

How Accurate Are Americans About Economic Mobility?

Research Report: PADS-007 | August 8, 2023

Research Question

According to economists at Stanford University, economic mobility is a “fading American dream.” Richard Delgado, a founder of critical race theory, calls upward mobility a “myth” and suggests that, “the myth of upward mobility enables the wealthy to justify favorable treatment for themselves and cutbacks for the rest,” while reminding us that, “study after study shows that class membership in our society is relatively fixed.” In agreement, the *Huffington Post* regards economic class in America as “suffocating,” *Mother Jones* insists that America is a “thriving aristocracy” maintained by “powerful-yet-obscure entities,” and the *New York Times* informs us that class in America is a “caste system,” and that “the hierarchy of caste is... about power — which groups have it and which do not. It is about resources — which groups are seen as worthy of them, and which are not.” These claims are not new. As far back as 1897, Carrol D. Wright, the first commissioner of the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, noted that, “the assertion that the rich are growing richer and the poor poorer has... taken more complete possession of the popular mind than any other.” Yet, Wright went on to say that this assertion “is a false one, false in its premises and misleading in its influence.” Is poverty ubiquitous in America? Do people have any chance of improving their economic circumstances? To assess these claims and what Americans think about them, in this report we ask: how accurate are Americans about economic mobility?

Methodology

Data Source

- Political Accuracy and Divisions Study (“PADS,” collected August 2022 to October 2022 using Qualtrics Panel Services and quota sampling)

Data Quality Control

- All participants in this dataset passed attention, response time, fraud, duplication, and bot checks.

Participants

- 3014 adults in the United States (51.2% Female)
- Average Age = 44.39 years (SD = 17.41 years)
- 46.4% White; 32.2% Hispanic; 21.2% Black

Measures

- Accuracy Questions about Economic Mobility: If you had to guess, about what percentage of...
 1. households in the United States receive support from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (i.e., “food stamps”)?
 2. people born into the poorest families in the United States, stay poor?
 3. people with immigrant parents are economically poor today?
- Political Orientation: Respondents were asked, “When thinking about fiscal/ economic issues, where would you place yourself on the political continuum?”

Summary of Findings

1. On average, GenZ respondents and those identifying as “Very Liberal” incorrectly believed that most Americans are on food stamps (Figs. 1 - 2).
2. Regardless of generation or political orientation, on average, respondents incorrectly believed that most people born into the poorest families in the U.S. remained in the lowest income bracket (Figs. 3 - 4).
3. On average, GenZ respondents and those identifying as “Very Liberal” or “Liberal” incorrectly believed that most adult children of immigrants live in poverty (Figs. 5 - 6).

Take-Home Messages

- Regardless of generation or political orientation, Americans are highly inaccurate about poverty and social mobility in the United States.
- Older and more conservative respondents are relatively more accurate than younger and more liberal respondents.
- Have an interpretation? Share it here: research@skeptic.com

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Figure 1

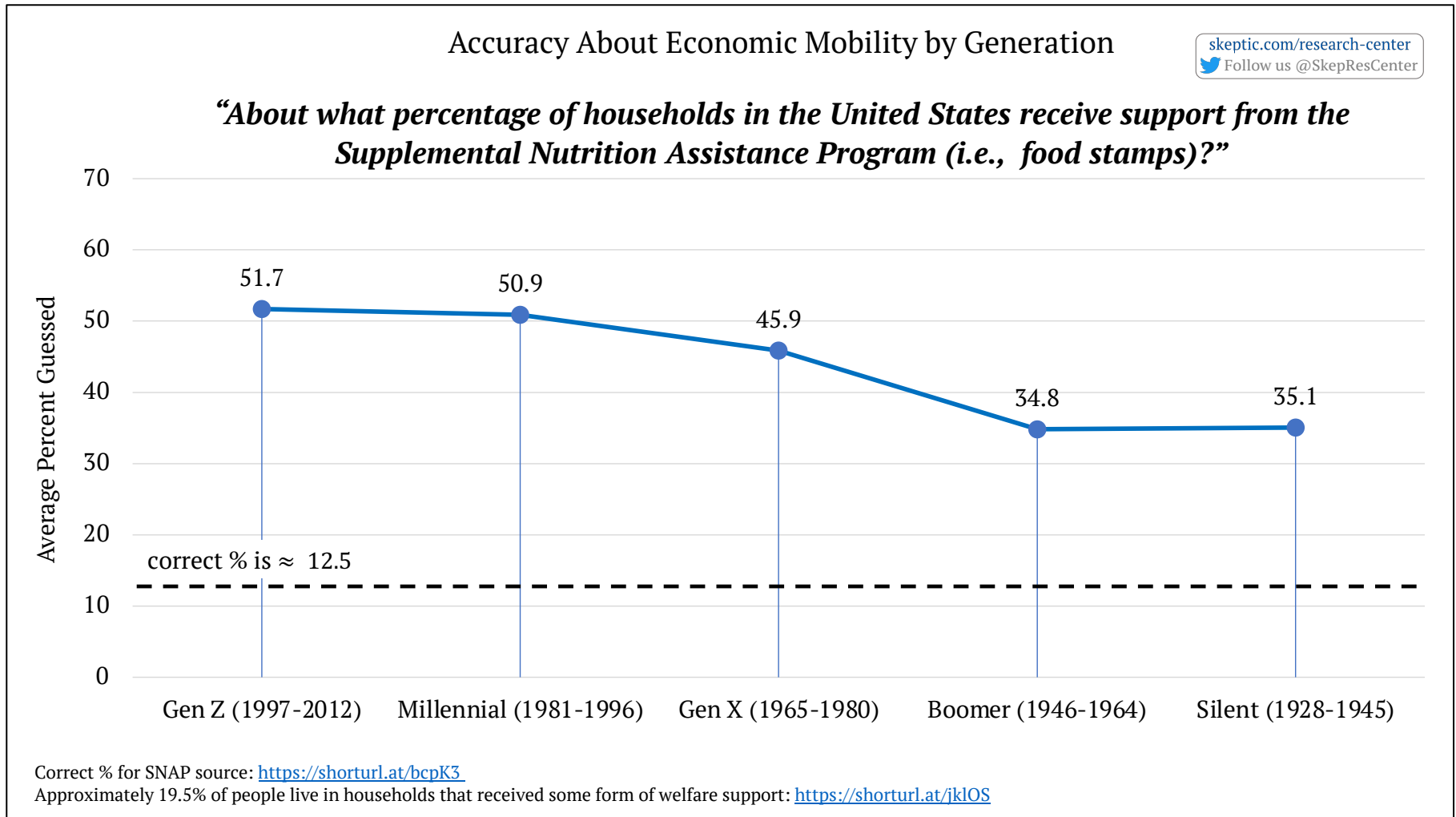


Figure 2

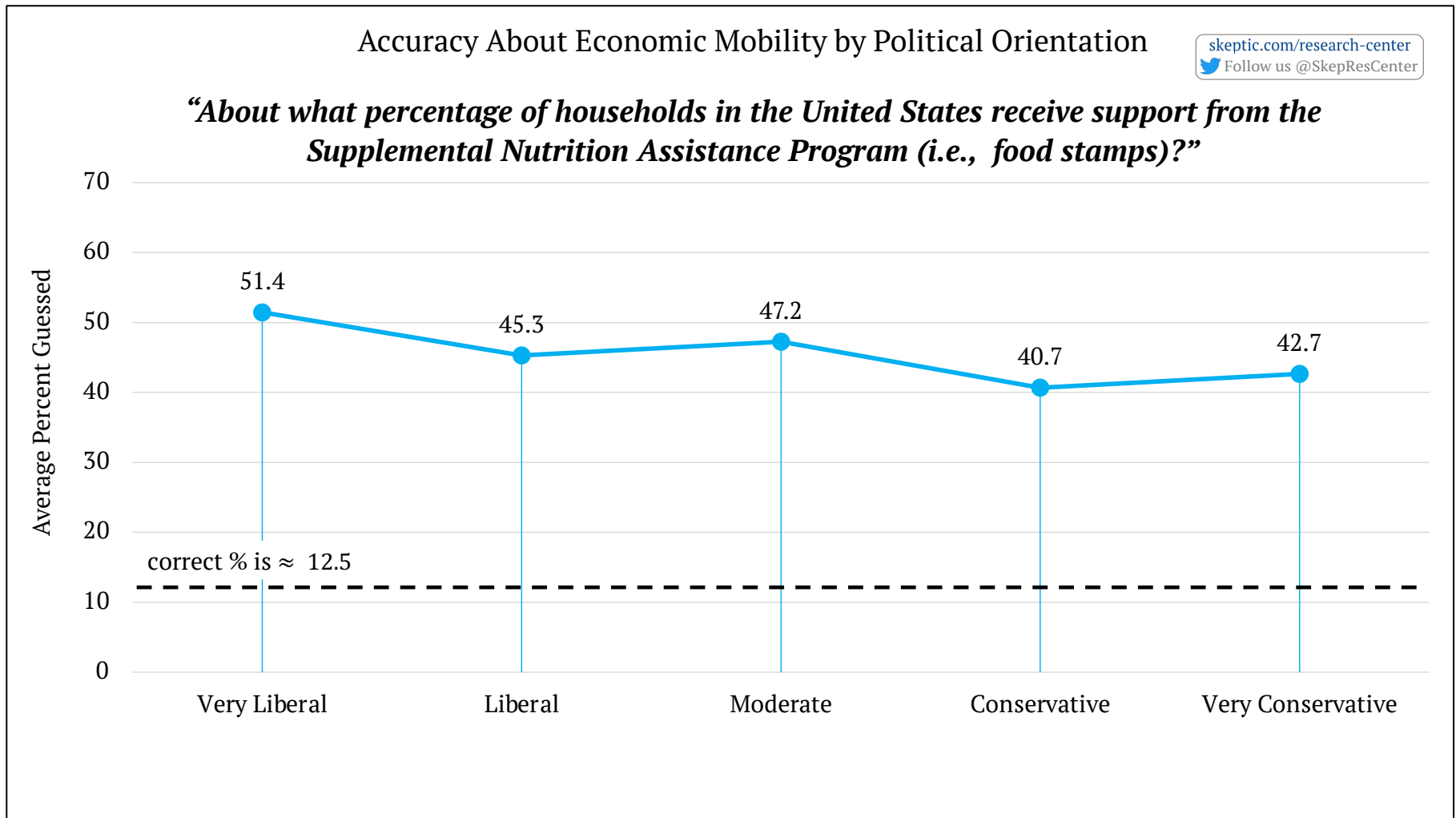


Figure 3

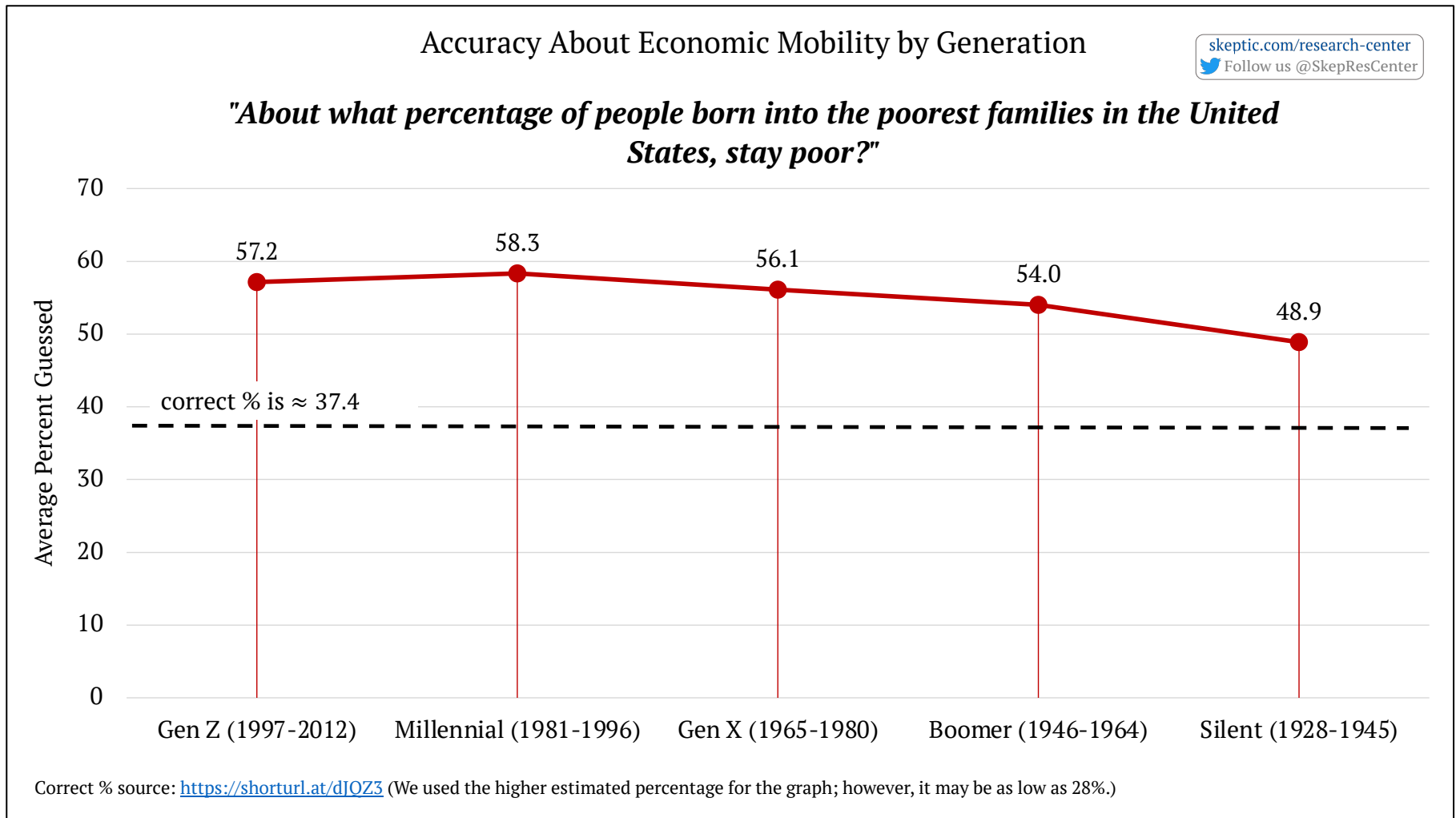


Figure 4

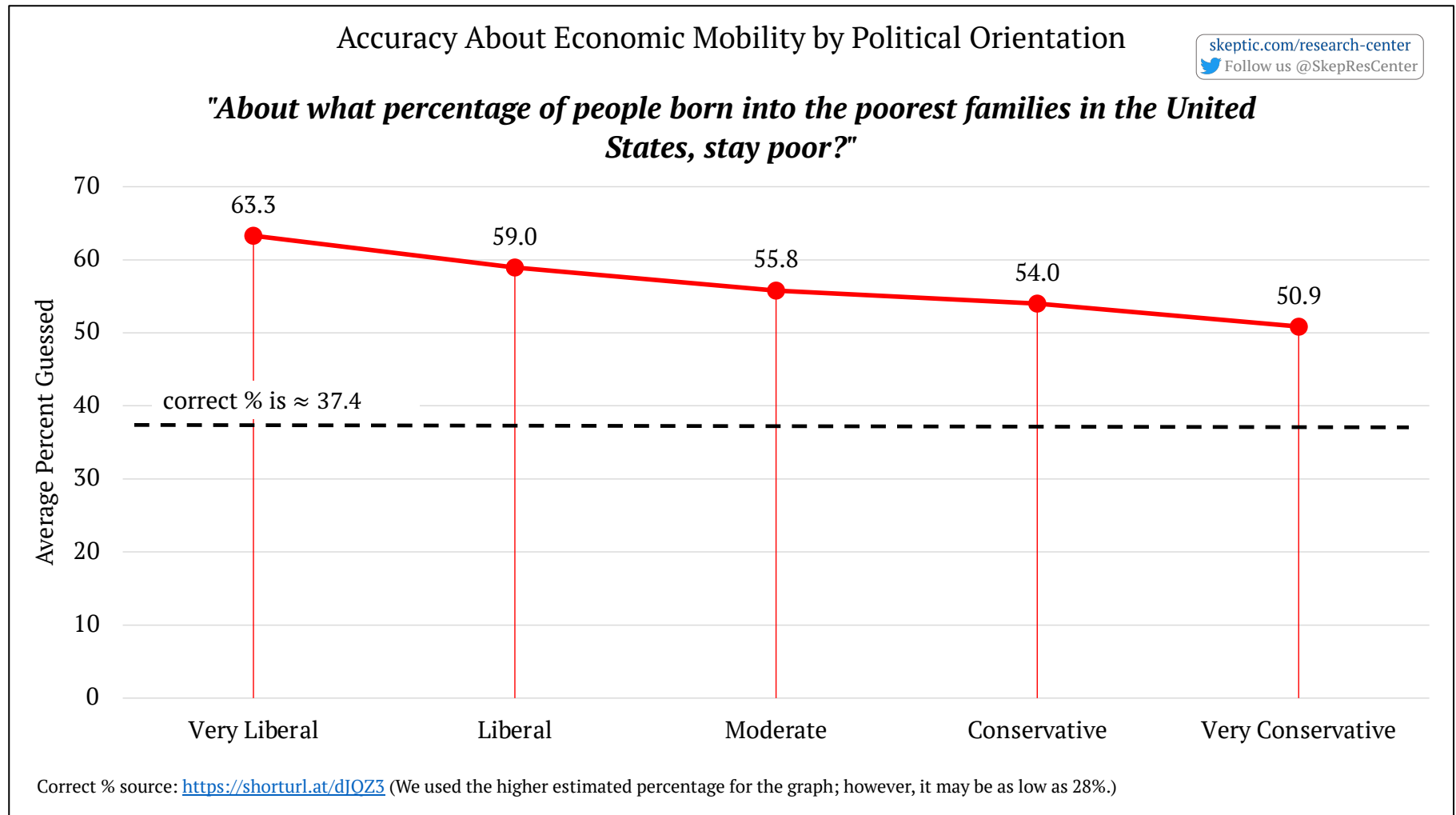


Figure 5

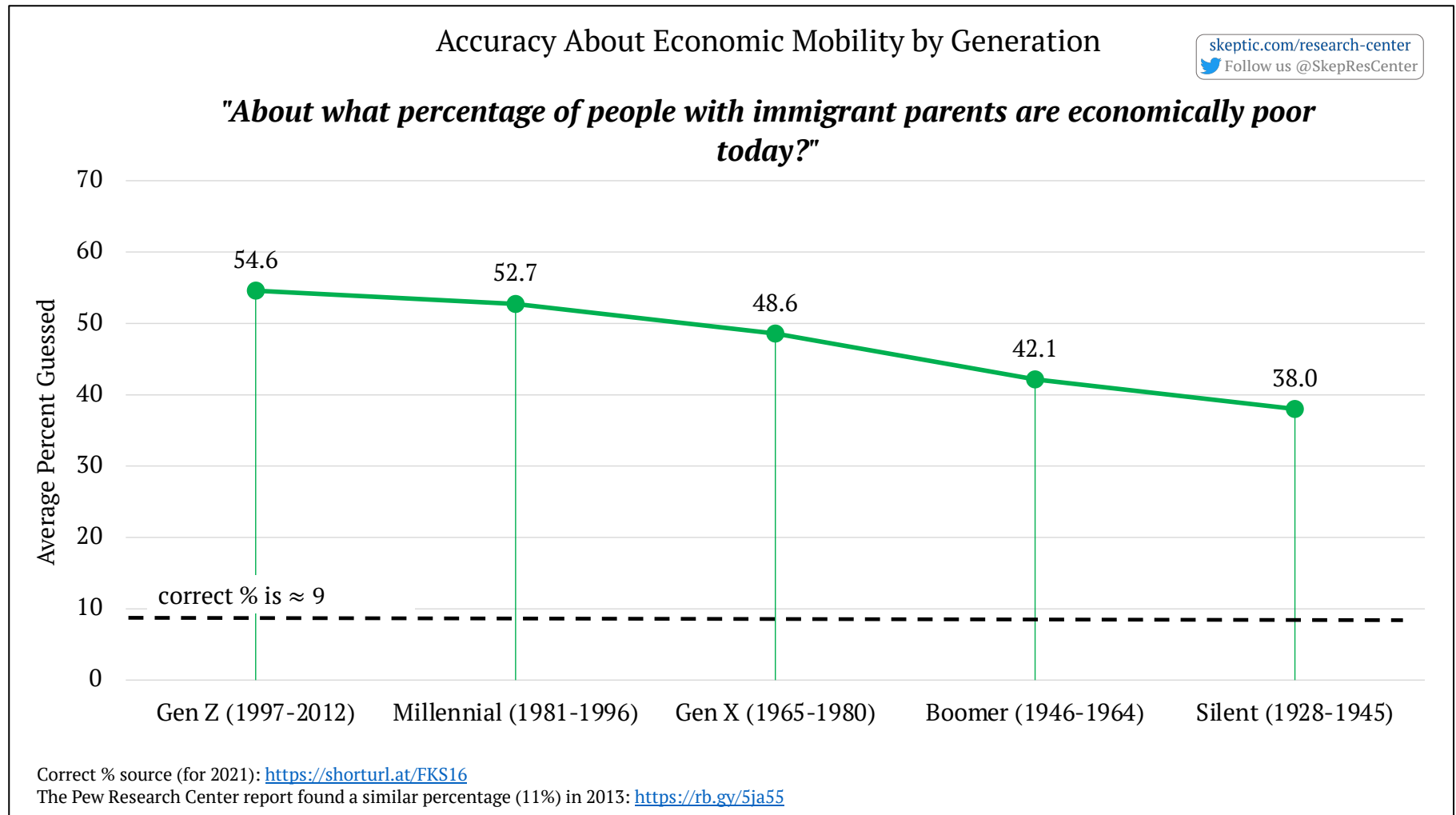
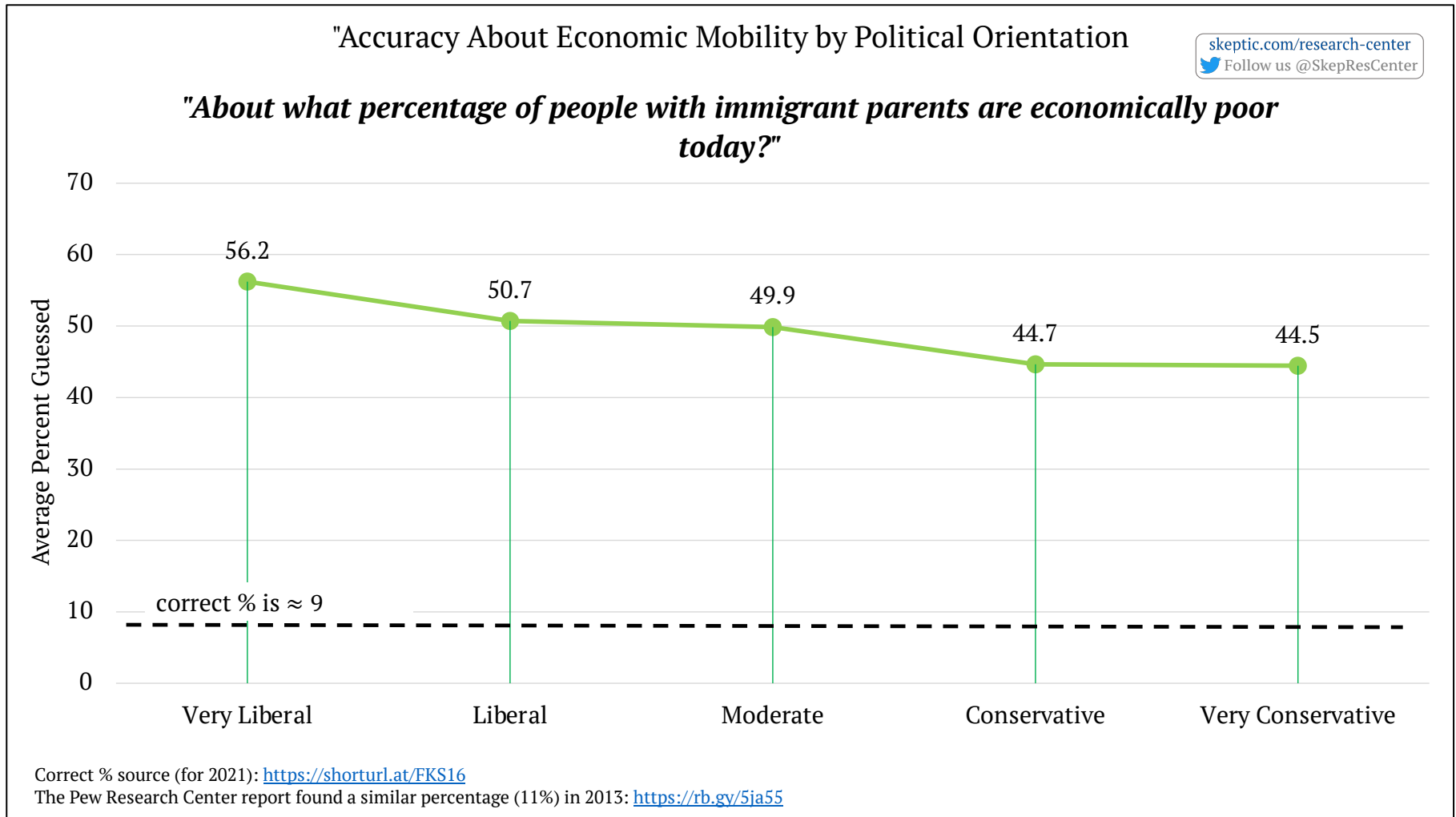


Figure 6



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