



# Not by Bread Alone: Mobility Experiences, Religion, and Optimism about Future Mobility

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## Abstract

Americans are quite optimistic about their chances of upward mobility, but sometimes even they have their doubts. The authors examine how mobility experiences boost or dampen American optimism about mobility and how the relationship is connected to religion. The authors find that Americans whose subjective financial situations have recently worsened are less optimistic, whereas those whose situations have improved are more optimistic. Objective measures of mobility were not connected to optimism. The authors also found that men affiliated with historically black Protestant denominations and Hispanic Catholic men and women are more optimistic than the religiously unaffiliated. Additionally, downward mobility is associated with different outcomes for different groups: very small drops in optimism among Hispanic Catholic women but unusually large drops among mainline Protestant and Hispanic Catholic men. The authors encourage more study of Hispanic Catholic women because their experiences may be useful for preserving optimism among other Americans during tough economic times.

## Keywords

religion, stratification beliefs, mobility, General Social Survey

American beliefs about mobility tend to be very optimistic. Compared with people in other countries, Americans are especially likely to believe that they can achieve financial success through hard work (Isaacs, Sawhill, and Haskins 2008). Scholars have often reacted to this optimism by highlighting the gap between beliefs and reality. Despite what Americans believe, there is less upward mobility in the United States than in many industrialized countries (Alesina, Stantcheva, and Teso 2018; Isaacs et al. 2008), and U.S. mobility rates have not been improving. Americans' chances of climbing higher on the income ladder than their parents (i.e., relative mobility) have been stable for decades (Chetty et al. 2014), and absolute mobility has dropped sharply. Mostly because of growing inequality, the percentage of Americans earning more than their parents fell from 90 percent for those born in 1940 to about 50 percent for those born in 1980 (Chetty et al. 2017). In short, Americans tend to overestimate their chances of upward mobility (Alesina et al. 2018; DiPrete 2007; Swan et al. 2017).

These optimistic beliefs, however, can be consequential even if they are inaccurate. Some scholars even suggest that beliefs about mobility are more consequential than the actual mobility regime (Gimpelson and Treisman 2018; Gugushvili

2016). Mexican adolescents who believe they will be upwardly mobile, for instance, engage in fewer negative and more positive behaviors (Ritterman Weintraub et al. 2015). German youth who believe that success depends on external factors tend to have lower incomes, occupational prestige, job autonomy, and wage growth (Kay, Shane, and Heckhausen 2017). Furthermore, beliefs about the causes of mobility by race, class, and gender influence intergroup relations (Hunter and Wilson 2011). They also influence support for policies designed to reduce inequalities in health (Kwate and Meyer 2010), crime (Thompson and Bobo 2011), and employment (Light, Roscigno, and Kalev 2011). The belief in upward mobility through hard work even seems to influence how the U.S. Supreme Court defines employment discrimination (DeSario 2003) and the number of highly skilled immigrants to the United States (Lumpe 2017).

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In this study we extend research on stratification beliefs by examining two issues. First, we study how Americans' subjective and objective mobility experiences are tied to their optimism about upward mobility in the future. Research suggests that American optimism is quite robust, but there are theoretical and empirical reasons to suspect that mobility experiences can shape optimism. Second, we examine if and how beliefs about mobility are related to religion. Much research shows that religion is tied to actual mobility and to beliefs about mobility. We examine if religion also helps Americans remain optimistic about their chances for mobility even after they have been downwardly mobile. In this way, we help address the need for research examining how economic factors and personal beliefs are related to group differences in economic optimism in times of economic uncertainty (Bandelj and Lanuza 2018).

## Background

There is a large interdisciplinary literature investigating the subjective side of social mobility. Since the foundational work of Kluegel and Smith (1981, 1986), many sociologists have examined people's beliefs about the relative importance of individual and structural characteristics in generating poverty, wealth, and mobility and their attitudes about the rich and the poor (e.g., Hunt and Wilson 2011; McCall 2013; McCall et al. 2017). Recently, psychologists have examined if Americans overestimate or underestimate social mobility and the extent to which their beliefs can be manipulated in experiments (Davidai and Gilovich 2015; Kraus and Tan 2015; Swan et al. 2017). Economists have studied how perceptions of mobility vary cross-nationally and how those perceptions influence preferences regarding economic redistribution (Alesina et al. 2018; Piketty 1995).

Few scholars, however, have examined how mobility experiences may boost or dampen a person's optimism about their own future mobility. Perhaps this gap in the literature stems from theories about stratification beliefs that emphasize the homogeneity and robustness of optimism. Psychologists, for instance, argue that most people cling to the "belief in a just world," a world where people get what they deserve (Sutton, Stoeber, and Kamble 2017). They also find a widespread "fundamental attribution error": people underestimate the importance of context and understand outcomes such as success and failure as the result of personal characteristics (Ross 1977). Together, these beliefs give people a sense of control and greater optimism about the future. Kluegel and Smith (1986) drew on these ideas to develop a framework that has guided much sociological research on stratification beliefs. They argued that in the United States, powerful institutions (e.g., schools, the media, religion) reinforce these psychological tendencies by socializing Americans to believe that opportunities for upward mobility are plentiful and attainable through individual hard work. They found that Americans across the social spectrum adhere

to this "dominant ideology" even when confronted with experiences that challenge it (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Taylor and Merino 2011). They noted that some people layer other beliefs (e.g., a recognition of racial discrimination) on top of this dominant ideology to create a dual consciousness, but they argued that the dominant ideology remains intact. Some economists have made similar arguments. They suggest that people (especially Americans) are optimistic about their chances for upward mobility because powerful groups (e.g., capitalists, teachers, politicians) promote those beliefs and because psychological needs create a demand for them (Benabou and Tirole 2006). These accounts suggest that in the United States, optimism about upward mobility will be widespread and resilient.

Still, the effects of the great recession (2007–2009) suggest that American optimism is not unassailable. As the aforementioned theories might predict, Americans were fairly optimistic even after the recession (Kohut and Dimock 2013). They remained more convinced than people in other countries, for instance, that it is possible to achieve personal success through hard work (Pew Research Center 2012b). Still, Americans began to question some core beliefs. In 2012, a substantial majority of middle-class Americans said that it was harder to get ahead than it had been a decade earlier (Pew Research Center 2012a). Scholars argued that the American dream was in trouble (e.g., Putnam 2016). The PBS television show *Point Taken* hosted a debate titled "Is the American Dream Dead or Alive?" (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/point-taken/american-dream-dead-alive/>). Moreover, the general public started to lose faith in upward mobility. In 2000, 77 percent of Americans agreed with the statement "The way things are in America, people like me and my family have a good chance of improving our standard of living." By 2012, that figure had fallen to 55 percent (authors' calculations using the General Social Survey [GSS] variable goodlife).

## Past Mobility and Optimism about Future Mobility

We think the drop in American optimism following the great recession may reflect a more general dynamic. Between 2007 and 2011, a quarter of American families lost 75 percent or more of their wealth, and at least half of American families lost at least 25 percent of their wealth (Pfeffer, Danziger, and Schoeni 2013). Such widespread downward mobility may explain the large decline in Americans' optimism about their chances for upward mobility. We suspect, however, that individuals' expectations about their chances for upward mobility will be tied to their own past experiences of mobility even under better economic conditions.

Our expectation that mobility experiences will influence mobility beliefs is grounded in theory and evidence suggesting that general stratification beliefs are malleable. The "underdog thesis," for instance, predicts that people of low

status question the dominant ideology precisely because they are often exposed to situations that contradict it (Davis and Robinson 1991; Robinson 1983). Young's (2006:116) work supports this prediction by showing that poor African American men from the same neighborhood had different beliefs about stratification depending on their exposure to people outside their neighborhood. Men who interacted with people from more affluent neighborhoods were less optimistic about their ability to achieve the American dream. Cech and Blair-Loy (2010) and Sealy (2010) found similar patterns: women's beliefs about gender inequality vary depending on their exposure to situations in which men and women are treated unequally.

Our expectations are also motivated by more specific predictions about the connection between mobility experiences and optimism about mobility. Piketty (1995) hypothesized that in the aggregate, beliefs about mobility change slowly because they are strongly influenced by the stories people hear. In this way, he echoed the social and psychological theories discussed earlier that emphasize the stability of stratification beliefs. Piketty also suggested, however, that personal experiences of mobility could alter beliefs about (1) the connection between mobility and effort and (2) the chances of upward mobility. Specifically, his work suggests that experiencing upward mobility may increase optimism about upward mobility in the future and that downward mobility will decrease it (Alesina et al. 2018).

Finally, our research is motivated by the limited and contradictory empirical examinations of the connection between mobility experiences and optimism. Research that draws on Piketty has often focused on the connection between mobility and attitudes about redistribution (Alesina et al. 2018; Gugushvili 2016). Consequently, his predictions about mobility and optimism have not been thoroughly examined. Furthermore, the few studies that examine those predictions (often indirectly as part of a larger analysis) have produced conflicting results. Using data from France, Italy, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States, Alesina et al. (2018) found that upwardly mobile respondents were not more likely than others to believe that people could move to a higher income quintile (see their Figures 4 and OA7 and Table OA7). Whyte and Im's (2014) study of China, in contrast, revealed that upwardly mobile respondents were more optimistic than others about increasing their standard of living in the next five years. In fact, mobility was the strongest predictor of optimism. There are several potential explanations for these conflicting findings. First, perhaps mobility experiences have different effects in different countries. Second, the results might reflect sampling issues: the Chinese data came from probability samples, but the European and American data came from nonprobability samples that were matched to the population only in terms of gender, age, and income. Third, the two studies used different measures of mobility. Alesina et al. used an objective, dichotomous measure: whether respondents had more prestigious jobs than

their fathers. Whyte and Im used a subjective, ordinal measure of mobility: how respondents' financial situations had changed over the past five years (1 = much worse, 5 = much better). As noted above, the two studies also used different measures of optimism.

We do not examine all the potential explanations for these conflicting results. Instead, we focus on the United States, where most of the relevant theory was developed, and we reexamine the relationship between mobility and optimism in detail using a probability sample. Piketty (1995) clearly suggested that upward mobility would be associated with greater optimism. Therefore, we start with two basic predictions:

*Hypothesis 1:* Upwardly mobile Americans will be more optimistic than nonmobile Americans about their future chances for upward mobility.

*Hypothesis 2:* Downwardly mobile Americans will be less optimistic than nonmobile Americans about their future chances for upward mobility.

In light of previous research, we pay special attention to the distinction between objective and subjective mobility. Alesina et al.'s (2018) objective measure of mobility was not related to optimism. Whyte and Im's (2014) subjective measure of mobility was. We try objective and subjective measures to see if this pattern appears when using a single measure of optimism and data from one country. The choice of an objective or a subjective measure could be seen as a methodological issue, but related research suggests that it has important theoretical implications. Americans tend to underestimate the amount of inequality in the United States, and it is their beliefs (rather than reality) that are most closely related to attitudes about redistribution (Gimpelson and Treisman 2015). Americans tend to overestimate the amount of mobility in the U.S. (Alesina et al. 2018), and attitudes about redistribution are also more closely related to beliefs about mobility than to actual mobility (Gugushvili 2016). Because Piketty (1995) did not address this issue, we do not offer a formal hypothesis, but these empirical patterns suggest that optimism may depend more on subjective perceptions of mobility than on objective indicators.

We also extend previous research by examining if mobility experiences have the same effect on all Americans. If the dominant ideology is reinforced by powerful social institutions (Kluegel and Smith 1986), levels of optimism and the connection between mobility experiences and optimism may vary depending on one's attachment to those institutions. In particular, we suspect that optimism and the resilience of that optimism may vary by religious affiliation. Indeed, many religious institutions try to provide hope and support during difficult times, and in contrast to other institutions such as schools, which people attend when they are young, religious institutions serve people across the entire life course. Furthermore, sociologists, psychologists, and economists all

argue that religion influences beliefs about mobility and in some cases actual mobility (Benabou and Tirole 2006; Keister 2011b; Li et al. 2012). Below we explain in more detail how and why religion may be related to optimism about mobility.

### *Religion, Mobility, and Optimism*

Religious affiliation is an important predictor of stratification and mobility (Keister and Sherkat 2014). Conservative Protestants, black Protestants, and Hispanic Catholics trail Jews, mainline Protestants, and non-Hispanic Catholics in wealth and asset accumulation (Keister 2011a). Conservative Protestants also tend to earn less than other Christians and the nonreligious (Fitzgerald and Glass 2012), and they are generally concentrated in less prestigious occupations than Jews, Catholics, and the nonreligious (Sherkat 2012). Jews, mainline Protestants, and non-Hispanic Catholics, in contrast, are more likely to experience upward mobility than members of other religious groups and the nonreligious (Keister 2007, 2011a).

In part, the relationship between religion and stratification described above is due to variations in attitudes and beliefs about money. In *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber (2001) argued that Calvinism paved the way for modern capitalism by transforming work from a secular enterprise into a sacred one. This transformation shaped how early Protestants thought about money and the accumulation of wealth. Most notably, the accumulation of wealth became a sign of God's blessing, and thus the followers of John Calvin worked diligently in their vocations to prove that they were saved. Contemporary research indicates that religion still affects economic outcomes over the life course by shaping attitudes and behaviors that are important for attainment, including educational attainment, work hours, and family size (Keister 2011b).

These connections between religion and mobility are potentially relevant. If mobility influences optimism, as suggested by hypotheses 1 and 2, mainline Protestants and non-Hispanic Catholics may be especially optimistic because they are especially likely to experience the upwardly mobility that promotes optimism. Optimism may be lower among less advantaged groups, particularly black Protestants and Hispanic Catholics.

*Hypothesis 3:* Mainline Protestants and non-Hispanic Catholics will be more optimistic than other groups about their chances of upward mobility.

It is possible, however, that religion may promote optimism even in the absence of upward mobility. Marx ([1884] 1977) recognized this dynamic when he called religion the "opiate of the masses." Contemporary scholars, though less critical of religion in general, have also discussed the connection between religion and economic optimism by focusing on the "prosperity gospel," which teaches that "a God

who loves you does not want you to be broke" (van Biema and Chu 2006). This suggests that for many believers, the key to optimism is not the experience of upward mobility but rather faith in the idea that God wants believers to prosper. Furthermore, research indicates that this belief system is widespread: roughly half of American adults believe that "God will grant material prosperity to all believers who have enough faith" (Schieman and Jung 2012:743). Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 4:* Religious affiliates will be more optimistic than the unaffiliated about their chances of upward mobility.

There are also good reasons to believe that religion may moderate the effect of mobility on optimism. Studies of the religion-health connection, for example, indicate that divine control (DeAngelis 2018; DeAngelis and Ellison 2018; Schieman and Bierman 2011; Schieman, Bierman, and Upenieks 2018), belief in an afterlife (Ellison and Burdette 2012), and religious involvement and social support (Acevedo, Ellison, and Xu 2014; Ellison, DeAngelis, and Güven 2017; Krause 2011) reduce the negative impact of stressful life events on mental health. It is thus possible that downward mobility will have a smaller effect on the religious so that their optimism is more resilient. There is some evidence, however, that optimism can be a double-edged sword. Although religion can promote optimism, optimism that bears little fruit can have negative physical and psychological consequences (Bennett et al. 2004; Merritt and McCallum 2013; Peterson 2000). It is thus possible that people who believe that God will provide for them will become particularly discouraged if they experience downward mobility. Given these competing possibilities, we propose the following nondirectional hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 5:* Downward mobility will have a different effect among the religious than among the unaffiliated.

### **Data and Methods**

We examine how optimism about future mobility is related to past mobility experiences and religion using data from the GSS. The GSS is a nationally representative survey conducted annually by the National Opinion Research Center between 1972 and 1994 and biennially thereafter. The GSS is an excellent choice for our study because it has a series of questions about both economic mobility and religion. We use data from 2008 to 2016 to examine optimism about upward mobility after the onset of the 2007 recession.

Our dependent variable identifies respondents who are optimistic about upward mobility. We created it using responses to the statement "The way things are in America, people like me and my family have a good chance of improving our standard of living." We collapsed the five original Likert-type responses

**Table 1.** Odds Ratios from Logistic Regressions Predicting Optimism with Subjective and Objective Measures of Mobility.

	Subjective Mobility		Objective Mobility			
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Mobility experiences <sup>a</sup>						
Downward (vs. same)	.51***	.54***	1.04			1.10
Upward (vs. same)	1.89***	1.44***	1.00			.91
Continuous measures				1.00	1.00	
Female	.78***	.79***	.78***	.78***	.79***	.78***
Survey year						
2010	1.05	.96	.90	.90	.91	.92
2012	.80*	.78*	.74**	.74**	.74**	.78
2014	.91	.96	.93	.93	.94	.97*
2016	.83	.92	.87	.88	.88	.91
<i>n</i>	5748	5692	5329	5329	5386	5608
Pseudo- <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.047	.026	.004	.005	.004	.005

a. The measures of mobility in each column are as follows: (1) "During the last few years, has your financial situation been getting better, worse, or has it stayed the same?" (2) Respondent's current standard of living compared with parent's standard of living at the same age. (3) Lower, same, or higher occupational prestige quintile as parent with higher prestige. (4) Respondent's occupational prestige minus occupational prestige of the parent with greater prestige. (5) Respondent's occupational prestige minus average occupational prestige of parents. (6) Respondent's highest educational degree compared to parent with highest degree.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

by coding "strongly disagree," "disagree," and "neither" as zero and "agree" and "strongly agree" as one.<sup>1</sup>

Our analysis includes both objective and subjective measures of mobility. Three objective measures capture intergenerational changes in occupational prestige. An additional objective measure captures intergenerational changes in educational attainment. The first subjective measure is based on self-reports of intergenerational changes in the standard of living. The second subjective measure is based on self-reports of how the respondent's financial situation has changed over the past few years (see Table 1 and Table A1 in the Appendix for details).

Our measure of religious affiliation is a modification of Steensland et al.'s (2000) RELTRAD coding scheme. RELTRAD uses denominational affiliation to organize GSS respondents into seven categories: mainline Protestants, evangelical Protestants, black Protestants, Roman Catholics, Jews, other religions, and the unaffiliated. GSS respondents who identified as "Protestant" were asked to specify their denominational preference, producing more than 200 unique responses across all iterations of the GSS. RELTRAD uses "theological criteria derived from denominational creeds and associational criteria taken from denominational membership status in national religious organizations" to arrange these more than 200 traditions into meaningful categories for the purposes of analysis and interpretation (Steensland et al. 2000:297).

<sup>1</sup>We also tried ordinal logistic regressions with the five-category variable, but they produced questionable results. Regressions without control variables failed the Brant test, indicating that the models violated the parallel lines assumption. Because of the small number of respondents in the "strongly disagree" category, we were unable to run Brant tests on our full models. Partial proportional odds models, which relax the parallel lines assumption, had convergence problems when estimated with the full set of controls.

Despite recent criticisms (e.g., Lehman and Sherkat 2018a, 2018b), RELTRAD remains the best measure for examining differences in religious-related social attitudes (Shelton 2018).

We make one modification to the RELTRAD classification scheme on the basis of evidence that economic mobility varies within the Catholic tradition (see Keister 2011a). More specifically, non-Hispanic white Catholics have greater intergenerational mobility than other religious groups in recent years. According to Keister (2011a), their exceptional mobility is likely due to changes in fertility rates, educational attainment, and income experienced over the past few decades. Although Hispanic Catholics have mobility patterns like their Protestant counterparts, Hispanics from all religious traditions are similar to African Americans in their chances of growing up poor and in their limited access to cash gifts, trust accounts, and other assets (Keister and Borelli 2014). Therefore, we separate Hispanic and non-Hispanic Catholics in all analyses. Additionally, the sample of Jews is so small that it prevents an adequate statistical examination of their experiences. Consequently, we do not include them in the analysis.

In our full regression models, we control for several factors to isolate the effects of mobility and religion and better understand why they are related to optimism. We include year dummies to control for differences between survey years, including the performance of the U.S. economy. We control for age because younger Americans tend to be more optimistic about mobility than older Americans (Kraus and Tan 2015). We control for marital status because married people tend to be more optimistic than others (Bailey and Snyder 2007; Ben-Zur 2012). We control for parental status because it is related to men's and women's career expectations (Wynn 2017). We control for living in the South because there is a culture of optimism there (Cobb 2007), and we

wish to isolate the effect of religion from location. We control for having a college degree because schools reinforce the dominant belief that opportunities for upward mobility are plentiful (Kluegel and Smith 1986). We also control for political views because conservatives tend to be more optimistic than liberals (Chambers, Swan, and Heesacker 2015; Kraus and Tan 2015). We control for family income because people in higher social classes tend to be more optimistic about their chances for upward mobility (Kraus and Tan 2015). Finally, we control for immigrant status because first-generation immigrants are more optimistic about their future than are subsequent generations (Escobar 2006). Table A2 in the Appendix provides detailed coding information and descriptive statistics for these control variables. After accounting for missing data, our sample includes 5,748 cases (2,624 men and 3,124 women).

### Analytic Strategy

Our analysis begins with bivariate analyses of the relationships among our central variables. First, we examine how objective and subjective measures of mobility are related to optimism about future mobility. This provides a first look at the support for hypotheses 1 and 2. Second, we examine if there are differences among religious groups in their optimism about future mobility. This provides a basic test of hypotheses 3 and 4.

We then turn to a series of nested logistic regressions to examine the potential moderating effect of religion (hypothesis 5) and to examine if adding control variables helps us better understand any connections among our central variables. If religion is associated with optimism only because it is related to our control variables, the coefficients for religion should lose significance in these full models. Also, if religion moderates the relationship between mobility and optimism, we should find a significant interaction between religion and mobility.

For most analyses, we calculate separate estimates for women and men. Existing research indicates that women tend to be more religious than men but that men tend to be more dogmatic (Schnabel 2018). Research also suggests that the relationship between religion and economic attitudes and behaviors varies by gender (Ammons and Edgell 2007; Civettini and Glass 2008; Glass and Nath 2006; May and Reynolds 2018). This provides a theoretical rationale for examining if the connection between religion and optimism varies by gender. Furthermore, a likelihood ratio test indicated that separate regression models for men and women were warranted. We weight all results using the GSS weight variable WTSSNR.

## Results

Like Alesina et al. (2018), we find that objective measures of mobility are not related to optimism. Specifically, optimism is not related to intergenerational mobility in terms of occupational prestige quintile. Nor is it related to the difference between the respondent's occupational prestige and the

highest (or average) occupational prestige of the respondents' parents or the difference between the respondents' and the parents' highest educational degree (see Table 1, columns 3–6). To account for nonlinear effects with the continuous variables, we also tried quadratic terms and dummy variables representing varying degrees of upward and downward mobility. None of these were significant.

Like Whyte and Im (2014), however, we find that subjective measures of mobility do predict optimism. For instance, the odds that respondents will agree that they have a good chance of improving their standard of living are  $100 \times (1.89 - 1) = 89$  percent larger among respondents whose financial situations have improved over the past few years than among respondents whose financial situations have stayed the same (see Table 1, column 1). Those whose situations have worsened are significantly less optimistic. Similarly, compared with respondents who report having the same standard of living as their parents did at their age, those who have a higher standard of living are more optimistic, and those who have a lower standard of living are less optimistic. Also, on average, women are less optimistic than men about upward mobility.

Ultimately, the results in Table 1 support hypotheses 1 and 2: upward mobility is associated with greater optimism and downward mobility with less optimism. They also reproduce previous findings by indicating that optimism is related to subjective mobility but not objective mobility. This is interesting because it suggests that if religion is related to differences in optimism, the mediating mechanism is not objective mobility. For the rest of the analyses, we rely on the mobility measure about recent changes in respondents' financial situations (Table 1, column 1). This measure is more appropriate for our analyses than the subjective mobility measure in Table 1, column 2, for two reasons. First, it is similar to the one Whyte and Im (2014) used in their study of China. Second its focus on the past few years (rather than intergenerational comparisons) is suitable for examining if optimism reflects short-term mobility experiences that could be caused by recessions, job loss, health problems, and so on.

Table 2 shows that optimism is also related to religion, but not as predicted. Contrary to hypothesis 3, mainline Protestants and non-Hispanic Catholics are not more optimistic than other groups about their chances of upward mobility. In fact, mainline Protestants are the least optimistic. Among mainline Protestants, only 50.4 percent of men and 51.6 percent of women agree that they have good chances for upward mobility. Non-Hispanic Catholics also have low levels of optimism. The most optimistic respondents are Hispanic Catholics and those affiliated with historically black Protestant denominations (especially among men). Furthermore, contrary to hypothesis 4, religious respondents are not uniformly more optimistic than the unaffiliated.

The results in Table 2, however, should be interpreted cautiously because they do not control for factors that could obscure how mobility and religion are related to optimism. For instance, even if mainline Protestants are the least optimistic

**Table 2.** Optimism about Mobility by Religious Affiliation and Gender.

	Evangelical Protestant	Mainline Protestant	Historically Black Protestant	Non-Hispanic Catholic	Hispanic Catholic	Other Faiths	Unaffiliated	Total
<b>Men</b>								
Do not agree	40.3	49.6	22.0	37.5	23.9	37.7	37.8	37.4
Agree	59.7	50.4	78.0	62.5	76.1	62.3	62.2	62.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
<b>Women</b>								
Do not agree	44.2	48.4	40.5	46.7	25.5	45.2	45.5	43.7
Agree	55.8	51.6	59.5	53.3	74.5	54.8	54.5	56.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note: The statement was “The way things are in America, people like me and my family have a good chance of improving our standard of living.” For men,  $n = 2,624$ ,  $\chi^2 = 54.57$ ,  $p = .000$ . For women,  $n = 3,124$ ,  $\chi^2 = 43.48$ ,  $p = .000$ .

group on average, controlling for age, education, income, and so on, could reveal that they are actually more optimistic than others with similar characteristics. Furthermore, as suggested by hypothesis 5, religion could moderate the relationship between mobility and optimism such that some groups have more resilient optimism than others. To examine these issues, we estimate a series of logistic regressions.

Our baseline regressions, which include measures of mobility and religion and control for survey year, echo the patterns in the bivariate analysis. Upward mobility is associated with more optimism, and downward mobility is associated with less optimism among women and men. Also, religiously affiliated respondents are not uniformly more optimistic than the unaffiliated, but optimism does vary by religious group. Among men, Hispanic Catholics and respondents affiliated with historically black Protestant denominations are more likely than the unaffiliated to be optimistic about upward mobility. Mainline Protestant men, in contrast, are less likely than the unaffiliated to be optimistic about improving their standard of living (Table 3, model 1). Among women, optimism is especially high for Hispanic Catholics (Table 3, model 4).

The models also show few significant changes in optimism over time. In fact, year and optimism are not even related in a bivariate analysis (not shown). Apparently, optimism about upward mobility did not increase as the U.S. economy recovered from the great recession.

Expanding the models by including interactions and control variables provides support for hypothesis 5: religion seems to moderate the effect of downward mobility. The coefficients from these models, however, are difficult to interpret for two reasons. First, the main and interaction effects must be combined to see how mobility and religion are related to optimism. Second, intercept shifts associated with group differences can influence predicted probabilities in nonlinear models without altering the slopes, making significance tests of the slopes unreliable indicators of interaction effects (Berry, DeMeritt, and Esarey 2010). For these reasons, we rely on predicted probabilities, which facilitate

statistical tests (Long and Mustillo forthcoming) and convey the empirical patterns more clearly.

Figure 1 shows the predicted probability of optimism among men for each combination of mobility and religious affiliation while holding all other variables at their observed values. Among upwardly mobile Hispanic Catholics, for instance, the probability of being optimistic is 0.917. Among downwardly mobile mainline Protestants, the probability is only 0.266 (all underlying probabilities are presented in Table A3 in the Appendix). The general patterns are as expected: the upwardly mobile are the most optimistic, followed by the nonmobile, then by the downwardly mobile. Also, across mobility experiences, black Protestant and Hispanic Catholic men tend to have comparatively high levels of optimism, while mainline Protestants tend to have low levels of optimism.

Formal tests using the predicted probabilities underlying Figure 1 show that downward mobility is not associated with the same patterns for all men. The drop in optimism associated with downward mobility is represented by the distance between the bottom two dots for each group. Formal tests show that although downward mobility is associated with some drop in optimism for all groups, the difference between the downwardly mobile and the nonmobile is not significant for black Protestants, men of “other faiths,” or the unaffiliated. More important, difference-in-difference tests support hypothesis 5 by showing that downward mobility is associated with a significantly *larger* drop in optimism among mainline Protestant and Hispanic Catholic men than among the unaffiliated. In other words, these religious groups are less resilient than the unaffiliated when confronted with downward mobility. The drop in optimism among non-Hispanic Catholic men is also on the larger side, but it is not quite significantly different from the drop among the unaffiliated ( $p = .07$ ).

Figure 2 presents the corresponding probabilities for women and provides additional support for hypothesis 5. As with men, downward mobility is generally associated with a visible drop in optimism. Among women, however, the difference between

**Table 3.** Logistic Regressions Predicting Optimism about Mobility.

	Men			Women		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Financial situation (past 5 years)						
Worse (vs. same)	.44***	.68	.76	.57***	.40***	.42**
Better (vs. same)	1.84***	1.83**	1.77**	1.96***	2.76***	2.60***
Religious affiliation						
Evangelical	.96	1.06	1.21	1.03	.99	1.13
Mainline Protestant	.66**	.72	.83	.92	1.01	1.22
Historically black Protestant	2.36***	2.49**	2.95**	1.29	1.60	1.68
Catholic	1.08	1.25	1.39	.99	1.08	1.28
Hispanic Catholic	2.17***	2.82**	2.09*	2.53***	2.20*	1.85
Other faiths	1.09	1.40	1.20	1.07	.99	1.00
Mobility × Religion interactions						
Worse × Evangelical		.66	.61		1.70	1.53
Worse × Mainline		.47	.45*		1.24	1.20
Worse × Historically Black Protestant		1.11	.97		1.42	1.29
Worse × Catholic		.57	.50		1.14	1.06
Worse × Hispanic Catholic		.35*	.28**		3.31*	3.08*
Worse × Other Faith		.55	.57		1.64	1.52
Better × Evangelical		.99	.90		.75	.69
Better × Mainline		1.40	1.39		.65	.64
Better × Historically Black Protestant		.65	.64		.36*	.36*
Better × Catholic		.97	.86		.72	.69
Better × Hispanic Catholic		1.48	1.47		.53	.58
Better × Other Faith		.75	.75		.83	.78
Controls						
Survey year						
2010	1.06	1.08	1.10	1.03	1.04	1.04
2012	.86	.87	.87	.75	.74*	.74
2014	1.04	1.06	1.08	.81	.81	.84
2016	.89	.90	.93	.78	.78	.81
Age			.99**			.98***
Married			.85			.88
Children			1.01			1.11***
South			1.13			1.11
College degree			.83			1.31*
Political Views						
Liberal			.97			1.09
Conservative			1.05			1.14
Family income in \$10,000			1.04**			1.01
Immigration history						
Second-generation immigrant			.79			.63*
Third-generation immigrant			.51**			.54***
Fourth or higher generation			.49***			.65**
<i>n</i>	2,624	2,624	2,624	3,124	3,124	3,124

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

the downwardly mobile and the nonmobile is not significant for black Protestants, Hispanic Catholics, or women of “other faiths.” Moreover, difference-in-difference tests support

hypothesis 5, but in a very different way than among men. Downward mobility is associated with a significantly smaller drop in optimism among Hispanic Catholic women than among

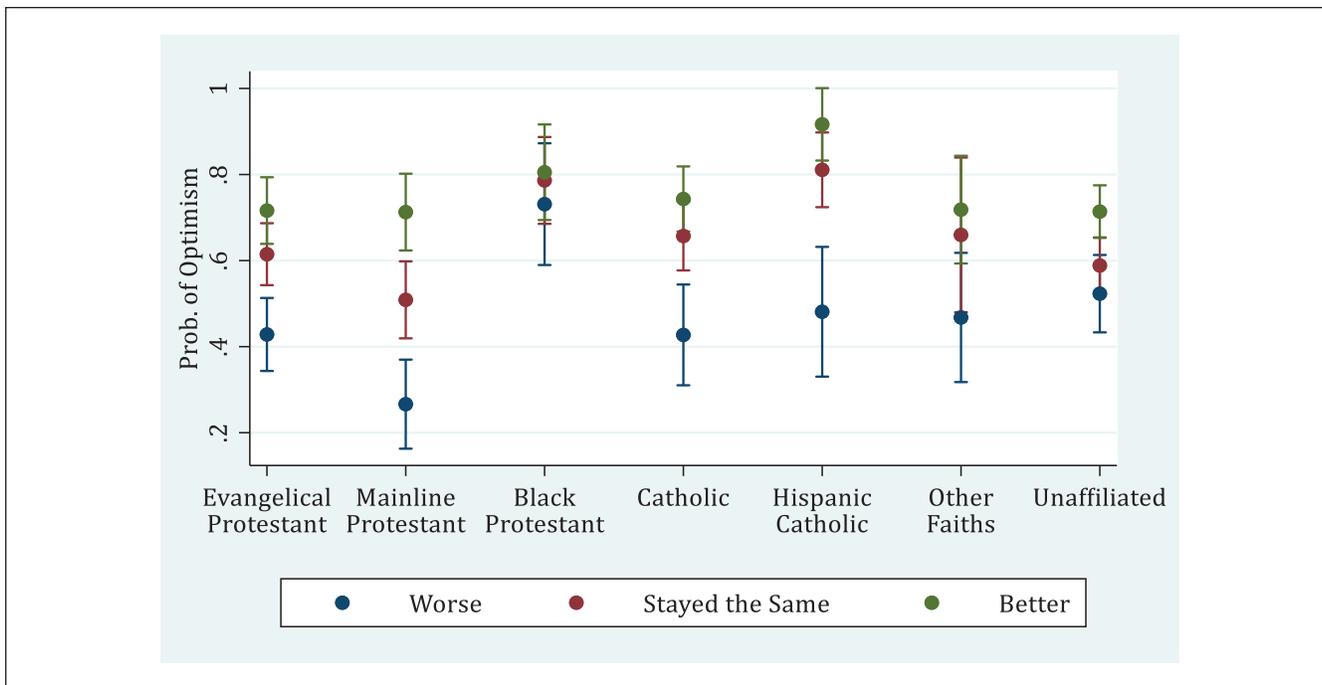


Figure 1. Probability of optimism by religion and changes in financial situation among men.

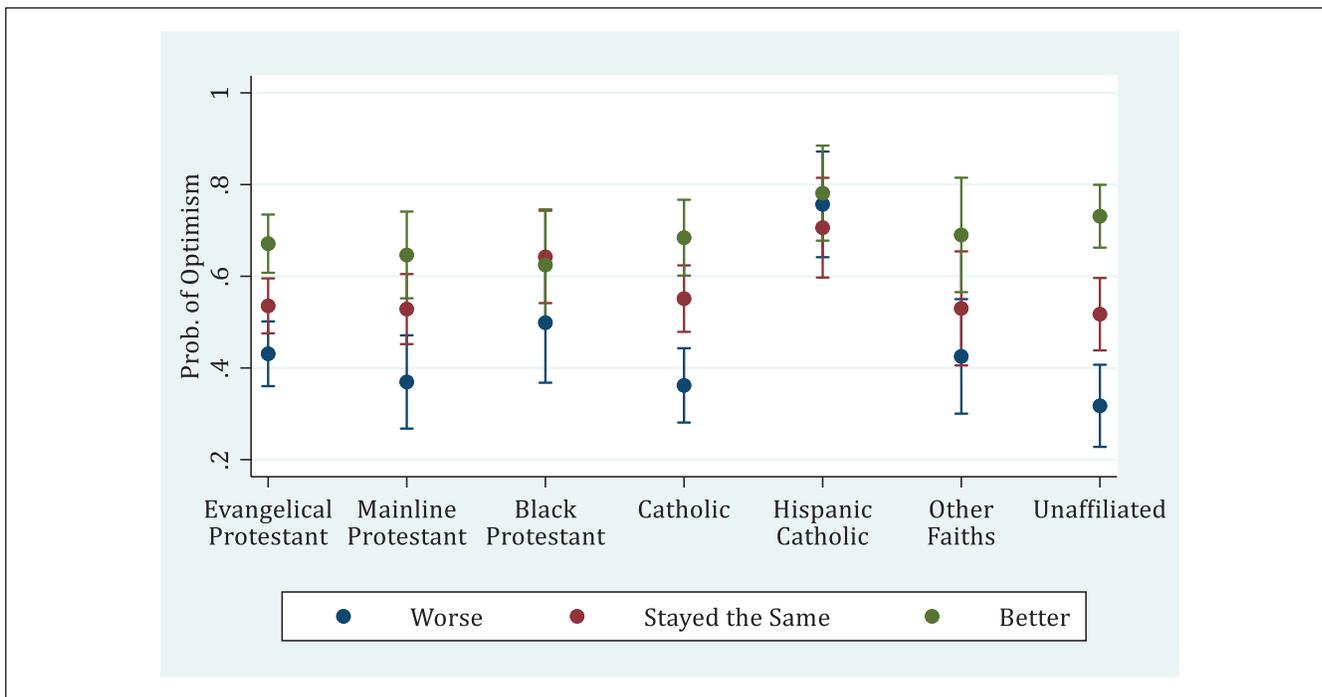


Figure 2. Probability of optimism by religion and changes in financial situation among women.

unaffiliated women. In other words, Hispanic Catholics are more steadfastly optimistic than unaffiliated women when confronted with downward mobility. Evangelical women also have a comparatively small drop in optimism, but it is not significantly different from the drop among the unaffiliated.

Because Hispanic Catholics stand out among men and women for different reasons, we also tested whether downward mobility is associated with a significantly different effect for those two groups. Using the approach described by Mize, Doan, and Long (forthcoming) for comparing

predictions across models, we found that it is significant ( $p = .002$ ). This indicates that the effect of downward mobility is not only different for Hispanic Catholics than for other groups; the effect is also gendered. When faced with downward mobility, Hispanic Catholic women are decidedly more resilient in their optimism than are Hispanic Catholic men.

Our ability to understand exactly why downward mobility is associated with these patterns of optimism for Hispanic Catholics is limited by the variables available in the GSS. We estimated a supplementary regression (available upon request) that controls for the frequency of church attendance, frequency of praying, and the subjective strength of religious affiliation. Only church attendance was significant, and only for men. Men who attended church at least several times a year were more optimistic. Nevertheless, including attendance in our models did not alter the results reported here. This suggests that the unusual resilience of optimism among Hispanic Catholic women and the unusual fragility of optimism among mainline Protestant men and Hispanic Catholic men is not driven by differences in church attendance.

Consequently, explaining the moderating effect of religion must be a task for future research. Still, patterns reported in other studies point toward some possibilities. Keister (2011a) reported that Hispanic Catholics and mainline Protestants are much more likely than the unaffiliated to say that work is essential to their self-worth. This is striking because the Hispanic Catholics and mainline Protestants are quite different on objective measures of earnings, wealth, assets, and so on. This may help explain why mainline Protestant men and Hispanic Catholic men are less resilient to downward mobility than the unaffiliated: they derive special meaning from work but do not experience the expected payoff when they are downwardly mobile. Hispanic Catholic women may be especially resilient because gender norms do not place the same expectations on them with respect to earnings, and yet they are more likely than other women to be working full-time (Keister 2011b). A sense of community belonging is also associated with optimism (Bandelj and Lanuza 2018), and Hispanic Catholic women may differ from others in that regard.

## Conclusion

Compared with people in other countries, Americans are unusually optimistic about their chances for upward mobility. Survey results after the great recession of 2007 to 2009, however, indicate that even American faith in mobility can waver in tough economic times. In this research, we studied optimism about upward mobility after the onset of the recession to extend research on stratification beliefs in two ways.

First, we examined how past experiences of mobility are related to optimism about future mobility. We found that subjective measures of mobility are related to optimism. In support of hypotheses 1 and 2, we found that people who say they are better off financially than they were a few years ago are

especially optimistic about their future chances for upward mobility, whereas people who say they are worse off are less optimistic. These findings support Piketty's (1995) argument that past experiences with mobility shape beliefs about the chances of future mobility. Interestingly, objective measures of mobility were not related to optimism (see also Alesina et al. 2018). This provides additional support for the argument that people's attitudes are often more closely related to their perceptions of the stratification system than to objective reality (Gimpelson and Treisman 2015; Gugushvili 2016).

Second, because many people interact with religious institutions throughout their lives and turn to religion to remain hopeful during difficult times, we examined if people with different religious affiliations have different levels of optimism or react differently to mobility experiences. Hypothesis 3 suggested that people in the most upwardly mobile religious groups would be most optimistic. Hypothesis 4 suggested that all religiously affiliated respondents would be more optimistic than the unaffiliated. We did not find support for either hypothesis. Instead, optimism was highest among Hispanic Catholics and those affiliated with historically black Protestant denominations. More research will be needed to determine if these groups are especially likely to hear messages consistent with the "prosperity gospel," which might boost their optimism. Furthermore, in support of hypothesis 5, we found that religion can moderate the effect of downward mobility. Downward mobility is typically associated with less optimism about mobility. However, the relationship is significantly stronger among mainline Protestant and Hispanic Catholic men than among unaffiliated men. It is significantly weaker among Hispanic Catholic women than among unaffiliated women. In short, religion can strengthen or weaken the connection between downward mobility and optimism.

Because of data limitations, we were unable to determine exactly why these religious differences exist. A supplementary analysis showed that among women, optimism is not related to frequency of church attendance or prayer or with the subjective strength of women's affiliation with their religious group. Among men, optimism was related only to frequency of church attendance, but controlling for that did not alter any of the other results. On the basis of Keister's (2011a) work, we suggest that researchers examine if the moderating effect of religion can be explained by variations in the importance people place on paid work.

Despite these limitations, our analysis advances the literature in several ways. It shows that American optimism about upward mobility is not static. Hope for the future depends in part on people's subjective mobility experiences. Our work also indicates that optimism varies by religion and that religion can make optimism either more or less robust to downward mobility.

Together, these findings provide reasons to worry about the future of the American dream. Despite political efforts to highlight improvements in the economy in the years after the

great recession, average American optimism about future upward mobility did not increase between 2010 and 2016. Furthermore, Americans who said their financial situation had grown worse over the past few years were especially doubtful about their chances for upward mobility. Because such optimism influences prosocial behaviors, efforts to get ahead economically, intergroup relations, and political support for efforts to reduce inequality, declining optimism could have wide-reaching effects.

However, in the context of other work, our results also hint at ways to help Americans remain optimistic about

upward mobility even during difficult times. The best solution, of course, is to have enough mobility that people remain optimistic about their futures. Still, when mobility is elusive for individuals (or in the aggregate), there may be ways to protect the optimism that is so important for achievement. Not everyone can develop the same religious beliefs as Hispanic Catholic women, but optimism is also connected to a sense of community belonging (Bandelj and Lanuza 2018). If communities can promote a sense of belonging, perhaps they can preserve optimism regardless of religious affiliation or gender.

## Appendix

**Table A1.** Coding Information and Descriptive Statistics for Focal Variables.

Variable	Coding	Men		Women	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Optimism about upward mobility	"The way things are in America, people like me and my family have a good chance of improving our standard of living." ("strongly disagree," "disagree," and "neither" = 0 ; "agree" and "strongly agree" = 1)	.62	.49	.55	.50
Mobility					
Financial situation					
Worse	"During the last few years, has your financial situation been getting better, worse, or has it stayed the same?"	.25	.43	.29	.45
Stayed the same		.40	.49	.40	.49
Better		.36	.48	.31	.46
Standard of living					
Worse than parents	"Compared to your parents when they were the age you are now, do you think your own standard of living now is . . ."	.16	.37	.18	.38
Same as parents		.24	.43	.24	.42
Better than parents		.60	.49	.59	.49
Occupational prestige quintile					
Lower	Respondent's occupational prestige quintile compared with quintile of parent with highest occupational prestige	.32	.47	.32	.47
Same as parents		.26	.44	.27	.45
Higher		.43	.49	.40	.49
Occupational prestige vs. parental maximum	Respondent's occupational prestige minus occupational prestige of the parent with greatest prestige	-2.36	17.10	-2.37	16.47
Occupational prestige vs. parental average	Respondent's occupational prestige minus average occupational prestige of parents	.76	15.37	.94	14.85
Educational mobility					
Lower	Respondent's highest educational degree compared to parent with highest degree	.21	.41	.19	.39
Same		.45	.50	.43	.49
Higher		.35	.48	.39	.49
Religious affiliation					
Evangelical	0 = no, 1 = yes	.22	.42	.27	.45
Mainline Protestant	0 = no, 1 = yes	.13	.34	.15	.35
Historically black Protestant	0 = no, 1 = yes	.06	.24	.09	.28
Catholic	0 = no, 1 = yes	.17	.37	.18	.39
Hispanic Catholic	0 = no, 1 = yes	.08	.28	.07	.26
Other faiths	0 = no, 1 = yes	.06	.24	.07	.25
Unaffiliated	0 = no, 1 = yes (reference category)	.26	.44	.17	.38

**Table A2.** Coding Information and Descriptive Statistics for Control Variables.

Variable	Coding	Men		Women	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Year					
2008	0 = no, 1 = yes (reference category)	.18	.38	.17	.38
2010	0 = no, 1 = yes	.17	.38	.18	.38
2012	0 = no, 1 = yes	.17	.37	.17	.38
2014	0 = no, 1 = yes	.22	.42	.23	.42
2016	0 = no, 1 = yes	.27	.44	.25	.43
Age	Respondent's age	47.62	16.62	48.18	17.31
Married	0 = no, 1 = yes	.48	.50	.43	.50
Children	"How many children have you ever had? Please count all that were born alive at any time (including any you had from a previous marriage)."	1.67	1.66	1.94	1.60
South	Respondent was interviewed in South Atlantic, Eastern South Central, or Western South Central region = 1, other = 0	.36	.48	.39	.49
College degree	0 = no, 1 = yes	.31	.46	.31	.46
Political views					
Liberal	0 = no, 1 = yes	.29	.46	.29	.45
Moderate	0 = no, 1 = yes (reference category)	.35	.48	.39	.49
Conservative	0 = no, 1 = yes	.35	.48	.32	.47
Family income	Family income in thousands of constant dollars (base = 2000)	5.35	4.48	4.58	4.14
Immigration history					
First generation	0 = no, 1 = yes (reference category)	.13	.34	.13	.34
Second generation	0 = no, 1 = yes	.09	.29	.09	.29
Third generation	0 = no, 1 = yes	.19	.40	.18	.39
Fourth generation or higher	0 = no, 1 = yes	.58	.49	.60	.49

**Table A3.** Predicted Probability of Optimism by Religion and Change in Financial Situation (Based on Full Models in Table 3).

	Men		Women	
	Margin	SE	Margin	SE
Evangelical				
Worse	.428	.043	.431	.036
Same	.615	.037	.536	.031
Better	.716	.040	.671	.032
Mainline				
Worse	.266	.053	.370	.052
Same	.509	.046	.528	.039
Better	.713	.046	.647	.048
Black Protestant				
Worse	.731	.072	.499	.067
Same	.786	.052	.642	.051
Better	.805	.057	.625	.062
Catholic (non-Hispanic)				
Worse	.427	.060	.362	.041
Same	.657	.041	.551	.037
Better	.743	.039	.684	.042
Hispanic Catholic				
Worse	.481	.077	.757	.059
Same	.811	.044	.706	.056
Better	.917	.043	.781	.053
Other faith				
Worse	.468	.077	.425	.064
Same	.660	.092	.530	.064
Better	.718	.064	.690	.064
Unaffiliated				
Worse	.523	.046	.317	.046
Same	.589	.033	.517	.040
Better	.714	.031	.731	.035

Note: Except for mobility, all variables are held at their observed values.

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