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America was Great When Nationally Relevant Events Occurred and When Americans Were Young

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During his campaign, President Donald Trump promised to “Make America Great Again.” When do Americans think America was at its greatest, and how do they decide on that year? We asked Americans to nominate America’s greatest year, their personal greatest year, and to explain why they nominated those years. Americans could not agree on America’s greatest year. Instead, some Americans nominated years when nationally relevant events occurred, such as 1776 and 1945. Others nominated years when they were between 0 and 20 years old; people nominated a similar pattern of years when asked the year they were at their personal greatest. Our findings establish, for the first time, a set of memories for the events that shape America’s identity. Our findings also add to the literature on the reminiscence bump, showing that decisions about America’s greatest time and one’s personal greatest time are most likely to occur during one’s youth.

General Audience Summary

During his campaign, President Donald Trump promised to “Make America Great Again.” When do Americans think America was at its greatest and how do they decide on that year? We asked Americans to nominate America’s greatest year, their personal greatest year, and to explain why they nominated those years. Americans could not agree on America’s greatest year. Instead, some Americans nominated years when events important to American identity occurred, such as 1776 and 1945. But others nominated years when they were between 0 and 20 years old, a pattern similar to when these people thought they were at their personal greatest. Our findings suggest that Donald Trump may find it difficult to make America great again, because Americans do not agree on when America was great.

Keywords: Nationally relevant memories, Reminiscence bump, Politics

President Donald Trump promised to “Make America Great Again.” But to make America great again, he must first know when America was great. Trump told the New York Times, “. . . the turn of the [20th] century, that’s when we were great, when we were really starting to go robust.” Then later in the same interview, he nominated “the late ‘40s and ‘50s. . .” (Haberma n & Sanger, 2016, “When America was ‘Great,’” para. 6). Of

course, if Trump is going to lead America back to greatness, it would help if both he and the American public agreed on their destination. Do they? The New York Times wondered the same thing. Instead of asking Americans “When was America great?” and obtaining a broad range of time periods that would be hard to interpret, the Times asked Americans “What year was America’s greatest?” But Americans could not agree. In fact, although

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the most popular “greatest” year was 2000, fewer than 9% of people surveyed nominated that year (Morning Consult, 2016; Sanger-Katz, 2016).

We were intrigued by the question the New York Times asked, and the lack of agreement they discovered. Our intrigue arose not as a matter of politics, but as a matter of memory: Do Americans share a set of memories about when America was great? Or are Americans’ memories of when America was great shaped by personal factors, such as their age, or their assessment about when they were at their own personal greatest? We addressed these two possibilities in three studies.

Nationally Relevant Memories

It seems reasonable to expect that when Americans nominate America’s greatest year, they would think of widely remembered events that make up part of America’s identity—these memories are called *collective memories* (Hirst & Manier, 2008). Collective memories differ from historical facts because they function to create a group identity, possibly at the expense of accuracy (Hirst & Manier, 2008; Wertsch & Roediger, 2008). By contrast, historical facts represent an attempt to provide an accurate account of the past, even if that account is negative, or does not fit with the identity of a nation (Wertsch & Roediger, 2008). We further expect the years people nominate as America’s greatest will be tied to *nationally relevant memories*, which are collective memories that are represented in a nation’s culture—for example, in monuments, texts, and traditions (Assmann, 2011; Stone, van der Haegen, Luminet, & Hirst, 2014). Although there is no published, empirically-developed, list of nationally relevant memories for Americans, we might expect such a list would include a mix of memories for positive and negative events—events such as the Moon landing, the signing of the Declaration of Independence, or the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center. People can have nationally relevant memories for events that happened in their lifetime, such as the World Trade Center attacks, or events that happened before they were born, such as the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Therefore, we expect that when Americans nominate America’s greatest year, they will draw on collective and nationally relevant memories.

But how can we know if Americans nominate these events when asked for America’s greatest year? One idea is to return to the New York Times research, and examine how frequently people nominated years that match important events in American history. But those data suggest only a small percentage of people nominated years with any obvious connection to American identity. For example, although it seems reasonable to assume that Americans who nominated 1776 as America’s greatest year were referring to the signing of the Declaration of Independence—surely a contender for one of America’s greatest years—fewer than 1% of Americans actually nominated 1776. Likewise, fewer than 2% nominated 1945, which marked the end of World War II, or 1969, the year of the Moon landing (Sanger-Katz, 2016).

How can we understand this seeming lack of agreement about when America was great? One possibility is that national events accrue their importance not because people assess memories

of these events against some benchmark of American nationalism, but because people relate those events to their own lives, making them personal memories (see, for example, Symons & Johnson, 1997). Although nationally relevant memories and personal memories can be about the same event, nationally relevant memories are widely remembered, and the subject of these memories is the nation (Stone et al., 2014). Consider, for example, the 50-something woman who remembers the first Moon landing. As she remembers, she reexperiences childhood thoughts, images, and feelings from her 7th birthday: She “sees” the Apollo 11 touch down on the lunar surface, and “hears” Neil Armstrong’s voice, “The Eagle has landed.” Does she remember the Moon landing as an event that defined America’s identity, or is she instead remembering her own autobiographical memory? To the extent that Americans rely on their personal memories to determine America’s greatest year, we might expect people to nominate a personally important year.

The Reminiscence Bump

The autobiographical memory literature provides support for this idea, and shows that the importance people attribute to personal events is related to how old they were when the event occurred. More specifically, when people report their most important personal events, or the events most central to their life story, they disproportionately nominate events from when they were between 10 and 30 years old—a period described as the *remembrance bump* (Berntsen & Rubin, 2002; Bohn, 2010; Rubin, Rahhal, & Poon, 1998; Rubin, Wetzler, & Nebes, 1986). The reminiscence bump also appears when people are probed with cue words (for example, “street”) or asked to freely recall autobiographical memories (Demiray, Gülgöz, & Bluck, 2009; Janssen, Rubin, & Jacques, 2011; for a review, see Koppel & Rubin, 2016). Moreover, when people think about a hypothetical person’s lifetime and predict when his or her most important personal event will occur, they disproportionately nominate years from that hypothetical person’s reminiscence bump (Berntsen & Rubin, 2004). This literature supports the possibility that people’s memories of personal greatness would be disproportionately from the reminiscence bump period.

These findings, of course, do not tell us about the extent to which the reminiscence bump would appear when people nominate America’s greatest year. But to the extent that America’s greatest year is an important public event, then we would expect to see a bump. For example, we know that when people report important public events, they disproportionately nominate events from their reminiscence bump, although one study detected an earlier bump for public events compared to personal events (Holmes & Conway, 1999; Schuman & Corning, 2013; Schuman & Scott, 1989). As with personal events, when people predict when the most important public event will occur in a hypothetical person’s lifetime they disproportionately nominate events or years that would occur in that hypothetical person’s reminiscence bump—despite the fact that the probability of important public events occurring should be independent of one’s age (Koppel & Berntsen, 2014).

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