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Nostalgia for What and to What End? Multi-Dimensional National Nostalgia and its Relationship With National Identification and Political Preferences

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Supplementary Materials: Materials [see Index of Supplementary Materials]

Abstract

Research on group-based nostalgia has begun exploring how different ways of representing the pasts shapes our group belonging and political preferences. So far, this body of work has focused on measuring levels of nostalgia, at the expense of considering what people are nostalgic for. The present paper develops a bottom-up approach to examining how the content of national nostalgia links with specific social and political attitudes. Across two studies, drawing on open-ended and close-ended survey data from the UK (Study 1, N = 3,005, and Study 2, N = 318), USA (Study 2, N = 305), and Sweden (Study 2, N = 234), we develop and test a multi-dimensional national nostalgia (MDNN) scale which captures nostalgia for communality, achievements, and power/status. Across the three countries we find persistent evidence that nostalgia for power/status is associated with stronger national identification, right-wing ideology, and right-wing party favorability, while nostalgia for communality and achievements vary in their associations with political preferences. Our findings reveal the various forms that national nostalgia can take, its implications for linking longing with belonging, as well as the variations that can occur in different national and political contexts.

Keywords

national nostalgia, national identity, collective continuity, political preferences

Non-Technical Summary

Background

National nostalgia – longing for the past – has recently gained more public attention, particularly due to its growing presence in political rhetoric. A lot of existing research has shown that heightened levels of national nostalgia become associated with different levels of inclusive and exclusive group identities, and political attitudes.

Why was this study done?

More recently, work has also begun showing that how we remember the past has implications for the relationship between national nostalgia and social and political preferences. It is this line of work that our research contributes to. This research explores how different types of national nostalgia relate to people's sense of national identity and political views.

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What did the researchers do and find?
Instead of just measuring how nostalgic people are, the study looks at *what* they feel nostalgic about. Using surveys in the UK, USA, and Sweden, we identify three key types of national nostalgia: nostalgia for community, achievements, and power/status. The results show that nostalgia for power and status is consistently linked to stronger national identity, right-wing political beliefs, and support for right-wing parties. In contrast, nostalgia for community and achievements has more varied connections to political preferences, depending on the country.

What do these findings mean?
The study highlights *what* people are nostalgic for has implications for political beliefs and attachment to the national ingroup.

In recent years, there has been a rise in social and political psychology's interest in nostalgia, particularly in group-based forms of nostalgia, i.e., related to a group's past, rather than one's personal past (Smeekes, 2015; Wildschut et al., 2014). Much of this research illustrates that the bittersweet nature of nostalgia extends to its group-based expression; nostalgia can strengthen ingroup identification (Wildschut et al., 2014) but also heighten outgroup animosity (Smeekes, 2015; Smeekes et al., 2015). It can lead to more anti-immigrant sentiments or less (i.e., Wohl et al., 2020b) and more right-wing populist support or less (Lammers & Baldwin, 2020).

What seems crucial here is *what people are nostalgic for*, in other words, the content of their nostalgic sentiments. Yet little research has developed a clear understanding of the content of nostalgia, and especially how the 'past' is given meaning by individuals themselves, and how this informs their sociopolitical attachments and attitudes. The purpose of the present research is to address this gap by uncovering *what people are nostalgic for* when they express nostalgic sentiments about their nation's past, using open-ended measures to generate themes (Study 1), that are then operationalized and tested in a new multi-dimensional national nostalgia scale which captures nostalgia for communality, achievements and power/status (Study 2). Across the three countries studied (UK, US, and Sweden) we find persistent evidence that nostalgia for power/status is associated with stronger national identification, right-wing ideology and right-wing party favorability, while nostalgia for communality and achievements vary in their associations with political preferences. The implication for the politicization of nostalgia, and the extent to which certain historical events serve as more potent 'symbolic reserves' for political mobilization, is discussed.

Group-Based Nostalgia in the National Context

Group-based nostalgia has been examined by studying nostalgia within different types of social groups, including racial (Reyna et al., 2022), cultural and religious (Wohl et al., 2020b), ethnic (Martinovic et al., 2018), generational (Hibbing et al., 2017), class (Smith & Campbell, 2017) and national groups (Smeekes, 2015). Studies on national nostalgia predominantly operationalize the concept by asking participants directly how nostalgic they feel when they think about their country's past (i.e., van Prooijen et al., 2022), whether they think their country was a better place to live 50 years ago (i.e., Richards et al., 2020) or whether they feel nostalgic for different aspects of their groups' past (Baldwin et al., 2018; Smeekes, 2015; Smeekes et al., 2015). In the case of the latter examples, statements include asking how nostalgic participants feel for 'the way people were in the past', 'the way society was', 'the values people had in the past' or the 'sort of place the country was before' (i.e., Loughnane et al., 2024). As such, existing research on national nostalgia has come a long way in evidencing the presence of national nostalgia among the public, illustrating how heightened levels of national nostalgia become associated with increased ingroup identification (Smeekes, 2015; Wildschut et al., 2014), outgroup prejudice (Behler et al., 2021), ingroup bias (Dimitriadou et al., 2019) and populist attitudes and support (Smeekes et al., 2021; van Prooijen et al., 2022). But what do people mean when they express nostalgia for the way 'people were' or 'society was'? What parts of history come to mind when people say that they feel nostalgic for the past?

Oftentimes, nostalgic sentiments are triggered in times of social transition and change (Boym, 2001; Davis, 1979; Wilson, 2005), playing a regulatory function (Wildschut & Sedikides, 2023) to counteract anxieties, losses, or perceived

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threats to the group (Ionescu et al., 2025; Smeekes et al., 2018). As such, understanding what people are nostalgic *for* can give us an insight into what kind of loss, threat or worries they perceived to be experiencing in the present.

It has been argued that nostalgia is more prominent on the right of the political spectrum, with increasing research showing a strong relationship between nostalgia and right-wing political attitudes (i.e., Elçi, 2022; Versteegen, 2024), as well as a prevalence of nostalgia appeals in right-wing rhetoric (Kenny, 2017; Kešić et al., 2022; Mols & Jetten, 2014). Despite this evidence, national nostalgia is not limited to the ideological right (Lammers, 2023), but has also been found within the political left, in response to negative political changes in the present (Fetterman et al., 2021). For example, Hibbing et al. (2017) show that *how* people perceive the political past (and how nostalgic they are for it) shapes their evaluations of the political present, a trend identified across the ideological spectrum. Thus, while being nostalgic might cut across political divides, the mobilization of it seems more prevalent in the context of right-wing rhetoric, perhaps underpinning the disproportional research on nostalgia within the context of right-wing ideologies. Key to the bottom-up aims of the current paper is, therefore, to both uncover what people across the ideological spectrum are nostalgic for and to then assess whether these nostalgic contents are differentially related to political preferences, evidencing how certain ways of representing the past might serve more potent 'symbolic reserves' for political mobilization.

While previous research has examined what nostalgia, as a concept, means to people (i.e., Hepper et al., 2012), evidencing its inherently social nature (Juhl & Biskas, 2023), less research exists examining the links between *nostalgia content* and key socio-political attitudes. In other words, how different types of nostalgia for different types of pasts, might shape sociopolitical attitudes in different ways. To address this gap, research has begun examining what happens to contemporary socio-political attitudes when we manipulate how the past is remembered, finding that it can lead to more, or less, inclusive political attitudes (i.e., Lammers & Baldwin, 2020; Wohl et al., 2020b). These studies have developed typologies of nostalgia by contrasting nostalgia for an open v. homogenous society (Stefaniak et al., 2021; Wohl et al., 2020b) and egalitarian v. traditional forms of nostalgia (Richards et al., 2020). This shift in focus is important as it acknowledges, and illustrates, how the relationship between nostalgic sentiments and sociopolitical attitudes is mediated by meaning. As Wohl and colleagues (2020a, p. 3) argue "it is important to know what group members are nostalgizing about", where "differing aspects of the past may be selectively brought to light or forgotten" depending on the perceived needs and goals of the present.

This requires us to understand better how the *meaning* given to the past translates into different forms of nostalgia, and whether all salient memories of the past have a potential to become mobilized through the politicization of nostalgia. While the abovementioned research has moved us some way in addressing the relationship between the content of nostalgia and contemporary socio-political attitudes, this has been done by pre-defining the 'content' that participants engage with, i.e., that they can express nostalgia for. A gap remains in considering how the 'past' is given meaning by individuals, and how this informs what they are nostalgic for. Research on social representations of history and collective memories (Liu & Hilton, 2005; Wagoner, 2015) goes some way in addressing this gap by theoretically and empirically evidencing the socially constructed nature of historical remembering, and how *what* we remember tends to align with social identity needs and projected socio-political futures (Liu & Hilton, 2005; Mols & Jetten, 2014; Obradović, 2016). Previous research finds that, across the world, history is predominantly remembered in terms of politics and war, both when reflecting on national, and world, history (Liu et al., 2005).

While this line of research gives us a good idea as to which historical events might be salient in collective memory, it says less about how potent these events might be for nostalgic 'picking', namely how certain collective memories can be mobilized to legitimize political agendas in the present and future (Liu & Hilton, 2005). What is needed is to marry these two lines of work to better understand when, how and why the politicization of nostalgia is effective in shaping contemporary sociopolitical attitudes of citizens. This is what we aimed to achieve through our two studies.

Study 1

In Study 1, we examine which parts of the past are salient in collective memory but also whether the explanations of why participants picked these events could tell us something about whether they were nostalgic for them or not.

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As such, Study 1 took a very exploratory approach to establishing a diverse set of categories of potential 'content' of nostalgia. To do this, we decided in Study 1 to not directly ask participants 'what they are *nostalgic* for'. Instead, as nostalgia refers to a sentimental longing for a group's past, we wanted to see whether we could establish which parts of a group's past seem to have more 'nostalgic appeal' than others without prompting negativity towards the general concept of nostalgia. Therefore, Study 1 aimed to examine how participants represent positively valued aspects of their past and whether these representations in turn would be significantly linked to varying levels of national identity importance, generalized national nostalgia, collective discontinuity, and political party preferences.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Data were collected in September 2018 as part of a larger study, using a nationally representative sample of British voters (N = 3,005). A survey was administered online via a market research company, and participants were paid £10.55/hour. Respondents were screened with a question confirming that they are registered voters in the UK and currently live in the UK, and they provided consent for their responses to be used in academic research. The study took 25 minutes to complete, the questions that form part of this dataset took between 4-6 minutes only. The sample consisted of 56% women and 44% men; 33% were between 18 and 30 years old, 36% were 31-50 years old, 25% between 51-70 years old, and 5% were above 70 years old. 31% had earned a university degree[1].

Measures

All measures used a 7-point Likert scale, unless otherwise stated.

Open-ended measures: The two open-ended questions were used to elicit positive representations of history 1) *What is the greatest era of British history?* and evaluative explanations 2) *What makes that era great?* The total number of valid open-ended responses used in the analysis was 1,979[2].

Theme dummy variables: From the open-ended analysis we created binary variables for four themes and coded all responses, allowing for entries to have multiple codes when appropriate. To avoid excluding cases based on the outcome variable, the respondents who did not engage with the question were coded as 0 for all four variables.

British identity centrality: One item (from Sellers et al., 1997) was used, asking, "*How important is being British to your identity?"* with a 5-point scale from "completely unimportant" to "very important".

Generalized national nostalgia: One item was used to probe the extent to which participants perceived that society has deteriorated compared to the past: "In general, British society is not as good as it used to be".

Collective discontinuity: One item measured the extent to which respondents perceived discontinuity between the nation's present and past: "Britain has changed so much in recent years that I no longer recognize it".

Political ideology: Combined score of two items asking, "In terms of economic [social] issues, how would you describe your political attitudes and beliefs?" with response options between "Very liberal" (1) and "Very conservative" (7), with higher scores indicating more right leaning.

Favorability of political parties: One item was used, asking "What is your perception of these political parties?" (Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrats, UK Independence Party [UKIP], Green, Plaid Cymru, and Scottish National Party [SNP]) with response options ranging from "extremely negative" to "extremely positive".

Open-Ended Analysis

To analyze the open-ended responses, we used an inductive-deductive approach to content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013), coding each question separately.

1) Age was collected as an ordinal variable. Respondents identified which age bracket was appropriate for their age. Participants were also asked for level of income.

2) We excluded empty answers and responses that did not identify an era (including 'unsure', 'not sure', 'undecided', 'I don't know' responses) or offer an explanation for why they did not select an era (i.e., some stated that 'none were good' which is a response we did code as it illustrated an opinion).

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We began by coding the first question (*What is the greatest era of British history?)*. Responses varied from identifying specific eras ('The Victorian Era'), specific points in time ('the 1960s', 'The 20s'), specific people ('When Churchill was in power', 'Diana'), and specific events ('WWII', 'Olympics'). This question was coded in two ways. First, following Liu, Goldstein-Hawes, et al. (2005) we coded which time-period a particular era/event corresponded with, as their research indicates references to the past tend to focus on the recent past. Secondly, we developed a more inductive codebook from the responses themselves, creating unique categories for the most frequently mentioned events/eras (i.e., WWII, Industrial Revolution), keeping these separate and distinct despite overlaps (i.e., Industrial Revolution and British Empire). This was done because responses to the follow-up question ('*What makes it great'*) tended to vary, so we kept categories as distinct as possible to be able to get a better picture of what people remember and why. All responses were coded by a research assistant and a sample of 150 were coded for inter-rater reliability (IRR). Given the categories stayed descriptively close to the responses, IRR was 100%.

For the second question (*What makes that era great?*) we coded the responses into categories based on shared meaning. The authors coded a sample of 100 responses together, from which a preliminary codebook was developed (see Supplementary Materials, Table S1). A research assistant was tasked with applying the final codebook of categories to the full dataset. While coding, we allowed for a response to fit into more than one category as responses sometimes included multiple evaluative points. The categories were then reviewed and grouped together under themes, which reflected a higher level of abstraction and degree of interpretation compared to the more descriptive content categories. A sample of 150 responses was then selected for intercoder reliability checking at the level of themes. Each sample was independently coded by the first and second author, then compared. This led to IRR of 86% (achievements), 85% (power/status), 88% (communality) and 99% (national nostalgia rejection).

We then created binary variables for each theme to include in the quantitative analysis. To avoid excluding cases based on the outcome variable, the respondents who did not engage with the question (see exclusion criteria above) were coded as 0 for all four variables.

Results

Open-Ended Results

Like previous research (Liu, Goldstein-Hawes, et al., 2005) we find a recency-effect in terms of time-periods mentioned (50.3% focused on the 20th century, 12.3% on the 21st century; see S2 for distribution across all time-periods). We also find that the types of events that are memorable are predominantly those related to politics and conflict (Power/Status), but also, to scientific and technological advancements (Achievements). Interestingly, echoing existing work on national nostalgia there was a significant presence of responses that focused on 'how society was' (Communality; i.e., Wohl et al., 2020b) and a unique, but relevant, set of responses that outright rejected the prompts focus on 'greatness' of the past (Nostalgia rejection). Table 1 and Table 2 illustrate theme counts, frequencies and overlaps with most common eras/events. For sample quotes of each theme, see Supplementary Materials, Table S1.

Table 1

Count and Frequency of Themes From Open-Ended Coding

Theme	Count	%
Achievements	722	36.5%
Power/Status	545	27.5%
Communality	648	32.7%
Nostalgia rejection	179	9.0%

Note. Valid sample: 1979 open-ended responses. Percentages do not total 100 given overlap and/or potential double coding of themes.

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Table 2

UK Era Frequencies: Counts and Percentages of Era and Theme Overlap

		Achievements		Power/Status		Communality		Nostalgia rejection	
Era	**% of eras total**	***n***	**%**	***n***	**%**	***n***	**%**	***n***	**%**
Victorian Era	12%	142	**20%**	97	**18%**	27	4%	0	0%
World War II	12%	15	2%	101	**19%**	134	**21%**	0	0%
1960s	9%	77	**11%**	33	6%	87	**13%**	0	0%
Post-WW II	8%	63	8%	23	4%	92	**14%**	0	0%
None	7%	1	0.1%	0	0%	4	0.6%	133	**74%**
Industrial Revolution	6%	93	**13%**	22	4%	8	1.%	0	0%
Now	5%	65	**9%**	4	1%	42	7%	2	1%
1980s	4%	40	6%	7	1%	27	4%	0	0%
British Empire	3%	10	1%	56	**10%**	5	1%	1	0.6%
Churchill	3%	4	0.6%	48	9%	12	2%	0	0%
Tudors	3%	20	3%	14	2%	33	6%	0	0%

Note. Rounded to closest round number where possible. Figures in bold indicate most frequent era/theme overlaps..

Theme 1: Achievements — The first theme (occurring in 36.5% of coded data) captured responses that emphasised how historical eras/events were great because they were perceived as positively impacting the country.

References to positive in-group achievements in terms of industrial innovations, technological advancements, social progress and economic prosperity were common. According to responses coded, these eras created better living conditions, fairer societies and more equal access to resources, including healthcare, education, transportation, and public services. This theme exemplifies the positive aspects of collective continuity, as the greatest eras were those that had created a lasting and positive impact on the present (see Table 1). We would expect that participants who fit within this theme would be less nostalgic generally, as their representations of history emphasized continuity and a positive link between past and present (i.e., references to achievements that "made the country what it is today" or have "survived in today's world").

Theme 2: Power and Status — The second theme (occurring in 32.7% of the coded data) included responses highlighting times of power and recognized status. Power was articulated in a diverse set of ways, referring both to power relations within the nation and on a global scale. On an intra-group level, power was embodied in strong leadership that helped the nation through difficult times (i.e., Churchill or Thatcher), and a societal structure that entailed respect for authority and leadership. A sense that strong leadership was powerful because it united the public was also evident, and this seemed to hint at perceptions of the current divisive political landscape as the fault of political leaders. Power was also expressed via international relations, where an emphasis on power over (dominance) and power through (influence) was celebrated. This theme did not only include references to power, but often more specifically to power that was recognized as such. The emphasis on status shows how a global context matters for considering representations of history (i.e., Liu, Goldstein-Hawes, et al., 2005), as positive historical eras are not only those where 'we' were good, but more importantly, better than others. We would expect that participants who fit under this theme to be more nostalgic, as their representations of history emphasised discontinuity to power and status, rather than continuity (i.e., "a great leader … unlike today's politicians"; "we were respected more").

Theme 3: Communality — The third theme (occurring in 27.5% of coded data) captured responses which depicted a time-period where society was perceived as simpler, happier and more united. This theme illustrates the past as being defined by social cohesion and unity within the nation, where people shared many positive characteristics including altruism and willingness to work for the greater good, as well as valuing and respecting the national identity, all framed as lost in the present. The perceived discontinuity between the past and the present in terms of how 'society' and its people were, is revealing. A sense of a common goal and shared purpose, particularly around WWII and its aftermath

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seemed to drive perceived cohesion, and this was coupled with a sense that society was structured to benefit all, either by being open and inclusive (associated with left-wing attitudes) or more homogeneous and clearly structured into social/racial/ethnic hierarchies (associated with right wing attitudes; Wohl et al., 2020b). Unlike previous research that sees traditional and egalitarian nostalgia as distinct and correlating to different political preferences, our data reflects that they both address a similar theme; a nostalgia for communality and social cohesion, although perhaps framed in different ways. This echoes findings by Wohl and colleagues (2020b, Study 1b) which finds a positive correlation between the two dimensions of nostalgia examined; nostalgia for homogenous society and nostalgia for openness. We believe this reflects a common overarching category of nostalgia, namely communal nostalgia. We would expect that participants who gave this response to be more nostalgic, as their representations of history emphasized discontinuity to communality, rather than continuity (i.e., "which has sadly disappeared"; "more friendly than now").

Theme 4: Nostalgia Rejection — Unlike the previous three themes, the fourth theme (occurring in 9% of the coded data) captured responses that expressed either a resistance towards romanticizing the past (and rejecting the premise of the open-ended question altogether) or that approached history in a way that acknowledged both its good and bad. Emphasis on criticality towards the past, complexity in analysing historical events, and focus on the present, highlight an active rejection of the past, and created an unexpected, yet insightful, contribution to the analysis. Given the outright rejection of representing the nation's past in a positive way, we would expect that participants who fit within this theme would be considerably less nostalgic, as their representations of history emphasized negative aspects of the past which needed to be addressed and challenged, rather than protected in the present (i.e., "we are not and never will be great"). Before moving on to the quantitative analysis, we also examined the frequencies of themes across demographics (see Supplementary Materials, Table S3). Noteworthy are the age differences, with older participants (50-59; 60-69 and 70+; between 20-32%) tending to mention Achievements and Power/Status more than younger participants (18-29 and 30-39, between 15-19%).

Quantitative Results

Next, we obtained the point-biserial correlation coefficients, a special case of Pearson correlations and appropriate for assessing the correlation between binary and continuous variables. Expression of nostalgia for achievements was negatively associated with collective discontinuity, $r(3003) = -.06$, $p = .006$ but not British identity centrality or generalized national nostalgia. Power/status was positively and significantly associated with British identity centrality, $r(3003) = .13$, $p < .001$, collective discontinuity, $r(3003) = .11$, $p < .001$, and generalized national nostalgia, $r(3003) = .13$, $p < .001$. Communality was positively and significantly associated with collective discontinuity, $r(3003) = .07$, $p < .001$, and generalized national nostalgia $r(3003) = .11$, $p < .001$, but not British identity centrality. Lastly, expressing national nostalgia rejection was negatively and significantly associated with all three variables (see Supplementary Materials, Table S4 for full descriptive statistics and correlations).

Political ideology was not significantly correlated with nostalgia for achievements, power/status, or communality, but it was slightly negatively associated with generalized national nostalgia rejection, $r(3003) = .05$, $p = .003$. Conservative (right-wing) party preference was positively associated with expressing nostalgia for power/status, $r(3003) = .11$, $p < .001$, while Labour (left-wing) showed the inverse relationship with power/status, $r(3003) = -.13$, $p < .001$.

Discussion

Study 1 identified three dominant ways of positively representing the past: through achievements, power and status, and communality. We also uncovered an additional theme directly rejecting the romanticization of history. Two themes highlighted positively valued, yet lost, aspects of the past (power/status and communality), one highlighted positively valued and present-informing elements of the past (achievements), while the fourth rejected the notion of a 'greatest era in history' altogether (national nostalgia rejection). By allowing the respondent to define their own understanding of the nation's "greatest era", we have captured particularly ecologically valid themes of representing the past. These themes echo findings from recent research on historical narratives in the US, which identified three categories of narratives: progress, glorification, or criticality (Choi & Liu, 2024).

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Next, we assessed whether the predictors theorized in the existing literature were indeed associated with a respondent's spontaneous expression of the four themes. Notably, we found that not all ways of representing a nation's history are similarly associated with a longing for the past or a connection to the national identity. Those who emphasised an era of power and status were more likely to strongly value their British identity, while those who represented history in terms of communality did not consistently vary in terms of their British identity. Both groups of people also felt that the country's past was better (generalized national nostalgia) and different from the present (collective discontinuity), echoing previous research (i.e., Wohl et al., 2020b). Those who emphasise power/status as well as communality seem to have a discontinuous nature in the open-ended responses, making them potentially more susceptible aspects of the past that can be mobilized rhetorically and psychologically.

In contrast, those who positively mentioned the nation's achievements did not feel a distinct disconnection with the past – in fact, the opposite. Similarly, those who rejected nostalgia represented the past as problematic, multifaceted and complex, or as a negative part of history that continues to inform the present. In this case too, the negative correlation with collective discontinuity makes sense. Those who reject nostalgia outright do not see the past and the present as disconnected, but instead the problems of yesterday find expression in contemporary society. The negative relationship found between national nostalgia rejection and British identity centrality further speaks to existing literature on the relationship between intra-group criticism and belonging (i.e., Penic et al., 2016; Obradović, 2016). While the correlations were low, they still evidence a differential relationship between the expression of nostalgia content and group identification, continuity, and political ideology.

Despite these important findings, a key concern with existing research on nostalgia is whether the prompting of nostalgic or positive expressions of history creates an artificial response to the past that is not reflective of how we think about history when unprompted to 'glorify' it. In other words, do the themes identified in Study 1 reflect collective memory more generally? If that is the case, it illustrates how certain ways of remembering the past, or reflecting on a nation's history, become 'riper' for nostalgic picking by political elites. To explore this, we used a more neutral phrasing of our open-ended questions in Study 2, asking about 'important' rather than 'great' parts of national history. Using a neutral phrasing we hoped to establish the robustness of the themes identified in Study 1, which in turn we used to develop a scale to capture the multiple dimensions of national nostalgia.

Study 2

Study 1 identified how individuals represent primarily positive aspects of history and developed three themes (as well as nostalgia rejection theme) based on open-ended data. Drawing on the findings from Study 1, Study 2 developed and tested a multi-dimensional national nostalgia (MDNN) scale, informed by the themes observed in Study 1. The MDNN builds upon the representations of history identified in Study 1 by explicitly framing the survey items within this scale in terms of a nostalgic longing for those aspects of the past. To test it we collected data in three countries: the UK, US, and Sweden. These countries were selected as, in addition to the UK, both the US and Sweden have seen a rise in nostalgic appeals within political discourse (i.e., Elgenius & Rydgren, 2019; Kenny, 2017; Lammers & Baldwin, 2018; Richards et al., 2020; Wohl et al., 2020b), where this has successfully mobilized political support through voter turnout. This means that in each country, the politicization of nostalgia has been successful. Their similarities (Western, imperial histories, contemporary rise in right-wing rhetoric and support) make the potential for emerging differences even more interesting.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Data were collected in the UK (N = 318) in December 2020, in the US (N = 307) in October and November 2020[3], and in Sweden (N = 234) in July 2021 using Prolific.co (an online crowdsourcing platform). The study took on average 8 minutes to complete and participants were compensated at a comparable rate of £12 per hour. All responses were collected anonymously, and participants provided their consent following information about the study. To detect a

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modest correlation (r = .20) with 80% power, a minimum sample of 194 was required. The budget allowed for slightly larger samples in each country. The UK sample consisted of 51% women and 49% men, with a mean age of 28 (ranging from 18 to 76, *SD* 15.7 years) and 53% having earned a university degree. The US sample consisted of 50% women, 49% men, and 1% non-binary, with a mean age of 44 (ranging from 18 to 81, *SD* 17.2) and 58% having earned a university degree. The Swedish sample consisted of 57% women, 42% men, and 1% non-binary, with a mean age of 31 (ranging from 19 to 68, *SD* 10.4 years) and 71% having earned a university degree. As with Study 1, participants were first invited to fill in the open-ended questions before answering a series of close-ended questions.

Measure

Representations of History: The two open-ended questions were used to elicit reflections on history and text-based responses; 1) "*When you think of British/American/Swedish history, which eras or events do you think of?"* Followed by 2) *"How would you describe that aspect of British/American/Swedish history?"*

Multi-Dimensional National Nostalgia (MDNN) scale: This new scale included the three nostalgia dimensions identified in Study 1. All participants were presented with each of the three sub-scales below and asked the degree to which they "would like to go back to a time when…" The number of survey items for each dimension was determined by the number of categories identified in Study 1[4].

> *Achievements nostalgia:* Four items measured nostalgia for ingroup achievements (α = 0.83) including when "Britain/America/Sweden was achieving social progress", "many of the great things in our country were being invented or developed", "many people in our country were employed and had job opportunities" and "Britain/America/Sweden was achieving great things".
> *Power and status nostalgia:* Five items measured nostalgia for power and status (α = 0.83), including when "Britain/America/Sweden dominated the world", "Britain/America/Sweden had international influence and respect", "Britain/America/Sweden was independent and in control of our own country", "Society valued tradition and respect for authority" and "Britain/America/Sweden had strong leaders".
> *Communality nostalgia:* Seven items measured nostalgia for communality (α = 0.90), including when "we had a sense of togetherness and community spirit", "our country came together to recover and rebuild", "people in Britain/America/Sweden were happier and friendlier", "Britain stood up to evil in the world", "Britain/America/Sweden could be proud to be British/American/Swedish", "the UK/US/Sweden had a fairer society" and "the UK/US/Sweden was expanding rights and opportunities for all".

National identity centrality: Two items (from Sellers et al., 1997) were used, asking, "How important is being British/American/Swedish to your identity?" with a 5-point scale from "completely unimportant" to "very important" and "To what extent do you identify with other British/American/Swedish people?" with a 5-point scale from "not at all" to "very much".

Political ideology: One item was used, asking "In terms of politics, where would you place yourself between the left and right?" with a scale between "far left" (0) and "far right" (100).

Favorability of political parties: One item was used, asking "What is your perception of these political parties?" and respondents answered with a 7-point scale between "extremely negative" to "extremely positive". For the UK respondents were asked to answer the question for the 7 main parties; US respondents rated the two main parties (Republican Party and Democratic Party) and the Swedish respondents rated the seven main political parties in Sweden.

The same measures from Study 1 for generalized national nostalgia, collective discontinuity and demographics were used in Study 2.

3) The US survey was fielded slightly before the UK survey to collect responses before the 2020 US Presidential Election. Our analysis begins with the UK survey to replicate the findings from Study 1 and then test these hypotheses in additional contexts.

4) For Communality nostalgia two items were added for the categories 'Social values' (Moral heroism and Ability to express pride) and 'Structure of society' (Equality of rights and opportunities and Proportionality and fairness) as these categories were quite large and included components that were not easily summarized in one statement as they were relatively distinct from each other.

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Results

Open-Ended Results

The content analysis followed the steps outlined in Study 1 but used a hybrid approach to coding, combining the codebook developed from Study 1 and allowing for flexibility in developing new codes as well (Krippendorff, 2013). Both authors coded half the dataset each for each country, and a researcher coded the full datasets to compare and ensure consistency. The aim of the analysis was to examine whether the themes identified in Study 1 would be present in Study 2 as well, and whether nostalgic sentiments would be expressed despite a neutral phrasing of the question.

Themes — Similarly to previous research and Study 1 findings, eras and events focused predominantly on time-periods of expansion, empire and/or conflict (see Table 3).

Table 3

Most Frequently Mentioned Eras/Events in Each Sample

UK		US		Sweden	
World Wars	31%	Civil War	35%	Vasa era	32%
British Empire	22%	American Revolution	26%	Swedish Empire	26%
Victorian Era	22%	World Wars	26%	Viking era	18%
World War II	16%	Civil rights era	22%	Stockholm Blood Bath	10%
Tudors	16%	Slavery	10%	World Wars	7%
Industrial Revolution	10%	Vietnam War	10%	Middle Ages	7%
Battle of Hastings	6%	9/11	9%		
		Declaration of Independence	8%		

Note. We only include eras/events with a minimum of 5% frequency within overall dataset.

We observed all four themes in Study 2, using the neutral question prompt (see Table 4). The most common responses focused on Power and Status in both the UK sample and Swedish sample, while Achievements was the most common in the US sample. Across responses that emphasized existing themes from Study 1 there was a tendency to frame these in positive terms, emphasizing the good aspects of the past, and at times, their nostalgia for it. The Supplementary Materials provide additional results, including Tables S5-S7 for overlap between themes and eras, and Table S8 for example quotes.

Table 4

Counts and Percentages of Each Theme Within Samples Collected in UK, US, and Sweden

	UK		US		Sweden	
Theme	***n***	**%**	***n***	**%**	***n***	**%**
Achievements	52	17%	**110**	**36%**	44	22%
Power and status	**89**	**29%**	32	11%	**68**	**34%**
Communality	23	8%	53	17%	3	2%
Nostalgia rejection	79	26%	81	27%	26	24%
Hardship	48	16%	68	22%	47	24%
Don't know / Invalid	16	5%	34	17%	12	6%

Note. As we allowed for coding across more than one code per response, the counts and percentages do not tally to 100. Valid responses in each country: UK = 307; US = 305; Sweden = 200. Numbers in bold indicate most frequent theme in each country.

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In all samples, nostalgia rejection occurred quite frequently, with responses emphasizing that the important parts of history were often "very romanticized and polished"; "embarrassing" and "glorified after the fact". Another interesting contrast between Study 1 and Study 2 is the relatively low frequency of Communality in Study 2. Thus, when participants were *not* prompted to reflect positively on the past, responses tended to include less references to community, unity and togetherness, and more references that were critical, or at the very least, nuanced, in their representation of important historical periods.

One new theme was identified that occurred frequently in the data: hardship (i.e., 'Industrious but incredibly difficult for the poorer members of society'; 'Tough times for the people who lived then'). This theme reflected the oftentimes forgotten negative sides of wars (poverty, death, destruction) and eras where health epidemics and inequalities led to large losses in population and high child mortality.

Quantitative Results

Exploratory Factor Analysis — We employed an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to identify the factors underlying the new scale. We conducted this analysis with a combined dataset, including the data collected in the UK, US, and Sweden ($N = 745$).

The EFA identified three factors (with eigenvalues greater than 1), which explained 70% of the total variance (see Table 5).

Table 5

Exploratory Factor Analysis: Factor Loadings and Eigenvalues

"I'd like to go back to a time when...	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Uniqueness	Communalities
[Britain/America/Sweden] was achieving social progress	.45	-.01	**.72**	.28	.72
many people in our country were employed and had job opportunities	.39	.19	**.73**	.29	.71
[Britain/America/Sweden] was achieving great things	.25	.44	**.73**	.22	.78
many of the great things in our country were being invented or developed	.17	.35	**.77**	.26	.74
[Britain/America/Sweden] dominated the world	.06	**.82**	.10	.32	.68
[Britain/America/Sweden] had international influence and respect	.42	**.59**	.32	.38	.62
[Britain/America/Sweden] was independent and in control of our own country	.20	**.76**	.27	.31	.69
society valued tradition and respect for authority	.07	**.80**	.16	.33	.67
[Britain/America/Sweden] had strong leaders	.31	**.69**	.24	.37	.63
people in [Britain/America/Sweden] were happier and friendlier	**.77**	.19	.28	.29	.71
we had a sense of togetherness and community spirit	**.78**	.27	.18	.28	.72
[Britain/America/Sweden] stood up to evil in the world	**.74**	.31	.14	.34	.66
[Britain/America/Sweden] could be proud to be [British/American/Swedish]	**.62**	.53	.20	.30	.70
our country came together to recover and rebuild	**.76**	.25	.31	.27	.73
[the UK/US/Sweden] had a fairer society	**.80**	.02	.23	.31	.69
[Britain/America/Sweden] was expanding rights and opportunities for all	**.78**	-.02	.34	.28	.72
Proportional Variance	.51	.13	.07		
Cumulative Variance	.51	.63	.70		
Eigen value	8.08	2.03	1.08		

Note. $N = 745$. The extraction method was principal component analysis with orthogonal varimax (Kaiser off). Factor loadings above .50 are in bold.

The communalities for each variable, presented in Table 5, ranged from .62 to .78, indicating that the identified factors accounted for a portion of the variance. For individual country EFAs, see Tables S9-S11.

Factor 1, accounting for 51% of the variance, included items related to nostalgia for communality, with strong loadings from variables such as nostalgia for a time when "we had a sense of togetherness and community spirit" (.80) and when "America/Britain/Sweden had a fairer society" (.78).

Factor 2, explaining 13% of the variance, included items measuring nostalgia for power and status, including strong loadings for items measuring nostalgia for when "[the US/UK/Sweden] dominated the world" (.82) and when "society valued tradition and respect for authority" (.80).

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Factor 3, accounting for 7% of the variance, included items related to nostalgia for achievements, with strong loadings from variables such as nostalgia for a time when "many of the great things in our country were being invented or developed" (.77) and when “many people in our country were employed and had job opportunities” (.73).

Overall, the three-factor structure suggests that the data can be reliably grouped into those three types of nostalgia, which will serve as the basis for further confirmatory analysis. The reduced set of variables for each type of nostalgia, with the strongest factor loadings in the EFA, is presented in Table 6.

Table 6

Reduced Set of Variables for the MDNN Scale

Dimension	Item
Nostalgia for achievements	many people in our country were employed and had job opportunities
	[Britain/America/Sweden] was achieving great things
	many of the great things in our country were being invented or developed
Nostalgia for power and status	[Britain/America/Sweden] dominated the world
	[Britain/America/Sweden] was independent and in control of our own country
	society valued tradition and respect for authority
Nostalgia for communality	we had a sense of togetherness and community spirit
	[the UK/US/Sweden] had a fairer society
	[Britain/America/Sweden] was expanding rights and opportunities for all

To assess the effect of country on levels of MDNN, we calculated the Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC) using a one-way analysis-of-variance (ANOVA) model for these sub-dimensions of national nostalgia. We found that the ICC and the conditional R^2 values were very low for composite measures of national nostalgia for achievements (.06, .04), power and status (.07, .05), and communality (.05, .04), meaning country does not appear to considerably impact responses to these items. We also conducted this process for each survey item, producing results consistent with the composite measures.

We then obtained the zero-order correlations between the three dimensions of the MDNN and the related constructs (see Table 7 below).

Table 7

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Combined Samples From UK, US, and Sweden

Variable	*M* (*SD*)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Achievements	5.16 (1.40)	–						
2. Power/status	3.87 (1.60)	.55***	–					
3. Communality	5.54 (1.29)	.56***	.30***	–				
4. National identity centrality	2.71 (1.07)	.22***	.44***	.12**	–			
5. Generalized national nostalgia	4.46 (1.77)	.40***	.40***	.35***	0.10**	–		
6. Collective discontinuity	4.20 (1.74)	.34***	.36***	.25***	.04	.63***	–	
7. Political ideology (left-right)	41.42 (23.35)	.15***	.46***	-.04	.20***	.16***	.14***	–

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

We find that nostalgia for power/status and correlates most strongly with national identity centrality and favorability for the right-wing parties. Additionally, all three the MDNN sub-dimensions were positively and significantly associated with generalized national nostalgia and collective discontinuity. For national identity, the strongest positive correlation was with nostalgia for power/status across, followed by achievements and communality. In terms of political ideology, the more someone identified as right-wing, the more likely they were to endorse nostalgia for power and status,

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followed by a weaker positive association with achievements. Right-wing ideology had an inverse, although not significant, relationship with nostalgia for communality.

In Supplementary Materials (Tables S12-S17) we break down the country-specific samples, identifying interesting variations between countries. For example, in the UK, nostalgia for communality was not associated with any political preferences, including political ideology or party favorability ratings, and nostalgia for achievements was only positively associated with Brexit Party support, $r(316) = .18$, $p < .001$. In the US, nostalgia for communality positively correlated with support for the Democratic Party, $r(305) = .15$, $p = .0081$, while nostalgia for achievements positively correlated with support for the Republican Party, $r(305) = .19$, $p < .001$, but neither was associated with political ideology. In Sweden, all three types of nostalgia correlated positively with right-wing political ideology; although nostalgia for achievements, $r(232) = .15$, $p = .029$, and communality $r(232) = .14$, $p = .048$, were not as strongly associated as nostalgia for power and status, $r(232) = .52$, $p < .001$, favorability ratings of the Sweden Democrats (the far-right political party) was positively correlated with all three types of nostalgia, with nostalgia for power and status being the strongest association $r(232) = .59$, $p < .001$. Favorability rating of the center-right Moderate Party only correlated with nostalgia for power and status $r(232) = .37$, $p < .001$, while favorability rating of the center-left Social Democrats was negatively associated with all three types of nostalgia, again with nostalgia for power and status being the strongest negative correlation $r(232) = -.36$, $p < .001$. Overall, these results suggest that the link between nostalgia and political preferences varies with national context.

Discussion

Drawing on a neutral phrasing of what individuals perceive as salient about a nation's past, our findings captured not only positive representations of history, but also the critical aspects and complex meanings group members give to the past. These findings provide additional support for our nostalgic content categories, as even when a positive historical outlook was not being explicitly primed our themes were meaningfully in organizing how participants viewed their nation's past.

The quantitative analysis contributed further evidence on the need to differentiate between different types of nostalgic content. The MDNN sub-dimensions were similarly associated with generalized national nostalgia and collective discontinuity, supporting the argument that there are varied ways of 'nostalgizing' the past (Wohl et al., 2020a). However, beyond this, the relevance of different nostalgia content for national identity centrality, political ideology, and political party preferences tells an interesting story. Namely, nostalgia for power/status stands out as a key dimension of nostalgia that has both a potent identity appeal and political appeal across the three different countries. The other forms of nostalgia (achievements and communality) have different political links in the three countries, suggesting that the extent to which different forms of national nostalgia have been mobilized politically depends on the national context and is not uniform across cultures.

General Discussion

The present paper aimed to develop a bottom-up approach to examining how the content of national nostalgia related to specific social and political attitudes. Using data from three countries, we find persistent evidence that nostalgia for power/status is associated with stronger national identification, right-wing ideology, and right-wing party favorability, while nostalgia for communality and achievements vary in their associations with political preferences.

Nostalgia for power and status is the type of nostalgia that most resembles the assumed content of national nostalgia in previous studies (i.e., Elgenius & Rydgren, 2019; Smeekes et al., 2018; van Prooijen et al., 2022), both in terms of its links to national identity and collective discontinuity as well as its ties to right-wing ideology and political party support in multiple national contexts. Notably, the two other types of nostalgia that we uncovered through our analysis share some links with the theorized predictors of national nostalgia but differ in important ways. For instance, the importance of one's national identity is not consistently associated with nostalgia for achievements and communality, meaning in different national contexts, one can either highly value their national identity or not value it at all, and still potentially

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feel nostalgic for those aspects of their country's past. Our findings complicate previous research that suggests national nostalgia is strongly linked to an exclusionary ingroup orientation and outgroup prejudice (e.g. Smeekes, 2015), and theories related to such prior research could be revisited and expanded considering our findings. We would hypothesise that nostalgia for power and status would replicate such findings, while nostalgia for achievements and communality may not; moreover, these links would vary by national and cultural context.

Compared to our findings on right-wing ideology and support for right-wing parties, there is less of a clear pattern for left-wing ideology and party favorability, echoing previous research on the prevalence of national nostalgia within predominantly right-wing rhetoric (Kenny, 2017). In fact, the only key trend across the three countries in relation to left-wing parties is its inverse relationship with nostalgia for power and status. It is interesting to pause and reflect on the implications of this, particularly considering the positive correlation between national identity centrality and nostalgia for power and status. With the growing prevalence of nostalgia as a coping mechanism against real (or perceived) socio-political change (Boym, 2001; Davis, 1979; Wilson, 2005), it seems that it is only right-wing politicians who have managed to couple a particular type of nostalgia with their political agenda. On the left, besides an explicit rejection of nostalgia for power/status, there is not really an equivalent appeal to any other form of nostalgia. Existing research that has manipulated frames of nostalgia have identified left-wing ideologies as associated more frequently with egalitarian nostalgia (Richards et al., 2020) and nostalgia for a more open society (Wohl et al., 2020b). To some extent, elements of egalitarian and open-society nostalgia were captured in the communality dimension of the scale (through references to fairness and expanding rights and opportunities) but besides being somewhat significant in terms of Democratic party favorability in the US, there were no clear trends with left-wing ideology for that dimensions. As such, a deeper understanding of what kind of nostalgia could potentially be mobilized by the left will further enhance our work on the social and political psychology of nostalgia.

On a broader, theoretical level, this research provides important nuanced understandings of how we can examine the mobilizing power of nostalgia across national and ideological divides by considering what people themselves express nostalgia for, and how this relates to group psychology and political preferences. Despite similarities across the three countries, we identified important variations, particularly in the relationship between achievements and communality nostalgia and political preferences. This emphasizes the importance of bringing together research on collective memories with research on national nostalgia, to understand the extent to which certain historical events serve as more potent 'symbolic reserves' for political mobilization. While a sense of loss, of culture, heritage or tradition, might be echoed around the world in nostalgic ways (Berliner, 2020), what is implied by these concepts across contexts varies, and understand this content becomes important for understanding responses to contemporary sociopolitical issues.

This variety in turn, highlights an important theoretical question that emerges from the data; what about those for whom the past is not, and cannot, be romanticized? Susana Boym (2001) argues that there is a link between longing and belonging, and our findings indicate that for people for whom the past is problematic, this has a knock-on effect on their sense of group membership. Understanding better for whom certain meanings of the past become 'meaningful', and for whom history has limited mobilizing power, is an important future avenue to explore.

Limitations

The nature of our design comes with some limitations. Primarily, in enabling people to define the meaning they give to the past, we took a more indirect approach towards examining expressions of national nostalgia. Doing so, we captured a variety of responses, which included both rejections of nostalgia and arguments that positively linked the past with the present through a sense of continuity. The benefits of this are that we were able to illustrate how different meanings given to the past link differentially to group identification, nostalgia, and political preferences. However, future research could more directly tap into different meanings by making explicit a sense of sentimental longing for the past.

Second, the findings from our studies are based on a correlational design, meaning causation cannot be established or argued. More research is needed to confirm the causal relationships between different nostalgia content and socio-political attitudes. Such future research will benefit from embracing the complexity of national nostalgia and the varied

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content that can be employed to connect with our national identities, our perceptions of change, and our political preferences for the future.

Lastly, the WEIRD sample of the paper comes with its own limitations. The selection of countries with colonial and imperial histories limits the generalizability of the findings to non-WEIRD and non-colonial contexts and requires further research to examine its usefulness in other countries. However, the presence of difference even across the three countries is encouraging as it signals to us the potential to examine divergences in which dimensions of the scale might be prevalent across cultural contexts, and what might be context specific. The MDNN scale (see Supplementary Materials, S18 for final scale) is not exhaustive in its ability to capture all types of nostalgia, but we see it as a starting point for further research on the politicization of nostalgia more specifically, and how different ways of remembering the past can mobilize citizens to take political action in the present.

Conclusion

Across two studies with data from three countries, we identify different nostalgia content and illustrate how these relate differentially with sense of belonging, continuity, and political preferences. Our results indicate that there are different ways to engage with history more broadly; identifying positive aspects that have shaped the present, identifying positive aspects that have been lost and identifying negative and critical aspects of the past that need addressing. These differences in how meaning informs social psychological processes is in turn linked with our political preferences, where certain ways of conceptualizing the past (as a time of power and status), and reminiscing about it, are more strongly associated with right-wing ideology and identity centrality than others. Together, these findings illustrate the link between longing and belonging, and how certain parts of the past become more strongly associated with political preferences in the present.

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Data Availability: The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, SO, upon reasonable request.

Supplementary Materials

The Supplementary Materials contain the following items (for access, see Obradović & Baron, 2025S):

Tables and Titles

- *S1:* Study 1. Codebook and quotes
- *S2:* Study 1. Frequency of codes by time-period
- *S3:* Study 1. Frequency of themes by demographics (age, gender, race and education)
- *S4:* Study 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations
- *S5:* Study 2. UK era frequencies: Counts and percentages of era and theme overlap
- *S6:* Study 2. USA era frequencies: Counts and percentages of era and theme overlap
- *S7:* Study 2. Sweden era frequencies: Counts and percentages of era and theme overlap
- *S8:* Study 2. Themes and exemplary quotes – UK, US and Sweden
- *S9:* Study 2. EFA of the Multi-Dimensional National Nostalgia (MDNN) questionnaire – UK
- *S10:* Study 2. EFA of the Multi-Dimensional National Nostalgia (MDNN) questionnaire – US
- *S11:* Study 2. EFA of the Multi-Dimensional National Nostalgia (MDNN) questionnaire – SWE
- *S12:* Study 2. Correlation matrix of MDNN scales, social psychological factors, and demographics, UK
- *S13:* Study 2. Correlation matrix of MDNN scales, social psychological factors, and demographics, US
- *S14:* Study 2. Correlation matrix of MDNN scales, social psychological factors, and demographics, Sweden

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- *S15:* Study 2. Correlation matrix of MDNN scales and political preferences, UK
- *S16:* Study 2. Correlation matrix of MDNN scales and political preferences, US
- *S17:* Study 2. Correlation matrix of MDNN scales and political preferences, Sweden
- *S18:* Final multi-dimensional national nostalgia scale

Index of Supplementary Materials

Obradović, S., & Baron, D. (2025S). *Supplementary materials to "Nostalgia for what and to what end? Multi-dimensional national nostalgia and its relationship with national identification and political preferences"* [Additional information]. OSF. https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/MSNFY

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