s standard of living will surpass their own (Pew Center Report, 2012). Reflecting this belief in declining social mobility and growing inequality between social classes, the general public and many politicians have begun calling for legislative action, including President Obama in his (2014) State of the Union address. However, no research has actually checked the accuracy of these public perceptions. That there is little opportunity for upward advancement in America, and less opportunity now than in previous generations, is an assumption that many citizens seem to take for granted. But it is one worth investigating, given the wealth of research demonstrating how faulty our

perceptions of social and economic conditions can be, such as the level of wealth inequality that exists in the United States (Eriksson & Simpson, 2012; Norton & Ariely, 2011).

The publication of a recent, multi-decade report provided us with an opportunity to compare those public perceptions with economic reality. Chetty and colleagues (2014a; 2014b) compared the tax records of nearly 40 million American adults with those of their parents 20 years earlier, allowing them to assess changes in each individual's economic position relative to their starting point in life (i.e., their parent's economic position). Importantly, they also compared individuals born in different decades, from the early 1970's through the mid 1990's, to assess any generational changes in mobility patterns. First, they found (as have others: Hertz, 2007; Lee & Solon, 2009) that intergenerational mobility rates have not declined, but in fact remained *stable* during the three decade period they examined—contrary to popular belief (Dugan & Newport, 2013; Pew Center Report, 2012). Second, their data revealed that Americans enjoy—depending upon one's perspective—a substantial amount of social mobility. For example, of individuals born to parents in the bottom third of the income distribution (i.e., lower-class parents), 49% remained in the bottom third later in life, whereas 51% moved up to the middle or top third. In other words, despite their disadvantaged backgrounds, half of them were “upwardly mobile” (though still below the two-thirds one might expect based on the American Dream). Moreover, because they utilized much larger sample sizes, actual tax records (instead of self-reported income), and multiple indicators of mobility (e.g., incomes, college attendance rates), Chetty and colleagues' study yields more precise estimates of social mobility than prior studies, and their findings are consistent with other published reports (Pew Center Report, 2013; U.S. Department of Treasury, 2007). This makes their study the most appropriate standard to gauge our participants' perceptual accuracy.

We also aimed to test whether intuitions differ as a function of political ideology, and if so, how and *why*. Gallup polling (Dugan & Newport, 2013) has revealed that political ideology predicts beliefs about social mobility, suggesting that one ideological group's perceptions must be more distorted than the other's (see also Pew Center Report, 2012). And the social psychological literature describes a pair of complementary theories that make relevant predictions. System justification theory (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004) contends that people, especially conservatives, are motivated to defend the *status quo*, to view the existing social system as fair, just, and legitimate, and to engage in rationalizations to maintain that belief. Similarly, social dominance theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 2001) contends that people, especially conservatives, are motivated to promote and maintain social hierarchies, by rationalizing status differences between groups. According to both theories, one of the core rationalizations is that everyone has equal opportunity to get ahead, and therefore one's outcomes must reflect something about one's character or make-up (e.g., work ethic, ability) rather than constraints imposed by the system (e.g., resource disparities, discrimination). These two theories imply that conservatives, who are more satisfied than liberals with the *status quo* and accepting of inequality, should therefore see greater social mobility than there truly is.

On the other hand, there is good reason to suspect that ideological distortion may be bi-directional (Bartels, 2002; Frenda et al., 2013; Frimer, Gaucher, & Schaefer, in press; Graham, Nosek, & Haidt, 2012; Granberg & Brent, 1983; Kahan, 2013; Morgan, Mullen, & Skitka, 2010; Taber & Lodge, 2006, Toner et al., 2013; see also Tetlock & Mitchell, 1993). *Everyone* seeks to confirm his or her vision of reality—this confirmation bias represents a core aspect of human social cognition (Hart et al., 2009; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979). For instance, liberals, principally unhappy with inequality and the status quo, might well *underestimate* social mobility

for the same reasons theories predict that conservatives will overestimate it. The Gallup poll finding that liberals, more than conservatives, have lost faith in the general fairness of the economic system offers some support for this account (Dugan & Newport, 2013). So does evidence that liberals exaggerate income disparities between the rich and poor more than conservatives (Chambers, Swan, & Heesacker, 2014) and express greater pessimism about general economic conditions (Duch, Palmer, & Anderson, 2000). Moreover, liberals *disagree* more than conservatives that “hard work tends to bring success,” in which case they should tend to see less possibility of upward mobility (Feather, 1984; Schlenker, Chambers & Le, 2012).

In the present investigation, we assessed peoples’ perceptions of both current levels of social mobility in the U.S. (e.g., the percentage of Americans who migrate from one social class to another) and recent historical shifts in mobility (e.g., whether mobility in the U.S. has increased or declined over the past 40 years). We compared their perceptions with findings from Chetty and colleagues (2014a; 2014b) report to determine the extent of inaccuracy—if any—in participants’ social mobility perceptions. In addition, we assessed individual differences in political orientation, system justification, and social dominance orientation, permitting tests of whether conservatives *overestimate* mobility (as implied by system justification and social dominance theories), whether liberals *underestimate* mobility (as implied by research on whether hard work is believed to lead to success), or both (as implied by the bidirectional perspective).

## Study 1

### Method

**Sample and procedure.** We recruited 410 American adults from Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk, who were paid a small fee in compensation. Studies have consistently shown that MTurk users are more diverse and representative of the U.S. population than are

convenience samples of college undergraduates (Paolacci & Chandler, 2014) and produce high quality survey data (Buhrmeister, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). Power calculations determined that a minimum of 400 participants were needed to achieve a power level of .90, with an alpha level of .05 (one-tailed) and assuming small effect sizes ( $d = .3$ ). Thus, we recruited until we had attained this minimum sample size (oversampling in both Studies 1 and 2).

The survey was divided into three sections. In the first section, participants were told to imagine a group of American children (born in the early 1980s) to parents from one of three social classes (either the bottom, middle, or top third of the income distribution). They were then asked to estimate the percentage of children in that group who ended up in the bottom, middle, and top third of the income distribution by the time they reached their mid-20s, with their three category estimates constrained to total 100%. A graphic displaying a hypothetical “income ladder” accompanied the instructions to aid participants in making their judgments (see Appendix). This process was repeated until participants made judgments about all three “class at birth” categories (with order randomized by the survey software). Next, participants were asked whether (and in which direction) they believed social mobility in the United States had changed over the past 40 years (from 1= *greatly decreased*, 2= *slightly decreased*, 3= *stayed the same*, 4= *slightly increased*, 5= *greatly increased*).

The next section of the survey contained the eight-item system justification scale (Kay & Jost, 2003; sample items: “In general, you find society to be fair” and “Everyone has a fair shot at wealth and happiness”; 1= *strongly disagree* to 5= *strongly agree*) and the 14-item social dominance orientation scale (Pratto et al., 1994; sample items: “This country would be better off if we cared less about how equal all people were” and “Increased economic equality” [reverse coded]; 1= *very negative reaction* to 5= *strongly positive reaction*). Scores on the system

justification ( $\alpha = .87$ ) and social dominance orientation ( $\alpha = .94$ ) scales were each averaged, with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction with the current social system, and greater acceptance of social hierarchies and inequality. The final section assessed basic demographic characteristics, including political ideology (1 = *strongly liberal* to 5 = *strongly conservative*), age, gender, education level, household income, race/ethnicity, and political party affiliation.<sup>1</sup> Table 1 (supplementary materials) provides information on the demographic characteristics of our samples in Studies 1 and 2.

## Results

In the analyses examining ideological differences, which follow, ideology was treated as a continuous variable (using the full range of responses to the 5-point ideological self-description question). However, in certain cases we report focused comparisons between “conservatives” and “liberals” (and “moderates”), and for these we grouped participants who responded 1-2 (i.e., liberals) 3 (i.e., moderates) or 4-5 (i.e., conservatives) to the ideology question.

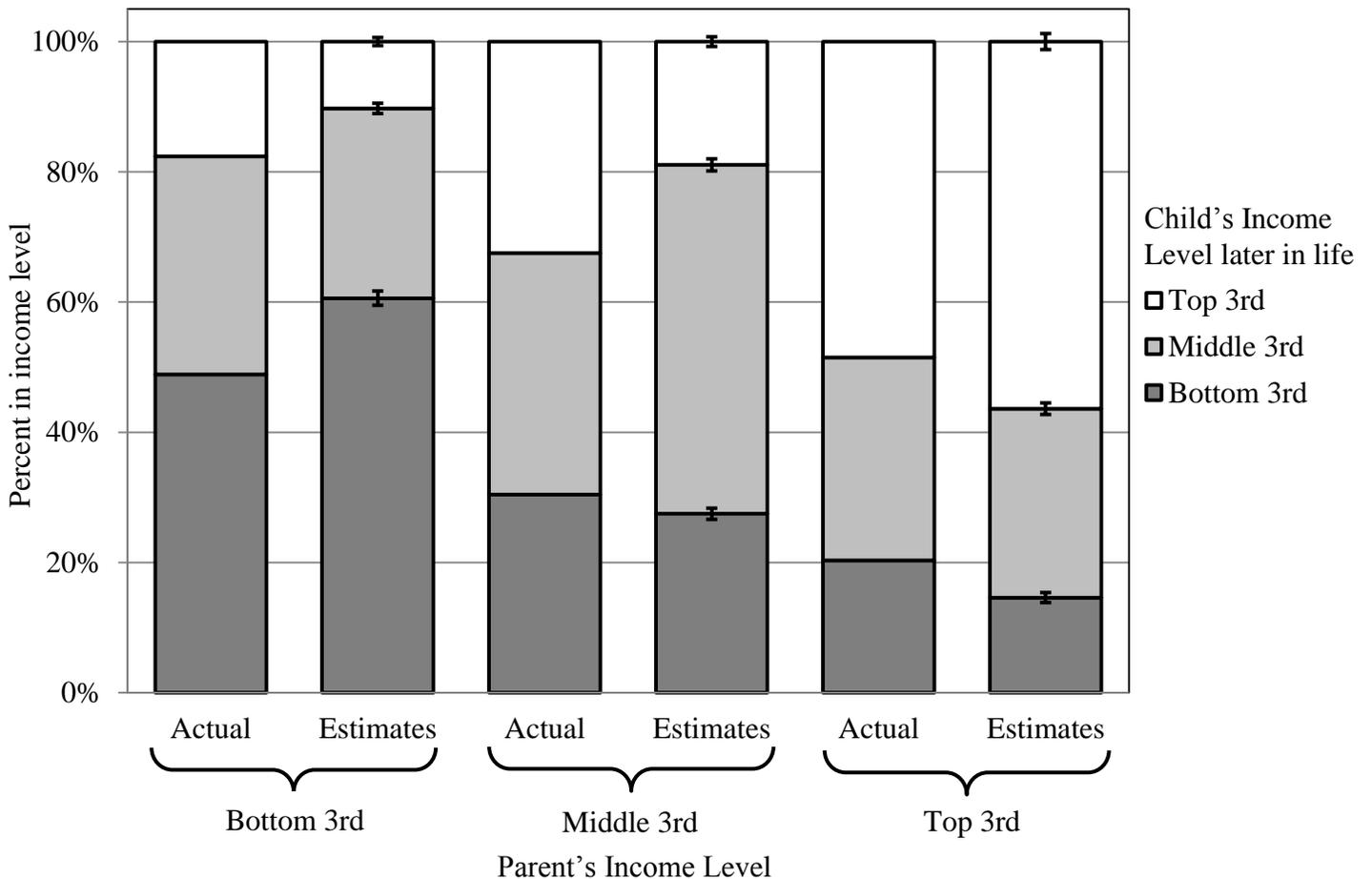
**Current Social Mobility.** We analyzed mobility judgments in a 3 (parent’s income level) X 3 (child’s income level) fully within-subjects ANOVA.<sup>2</sup> To control for any possible differences associated with participants’ age, gender, education level, household income, we included these variables as covariates.

The results, displayed in Figure 1, reveal an overall bias toward *underestimating* social mobility. That is, participants underestimated the number of individuals who were “upwardly” or “downwardly” mobile, transitioning later in life into a different social class from the one they were born into. Correspondingly, they overestimated the number of individuals who were socially *immobile*, that is, who remained in the same social class they were born into. For example, participants assumed that only 39% of individuals born to lower-class parents were

able to make it to the middle or upper classes later in life, when in reality 51% did so, and they assumed that 61% remained in the lower class, when in reality only 49% did so. Although participants underestimated social mobility in all three “class at birth” categories—individuals from lower-, middle-, and upper-class backgrounds—their perceptions were especially distorted regarding individuals from *middle-class* backgrounds, of whom they estimated only 46% transitioned to a different social class, compared to the actual figure of 65%. This pattern was confirmed by a 2-way interaction between parent’s and child’s income level on mobility estimates,  $F(4, 1620) = 5.99$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .02$ .

Figure 1

*Estimated (vs. actual) social mobility in Study 1*

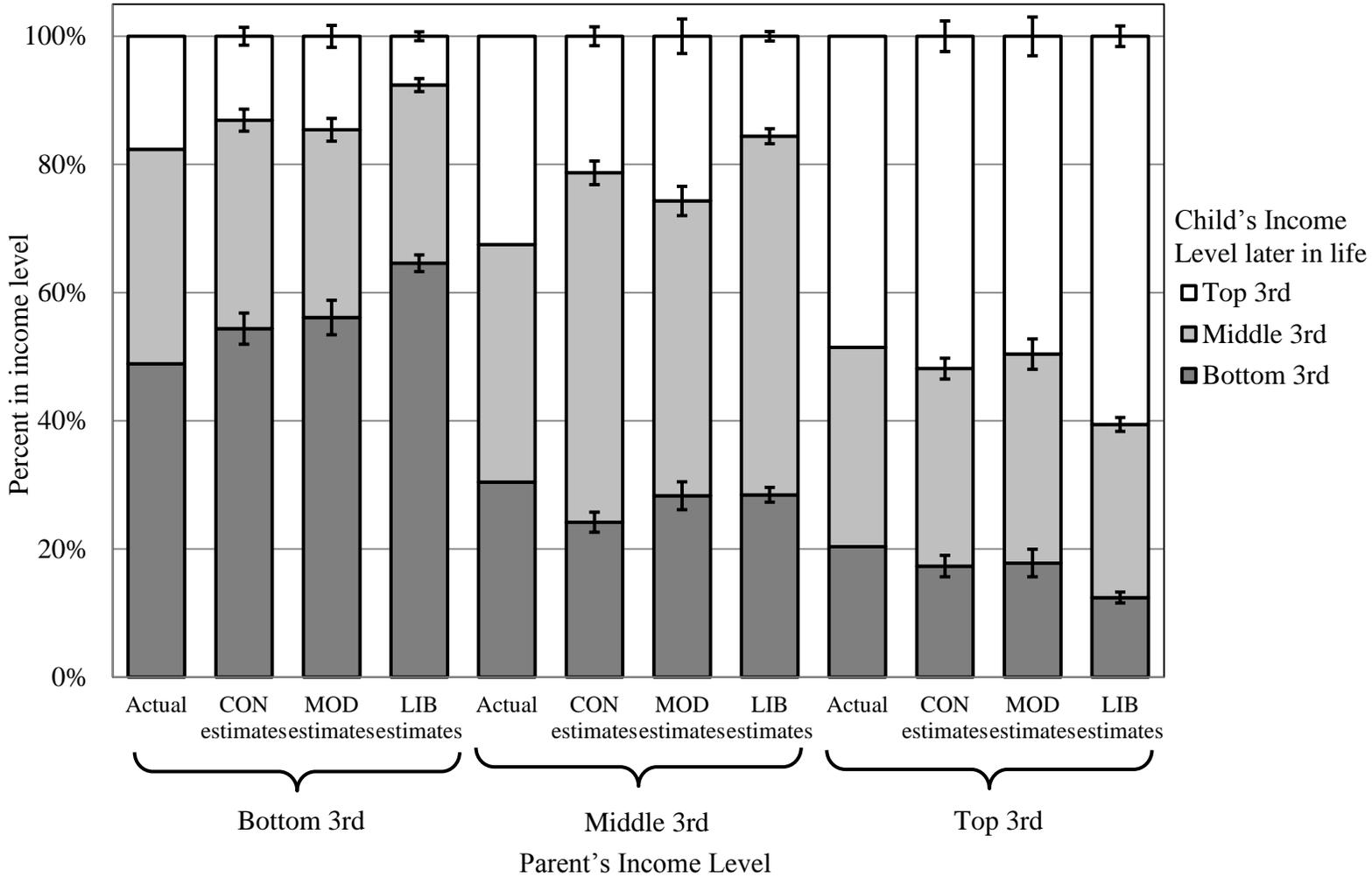


Note: Error bars represent standard errors around the mean estimates

As predicted, liberals and conservatives differed in their perceptions of current mobility (see Figure 2); the 2-way interaction mentioned above was qualified by a 3-way interaction with participants' political ideology,  $F(4, 1616) = 16.74$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .04$ .<sup>3</sup> All participants, regardless of their political ideology, underestimated social mobility. However, consistent with the *bidirectional* perspective, politically-liberal participants underestimated mobility to a greater degree than moderate and politically-conservative participants. This was true for all three "class at birth" categories, except for individuals from *middle-class* backgrounds (i.e., parents in the middle third). Regarding this category, liberals and conservatives underestimated mobility to an approximately equal degree ( $t(323) = 0.66$ , 95% CI for the difference: -2.89, 5.81,  $d = .08$ ). Yet the errors they made for this category were in opposite directions, and are especially revealing about their intuitions concerning how mobility manifests itself: liberals underestimated the proportion of individuals from middle-class backgrounds who were "upwardly mobile" (i.e., moved to the top third) more than conservatives ( $t(323) = -3.78$ , 95% CI for the difference: -8.72, -2.75,  $d = .38$ ), whereas conservatives underestimated the proportion who were "downwardly mobile" (i.e., moved to the bottom third) more than liberals ( $t(323) = -2.05$ , 95% CI for the difference: -8.38, -0.16,  $d = .25$ ).

Figure 2

*Estimated (vs. actual) social mobility as a function of participant’s political ideology in Study 1*



*Note:* Error bars represent standard errors around the mean estimates

We next tested whether these ideological differences were mediated by attitudes toward the existing social system (i.e., system justification) and towards social hierarchies and inequality (i.e., social dominance orientation). Consistent with prior research (Chambers et al., 2013), political liberalism was associated with more negative attitudes toward the system ( $r = .38$ ) and greater opposition to social hierarchies and inequality ( $r = .48$ ). In turn, negative attitudes toward the social system and opposition to social hierarchies and inequality each predicted perceptions of lower social mobility (see Figures S1 and S2 in the supplementary materials). When

participants' scores on system justification and social dominance orientation were entered *simultaneously* as covariates in the model with political ideology, both had independent 3-way interactions with parent's and child's income level on mobility estimates (system justification:  $F(4, 1608) = 16.72$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .04$ ; social dominance orientation:  $F(4, 1608) = 12.10$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .03$ ) and they attenuated the 3-way interaction with ideology ( $F(4, 1608) = 0.77$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .02$ ), providing initial evidence of mediation. Furthermore, when each variable was entered *individually* in the model with political ideology, each had a 3-way interaction (system justification:  $F(4, 1612) = 24.34$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .06$ ; social dominance orientation:  $F(4, 1612) = 19.63$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .05$ ), and each substantially reduced but did not eliminate the 3-way ideology interaction ( $F$ 's = 4.64 and 2.87, respectively, partial  $\eta^2$ 's > .01), indicating that both are partial mediators.

**Changes in Social Mobility.** Overall, participants indicated that social mobility has declined over the past 4 decades, contrary to recent evidence suggesting that it has remained relatively stable (Chetty et al., 2014a; Chetty et al., 2014b). Approximately 56% of participants thought that social mobility has declined either “slightly” or “greatly,” compared with only 15% who thought it has remained stable and 29% who thought it has increased to any extent (the mean rating of 2.50 was lower than the scale midpoint of 3, the latter representing a response of no perceived change, one-sample  $t(409) = -8.13$ , 95% CI for the difference:  $-.62, -.38$ ,  $d = .40$ ).

Here, too, the predicted ideological differences emerged. Liberals erroneously perceived mobility as declining ( $M = 2.21$ , one-sample test comparing to 3:  $t(234) = -10.14$ , 95% CI for the difference:  $-.94, -.63$ ,  $d = .66$ ), whereas moderates and conservatives accurately perceived it as remaining stable ( $M$ s = 2.82 and 2.93, respectively; one-sample  $t$ 's =  $-1.24$  and  $-0.55$ , 95% CI for the difference:  $-.46, .11$  and  $-.31, .18$ ,  $d$ 's =  $.14$  and  $.06$ ). A larger proportion of liberals than

moderates or conservatives thought that mobility has declined either “slightly” or “greatly” (67% vs. 44% of moderates, 40% of conservatives), and a smaller proportion thought that mobility has either remained stable (12% vs. 19% of moderates, 20% of conservatives) or increased to any extent (21% vs. 38% of moderates, 40% of conservatives). Overall, liberals perceived a greater decline in mobility than either moderates ( $t(318) = -3.95$ , 95% CI for the difference:  $-.92, -.31$ ,  $d = .49$ ) or conservatives ( $t(323) = -4.92$ , 95% CI for the difference:  $-1.01, -.43$ ,  $d = .58$ ), who did not differ from each other ( $t(173) = -0.59$ , 95% CI for the difference:  $-.48, .26$ ,  $d = .09$ ).

Negative attitudes toward the social system and opposition to social hierarchies and inequality were both associated with political liberalism (see above) and with the perception of declining mobility ( $r_s = .49$  and  $.25$ , respectively). In turn, multiple mediation tests revealed that system justification mediated the relation between liberalism and the perception of declining mobility, while social dominance orientation had no unique mediating role (bootstrapped tests of the indirect effects: system justification:  $b = .17$ , 95% CI:  $.12, .23$ , social dominance orientation:  $b = .02$ , 95% CI:  $-.04, .06$ ).

## Study 2

Study 2 is a direct replication of Study 1 with several slight methodological changes. First, because participants in Study 1 judged all three “class at birth” categories, it is possible that their judgments of one category may have influenced their judgments of the other categories. To avoid this potential biasing influence, participants in Study 2 rated only one category. Second, given that system justification and social dominance orientation are conceptually and empirically related constructs (Chambers, Schlenker, & Collisson, 2013), and because we found evidence for the unique mediating role of system justification, we chose to focus exclusively on this variable in Study 2. Third, whereas political orientation and system justification measures came after the

key social mobility judgments in Study 1, we counterbalanced the order of these measures in this study (i.e., either before or after mobility judgments). In all other respects, the judgment task and measures were identical to Study 1.

## Method

**Sample.** We recruited 455 American adults from Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk, who were paid a small fee in compensation (see Table 1 in the supplementary materials for information on sample characteristics).

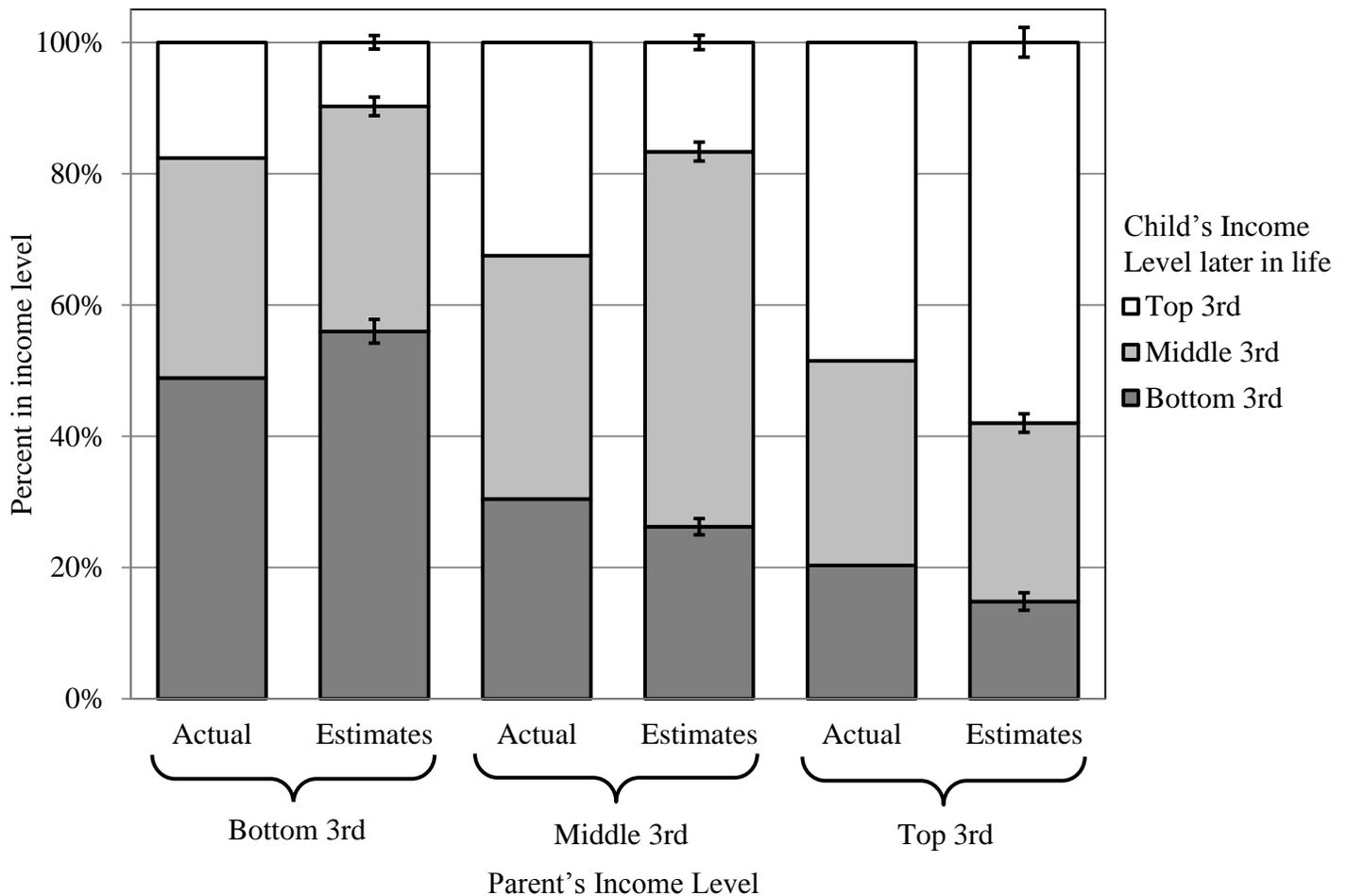
## Results

Responses to the system justification scale were averaged ( $\alpha = .85$ ) to form a composite score for each participant. As in Study 1, we included participants' age, gender, education level, and household income as covariates in all analyses.

**Current Social Mobility.** We analyzed mobility judgments in a 2 (order of measures) X 3 (parent's income level) X 3 (child's income level) mixed-model ANOVA, with the last factor as the only within-subjects variable. None of the effects of interest were qualified by measure order, so this variable is not discussed further.

Once again, participants underestimated social mobility (see Figure 3). In all three "class at birth" categories, they underestimated the proportion of individuals who migrated into a different social class from the one they were born into, and overestimated the proportion who remained in the same social class. And, replicating Study 1's results, they underestimated mobility especially for individuals from middle-class backgrounds. These patterns were confirmed by an interaction between parent's and child's income level on mobility estimates,  $F(4, 894) = 208.72$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .48$ .

Figure 3

*Estimated (vs. actual) social mobility in Study 2*

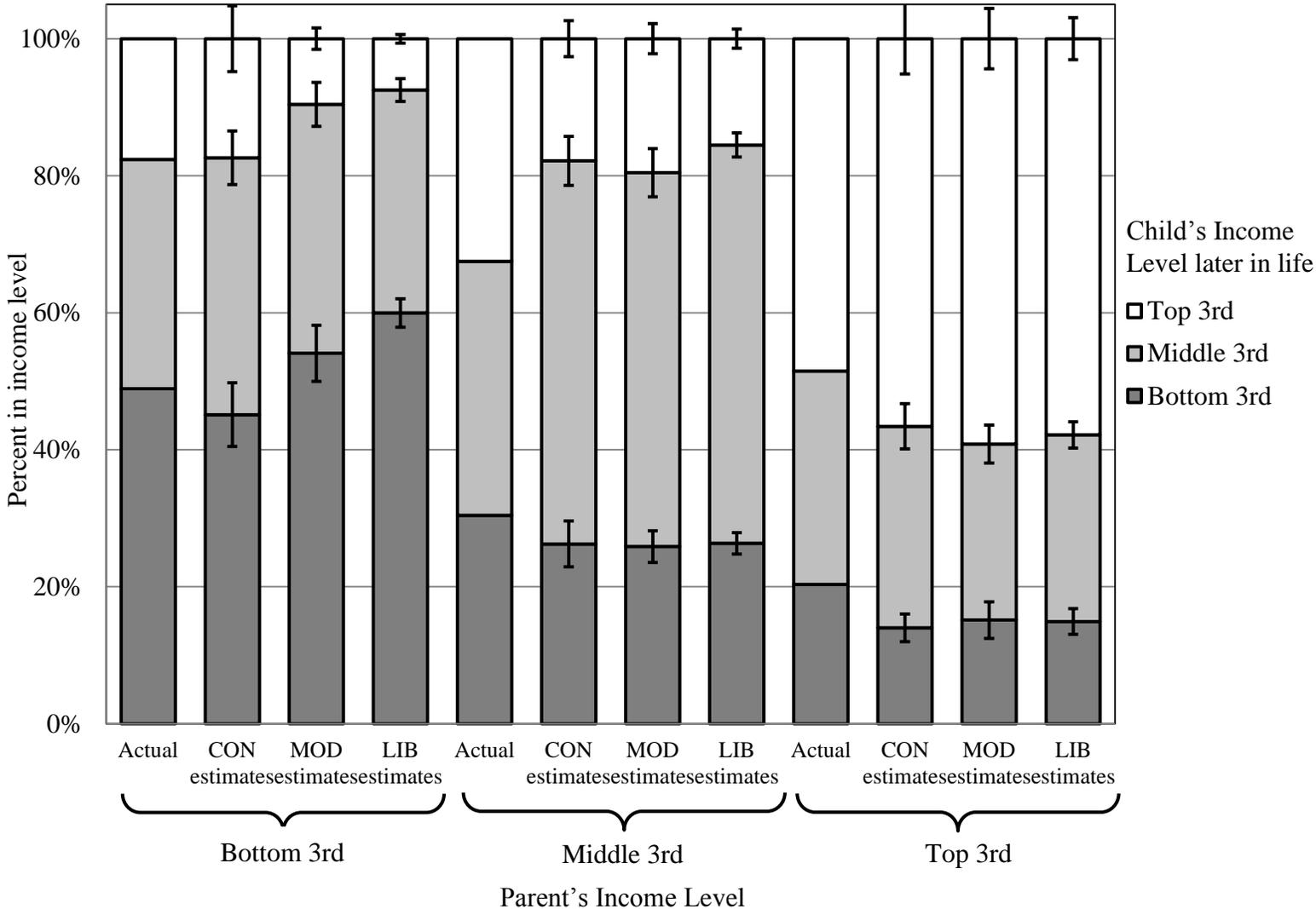
Note: Error bars represent standard errors around the mean estimates

The 2-way interaction described above was qualified by a predicted 3-way interaction with participants' political ideology,  $F(6, 888) = 3.14$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .01$ . Figure 4 shows that for individuals from middle- and upper-class backgrounds, all participants (regardless of political ideology) underestimated mobility, and to approximately equal degrees. However, regarding individuals from lower-class backgrounds, the ideological differences observed in Study 1 replicated. Namely, politically-liberal participants underestimated the proportion who were upwardly mobile (one-sample test comparing to 51.1%:  $t(92) = -5.35$ , 95% CI for the difference: -15.22, -6.98,  $d = .55$ ), whereas moderate and politically-conservative participants did not

(respectively, one-sample tests:  $t_s = -1.27$  and  $0.81$ ,  $d_s = .21$  and  $.15$ ). Indeed, liberals underestimated upward mobility to a greater extent than conservatives ( $t(119) = -3.26$ , 95% CI for the difference:  $-23.90$ ,  $-5.85$ ,  $d = .66$ ).

Figure 4

*Estimated (vs. actual) social mobility as a function of participant's political ideology in Study 2*



*Note:* Error bars represent standard errors around the mean estimates

Negative attitudes toward the social system (i.e., system justification) were associated with political liberalism ( $r = .33$ ) and with perceptions of lower mobility (see Figure S3 in the supplementary materials), replicating findings from Study 1. Moreover, negative attitudes

toward the system mediated the relation between liberalism and perceptions of lower mobility. When participants' system justification scores were entered as a covariate in the model with political ideology, there was a 3-way interaction with system justification ( $F(6, 882) = 4.50$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .03$ ), while the 3-way interaction with ideology was almost fully attenuated ( $F(6, 882) = 1.48$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .01$ ), suggesting that system justification fully mediated its relation.

**Changes in Social Mobility.** Once again, participants generally believed that social mobility has declined over the past 4 decades ( $M = 2.52$ , one-sample test comparing to 3:  $t(454) = -8.56$ , 95% CI for the difference:  $-.59, -.37$ ,  $d = .40$ ). And again, politically-liberal participants perceived mobility as declining ( $M = 2.33$ , one-sample test comparing to 3:  $t(276) = -9.51$ , 95% CI for the difference:  $-.81, -.53$ ,  $d = .57$ ), and to a lesser extent, so did politically-moderate participants ( $M = 2.71$ , one-sample test comparing to 3:  $t(98) = -2.43$ , 95% CI for the difference:  $-.53, -.05$ ,  $d = .24$ ). In contrast, conservatives perceived no change in mobility ( $M = 2.94$ , 95% CI for the difference:  $-.33, .20$ ,  $d = .05$ ). Approximately 64% of liberals said mobility has declined “slightly” or “greatly” over the prior 4 decades (vs. 51% of moderates, 37% of conservatives), while only 13% believed it has remained the same (vs. 16% of moderates, 27% of conservatives), and 23% believed it has increased by any amount (vs. 33% of moderates, 37% of conservatives). Overall, liberals perceived a greater decline in mobility than either moderates or conservatives (respectively,  $t_s = -2.72$  and  $-4.05$ , 95% CIs:  $-.65, -.10$  and  $-.90, -.31$ ,  $d_s = .38$  and  $.51$ ), who did not differ from one another ( $t(176) = -1.28$ , 95% CIs:  $-.58, .13$ ,  $d = .19$ ).

As in Study 1, negative attitudes toward the social system were associated with political liberalism (see above) and with a belief in declining social mobility ( $r = .32$ ). And once again, negative system attitudes mediated the relation between liberalism and the belief in declining mobility (bootstrapped tests of the indirect effect:  $b = .08$ , 95% CI:  $.04, .12$ ).

### General Discussion

These two studies reveal both accuracy and systematic bias in Americans' perceptions of social mobility (see Jussim et al., 2009, for discussion of the co-occurrence of perceptual accuracy and bias). On one hand, our participants showed awareness that social mobility is *bounded*, to some extent, and that one's starting position in life strongly predicts one's finishing position. They judged (accurately) that Americans born into a given social class were more likely to remain there than move to a different class. Nevertheless, they also underestimated the *actual* amount of movement between social classes. The number of Americans from lower- and middle-class backgrounds who moved up in social position (and the number of Americans from upper-class backgrounds who moved down) was greater than our participants estimated. Moreover, despite evidence that mobility in America has remained stable throughout the last 40 years, a majority of our participants believed mobility has declined (consistent with public opinion polls, e.g., Dugan & Newport, 2013). Much of this pessimism about social mobility, we suspect, is driven by the popular media's intensive coverage of the recent economic downturn, high unemployment rates, and rising wealth inequality, and public and political debates over these issues.

We also uncovered evidence that mobility beliefs are divided (and distorted) along ideological lines. Politically-liberal participants underestimated current levels of mobility in the U.S., and exaggerated how much it has declined in the recent past, more than moderates and politically-conservative participants. This was due, in part, to liberals perceiving lower mobility in general, and less *upward* mobility in particular, than moderates or conservatives. Indeed, one of the more consistent effects across both studies was that liberals underestimated upward mobility especially among individuals from lower-class backgrounds. Moreover, we found that

liberals' relative pessimism about mobility appears to be accounted for by their relative dissatisfaction with the current system, social hierarchies and inequality. These findings are consistent with the *bidirectional* perspective, which posits that error and bias can occur at both ends of the ideological spectrum.

Ideologically-motivated bias has been claimed to be a uniquely conservative affliction (Jost et al., 2003; Feygina, Goldsmith, & Jost, 2010; Napier & Jost, 2008); our findings challenge this view and are more consistent with a growing body of evidence suggesting that liberals and conservatives *both* engage in motivated reasoning processes in defense of their worldviews, and both are vulnerable to distort different aspects of social, economic, and environmental realities (e.g., Kahan, 2013; Tetlock & Mitchell, 1993). Rather than treating motivated reasoning as unique to any particular ideology (Jost et al., 2003), we believe a more fruitful and scientifically tenable approach is for researchers to recognize that motivation is a general feature of the human condition, and to begin investigating the myriad ways in which *both* ideologies, embracing different moral foundations (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009), may distort different facets of reality in a manner congruent with their particular worldviews. Liberals, and those who view the social system as unfair, may exaggerate the system's negative features (as in the present case with social mobility), just as conservatives and those who view the system as fair may exaggerate its positive features. More broadly, our research highlights the utility of comparing perceptions of social and economic conditions (e.g., unemployment, crime, and poverty rates) with objective indicators for evaluating theories of ideology, and for pinpointing the sources and consequences of ideologically-motivated distortion.

Some potential limitations of our research deserve mention. First, we relied on internet-based convenience samples, raising questions of whether the same patterns would be observed

with a nationally-representative sample of Americans. We note, however, that nationally-representative public opinion polls have yielded findings very similar to ours—specifically, the perception of declining mobility and economic opportunity (and their association with ideology; see Dugan & Newport, 2013). In addition, given that *all* participants underestimated mobility, irrespective of their political ideologies (and other demographics), this general underestimation effect appears to be robust and therefore very likely would replicate with representative samples. Nonetheless, future research with larger, nationally-representative samples would be worthwhile.

Second, because Chetty and colleagues (2014a; 2014b) assessed mobility only among Americans in their mid-to-late 20's, one may wonder if this appropriately reflects changes in mobility across the *lifetime*, and therefore whether their data constitute a valid “accuracy criterion” for calibrating perceptions. First, we note that Chetty and colleagues’ results correspond very closely with other independent, published reports that have assessed intergenerational mobility across much wider age ranges (Hertz, 2007; Lee & Solon, 2009). Second, one’s chances of changing social classes are likely to be greater over a much wider timeframe (e.g., one’s entire lifetime) than within a narrow timeframe. Therefore, if anything, Chetty and colleagues’ data *underestimates* the true amount of social mobility, implying that our participants may have underestimated mobility even more than their responses indicate.

In conclusion, we find that—despite growing fears in the American public about limited opportunities for economic advancement and widening class divisions—there remains greater social mobility in America, both now and over the recent past, than many seem to realize.

### Footnotes

1. For exploratory purposes, and only in Study 1, we included several other individual difference measures, including attitudes toward various wealth redistribution policies, beliefs about important factors determining one's life outcomes, a measure of "numeracy," and brief measures of personality traits (e.g., dispositional optimism, self-esteem, personal control). None of these variables eliminated the 3-way ideology interaction (all  $F$ 's > 9.70, partial  $\eta^2$ 's > .02), suggesting they played no mediating role. For more information on these measures, contact the first author.
2. Ipsative measures (such as percentage estimates of child's income level) violate the ANOVA assumption of independent observations and can produce inflated Type 1 error rates. However, Greer & Dunlap (1997) demonstrated that error rates and power levels of ipsative measures are highly similar to normative measures under identical test conditions. As a precaution, they recommend that corrections to the degrees of freedom be applied with ipsative measures. All of the critical effects we report (e.g., interactions between parent's and child's income level, and higher-order interactions with ideology) are significant whether or not these corrections are applied.
3. None of the other demographic variables (i.e., age, gender, education level, household income) had 3-way interactions in either study. And although social mobility is higher in some regions of the United States than others (Chetty et al., 2014), we assessed participants' geographic region (see Table S1) and found no substantial differences across regions in perceived social mobility.

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Appendix

