

## **Exploring intergroup perceptions of voters in the European Union Referendum and United States Presidential Election, held in 2016**

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### *Abstract*

The aim of this research was to examine group member perceptions on political motivations and intergroup political competition. Group members were voters that took part in one of two Western political votes: UK-EU referendum and the USA elections of 2016 (Brexit and President Trump). To examine the perceptions of the voters, four focus groups were conducted, one with 8 Leave voters and one with 8 Remain voters and one with 5 Democratic voters and one with 6 Republican voters, 5 years after the vote. Reflective thematic analysis was utilised to draw out the themes of the focus group discussions. The analysis identified themes of representation and national identity, bias and prejudice and issues voting. The themes are discussed in line with the existing literature that has investigated these events as well as in terms of general understandings about political competition and political group members. Further, a critical discussion that emerges from the themes in this research is the application of cross-cultural debates on thinking strategies as an explanation for intergroup differences in political voting motivations. This has implications for the literature examining intergroup differences in political debate as well as for attempts to close the political divide.

*Keywords:* Brexit, Trump western politics, holistic versus analytic thinking, Political intergroup differences

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*Cite as:* Nayyar, D. (2024) Exploring intergroup perceptions of voters in the European Union Referendum and United States Presidential Election, held in 2016. *Annual Review of Critical Psychology*, 17. pp.108 - 123.

## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine how voters in the UK-EU referendum and the USA elections made sense of their political choices, the role of their perceived group identity and what impact this had on their perceptions of intergroup differences and feelings of belonging to these voting groups. This is to outline whether models assessing these, and other political events need to include factors of bias and intergroup competition as moderating variables to understand more about the opinions and perceptions of the voters and whether such an insight can be applied to other such political events that occur globally. These questions are motivated by the increase in research paying attention to identity politics (Fukuyama, 2018; Marchlewska et al., 2018; Walters, 2018). Identity politics refers to the reliance on group identity and a sense of belonging to political groups, rather than political belief and affiliations (Huddy et al., 2015, 2018). Therefore, the aim of this research is to examine group members' perceptions of what motivated their voting decisions and has impacted their experiences of belonging to their respective voting groups.

## The Political Events

The US Presidential election was a leadership contest to elect a Republican or Democratic Party leader to lead the country (Azari & Hetherington, 2016). The structure of the US electoral system is such that groups promoting the election of a candidate deemed unsuccessful after the results of the Primary election will have to decide whether they continue to vote for the group or whether they instead vote for an external candidate (Kernell et al., 2017). Research has argued that the US election debates of 2016 were centred on each political group's interpretation of American identity and values and the behavioural aims of the leader (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016a). There were 306 Republican electoral votes of the 538 US electors. Therefore, the Republican leader, Donald Trump, was elected as President of the United States (Heredia et al., 2018). This political event is representative of a long standing competition creating established group identities with each of the voting campaign groups (Huddy, Mason & Aaroe, 2015; Abramowitz & Webster, 2016).

The European Union (EU) Referendum was a vote taken by the general public of the UK as to whether citizens wished to stay as a member of the EU, or if they wished to leave the union. Some scholars argue that it was a lot more. Research has stated that within the UK-EU Referendum, the debates centred on immigration and international trade, with an overarching theme of European versus British national identity (Ashcroft & Bevir, 2016). Moreover, members of various, traditionally opposed political parties in the UK were required to collaborate to facilitate either the Leave or Remain campaign (Kaufmann, 2016). For example, traditional Conservative and Labour voters voted Remain. To win, the Leave and Remain campaigns were created separate to the Conservative and Labour political affiliations driven by motivations of national identity, immigration and multiculturalism (Hobolt, 2016). The Leave campaign, representing those who wished to exit, won with 51.9% of the vote (Goodwin & Heath, 2016) beginning the movement towards the UK exiting the union. This political event is representative of a one-off political

event creating task-focused and newly created group categories with each of the voting campaign groups.

### **The role of identity and bias**

Importantly for the current study, group identity is linked to greater perceptions of intergroup differences in the value systems driving political affiliation and so higher activation of intergroup bias (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012). Understanding perceptions of political group identity in political decision making, allows scholars to assess bias that comes from political competition, such as more favourable perceptions of one's own group as compared to their competing. Greene (2004) found that partisan social identity is a main predictor of party engagement in the US Presidential Election, even when controlling for strength of support for one's campaign. This is possible as the social group identities to which individuals assign themselves can determine their political actions. For instance, scholars who studied the civil rights movement and the women's rights movement have found evidence that social identities play a role in the motivation for socio-political change (see, e.g., Taylor & Whittier, 1995). Further, studies find political groups more specifically have incorporated this same process of identity formation so that belonging is defined by political group affiliation (Cohen, 2003; Greene, 1999, 2004; Huddy, 2001, 2015). Therefore, understanding these identities, how they form and how they affect perceptions of individual members allows scholars to make inferences on biases held by political groups. Such theoretical discussions are important for the present work.

### **Established versus newly formed political identities**

A further important commentary for this research is that there are political groups that are temporary and have the potential to disband once the outcome of the political event is known, for example, same-sex marriage referendums or country independence referendums. These groups are often formed with aims to maintain or challenge the status quo of society (Jost et al., 2009; Jost et al., 2004). Jost et al (2009) argue that once these types of temporary groups fulfil their aims they can disband, as the identity of the group was formed around the task at hand (Lickel et al., 2000; Lickel, Hamilton and Sherman, 2001). Lickel et al (2000, 2001), suggest that temporary groups form their identity around the task that binds them together and therefore it is not needed or maintained once the task is complete. Yet, established groups form their identity around belonging. Furthermore, according to Cohen (2003), a cohesive group identity comes about in political competitions when group members are encouraged to clarify their aims and values and they feel secure in the identity that these aims and values form. Cohen argues that this is more likely apparent in groups that belong to long standing cyclic political competitions because they work to clarify their position and identity.

This is supported by the literature which examines the intergroup differences that result in partisanship affiliation in political events, i.e., what differentiates the voters from one group to those from another. For instance, Abramowitz and Webster,

(2016), used the American National Election Studies to assess what causes negative partisanship in the US. They found that social, cultural, and ideological differences were driving the partisanship divide. They argued that there has been an increase in group loyalty and negative feelings towards the outgroup and their leaders during the 21st century; the consequences of which have resulted in an increasing divide between political competing groups that has built over time and continued intergroup competition. This forms the question as to whether all political groups are showing such negative feelings towards their competing groups or whether this is seen only in groups that have existed in the political climate for an extended amount of time, i.e., with established political group identities (in long standing political competition).

Therefore, in this paper, perceptions of group identity are examined in the US Presidential Election of 2016 as an example of a long standing established political competition, and in the European Union (EU) Referendum of 2016 conducted in the United Kingdom as an example of a one-off political competition with newly created political group categories. Perceptions of intergroup identity, foundations of group identities and activation of intergroup bias and the impact these have on feelings of group belonging will be assessed. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to understand more about the motivations behind political group identity, intergroup bias, and differences in ways of thinking between these political groups.

## Methods

### Participants

Twenty-seven participants took part in four focus groups. There was one focus group for each voting campaign: there were 5 Republican participants and 6 Democratic participants; there were 8 Leave participants and 8 Remain participants<sup>1</sup>. The selection criteria required that participants had voted in the UK-EU Referendum/US Election, and highly identified with their voting group, as measured by Huddy et al.'s (Huddy et al., 2015) expressive partisanship identity (see appendix A for the survey).

### Recruitment and procedure

Participants were recruited using the social media platforms Twitter and Facebook, between 05/10/2021 and 25/10/2021. Participants were told that the study assesses social perceptions and values of political groups belonging to the voting campaigns they had voted for (see information sheet, Appendix C). They were asked to complete a survey of socio-demographics, partisanship identity, and availability to take part in a focus group that will last up to 1 hour over Zoom.

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1 Initially, 12 people filled out the online survey confirming their availability to partake in their corresponding focus group. Within each focus group there was attrition at two levels, the first was the confirmation of attendance the day before the focus group was held and the second was showing up to the focus group. Of the 12 participants recruited, 8 Republicans confirmed and 3 did not show; 7 Democrats confirmed and 1 did not show, 12 Leave participants confirmed and 4 did not show; 8 Remain participants confirmed, and all showed.

The Remain focus group was conducted on 19th October 2021 at 5pm GMT and lasted 60 minutes. The Leave focus group was conducted on 21st October 2021 at 5pm GMT and lasted 56 minutes. The Democrat focus group was conducted on 24th October 2021 at 10pm GMT and lasted 37 minutes. The Republican focus group was conducted on 25th October 2021 at 10pm GMT and lasted 46 minutes. Participants were read the information sheet and the rules of conduct. These included remaining muted when not speaking to avoid feedback, to allow each other to finish sharing their points before adding to the discussion. In line with ethical guidelines participants were told that the group is confidential and so no names or other personal information was to be shared<sup>2</sup>. Once everyone was comfortable, the recording was started. The researcher then asked questions in line with the focus group schedule. Once the discussion was complete, participants were thanked for their time and told to contact the researcher if required.

## Measures

A latent approach was adopted, and the questions created, and data was coded to capture themes presented by the research aims through the identification of gaps in the literature. The questions were grouped on three main themes: group identity, intergroup bias, and social values (see Appendix B for the measures).

## Design and analysis

Focus groups were conducted with the intention to use reflexive thematic analysis to analyse the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Clarke and Braun, 2014), due to the flexibility of this method, theoretically and in design (Clarke & Braun, 2014) and its accountability for the epistemological impacts on conclusions drawn. Thematic analysis realises that the researchers' analytic observations of the data are central to the findings and conclusions that can be drawn from this qualitative investigation. Nowell et al., (2017) extension of Braune and Clarke's (2006) six phase approach to thematic analysis was adopted to minimises bias.

## Results

The main findings presented in this paper, focus around three themes: representation and national identity, bias and prejudice, and issues voters.

### Representation and national identity

Representation and national identity outlines participants' views on whether they felt heard and whether feeling represented by their national identity motivated action.

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2 Ethical approval for this study was obtained by the University of Birmingham ethical review board. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw before the focus group and informed that anyone who wished to withdraw within two weeks could do so, and every effort would be made to remove their contributions, however, that it might not be possible due to the nature of focus group discussions.

Interestingly, when asked what represents the national identity, we have a variety of responses:

#### Extract 1 - Remainer

'So, I think that there are British values that we like to think of ourselves as having as a foundation. And one of them is it honesty that were, we had a reputation for being very honest, very forthright people. And I think that's just gone completely now... But other things I consider to be British values, the rule of law, which is like a huge thing we give our word. And we stick to it...'

In extract 1, we see an outline of specific values that the participant believes represents the British identity. They talk about 'honesty' and the 'rule of law' as foundations to the national identity, but that these values are presently not being adhered to. Interestingly, a Leave voter did not state any specific values that are British but instead outlined that there is a dismissal of the 'English identity'.

#### Extract 2 - Leavers:

LU: 'There's a lot of people who are anti English, and they stopped to say well, British identity is multicultural it's, it's, modern way of thinking it's globalized it's a, it's a new way of thinking, they don't, they're very involved, actively involved in cancel culture. And they're cancelling English identity, whereas the People who voted Leave wanted to preserve English Identity...identity is a healthy thing. People are different by denying people identity all you're doing is putting real human emotions into a pressure cooker, trying to suppress it.'

EB: 'I think the question struck me because I think both sides probably believe that they are representative of it.'

In extract 2, the participants suggest an 'anti-English agenda' presented by Remainers. The discussion from these participants suggested that they do not accept the English identity as multi-cultural and suggest that a shift towards that perception means cancelling the English identity. They later go on to talk about how the English identity is being suppressed and how that is creating outbursts of human emotion. EB also outlines how she thinks both sides would think they are right. This is an interesting statement as it supports that there are variations on what represents the national identity, therefore suggests there are intergroup differences in these ideas. On the one hand, the English identity is seen from the lens of adhering to the values that make one English and on the other, it is seen as being English and not belonging to 'other'. This intergroup distinction is visible in US voters too.

#### Extract 3 - Democrat

'I don't know that there is a singular American Identity ... there's a lot of different ones right it depends on where you are in the country. It depends, you know there's a lot of variation on that sort of thing... I mean I think that the democratic ideals tend to align more with it I think the American Identity should be... You know this idea of you know it being an immigrant nation and a melting pot and that kind of thing. You know that the notion of, you know, encouraging and fostering and diversity.'

#### Extract 4 – Republican

'When you define the American Identity, you're talking about the constitution. That's what you're talking about the Bill of Rights declaration Independence, the Constitution, that's talking about that. So, when it comes to freedom and liberty which I think the American constitution is really good, the Magna Carta back in the day was very good at restricting unlimited power that Kings have back then.'

In extracts 3 and 4, we see various views on what defines the American identity. Whilst from the Democrat voter we see the themes of multiculturalism and diversity, from the Republican voter we see the importance of following the constitution and allowing for freedom and liberty of the people of the nation. This split in perception is one of the real divides in opinion between the right and left political voters in the US. If there is no agreement in the focus of the country identity, can there be cohesion between the different sides of the debate?

A further point of consideration is how represented individuals feel by the leadership of their government. This is important as a leader can facilitate the representation of the identity of a group and oversees making choices that are representative of what the group members would want. Yet, of recent times, there have been communities that have felt unheard in such contexts. A Democrat participant argues these communities are why the US election ended as it did:

#### Extract 5 - Democrat:

"I think the big thing that Trump did with a lot of these poorer communities like you know, would be good like I'm going to make your life better. I'm going to talk. I'm going to do something for you that you care about that everyone else, you know is ignoring, essentially."

In extract 5, the participant talks about the role that Trump played in targeting communities that felt unheard. It touches upon the importance of issues that voting decisions are motivated by and the importance of targeting unrepresented sectors of communities. The participant suggests that the promise to be "heard" is driving support towards the Trump campaign and that the trust towards the political candidate to deliver is driven by the feeling of being represented or heard by them.

This fits in with the literature that examined feelings of loss in a growing multicultural national identity (Inglehart and Norris, 2016; Wilson, 2017). This is because increasing competition for resources was blamed on those moving into the US (Abrams and Travaglino, 2018; Whitehead, Perry and Baker, 2018). Trump's targeting of voters who felt unheard targets the personal needs and so personal identities of the voters and encourages identification with a party leader and so identification with the group.

### **Bias and prejudice**

The second theme is bias and prejudice. Bias and prejudice in this context define the experiences of participants where they have felt others were biased or prejudiced towards them based on their voting preferences.

#### **Extract 6 - Leavers:**

LU – 'And the answer was, oh you're just racist. Well, if I'm a racist, look at the result exactly what I said would happen happened.'

EB – 'I definitely agree that's what I got a lot with and that I must be racist as a Leave voter.'

These Leave voting participants outlined how during political debates they were labelled as 'racist' by those who supported the other side. They go on to express feelings of being misunderstood by their competing group members and felt attacked personally. This aligns with literature that claims outgroup members are seen as homogenous (SIT, Tajfel & Turner, 1979). These participants felt they weren't seen as individuals which their own motivations but judged as racist as was a narrative presented towards the 'outgroup' from the Remainers. Similarly, this idea of addressing the person rather than their political debates was experienced by a Remain participant too as we can see in extract 7.

#### **Extract 7 - Remain:**

'And it was a sort of like, if he can't beat me in an argument, he'd so be like well you know you're just this young girl in the family, it became sort of, like, it hit on to sexism as well and like you haven't live the life as long as me just because I was younger.'

The participant here stated that when a family member who voted for the competing campaign felt they could not win a debate with them, that they started to attack their characteristics or traits rather than continue in the debate. The participant outlines themes of sexism and ageism. This aligns with optimal distinctiveness, whereby when group members lack validity in their competition with the outgroup, they target alternative characteristics and values to differentiate their views from the others and consolidate their status and position (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). Therefore group belonging processes are active with how group members are interacting as well as



perceiving their competitors. This provides additional evidence for the importance of viewing the group dynamics of these competing political groups.

#### Extract 8 - Remainer

MB: 'I think for me, it felt very vindicated. It felt very cruel, it felt very marginalizing and, and I guess for me as a black woman in the UK I felt very much like, I don't know, I definitely felt a sense of wow there is something a bit deeper rooted in what some of these decisions and what some of the views that are coming out... and reasons and rationale that people were trying to justify why this was a really good thing to do and it just made me a little bit cautious.'

Extract 8 brings in the theme of belonging and racial identity and how these interact to impact the feelings of those at the intersection of belonging to multiple cultures. Here, the participant outlines how there is something "deeper rooted" that has been triggered by this political event and that it has made them feel uncomfortable. This brings in a more holistic view of the impacts of engaging with such processes of bias and competition. That the participant questions the foundations of the values of the society they are within shows how harmful intergroup bias and interpretations of group motivations can be. There were instances of this displayed in the Democrat and Republican groups too, interestingly, this focused on how bias cross cut the way that the participants engaged with politics.

#### Extract 9 – Republican

'You really don't expect rivalry to be on good terms when it comes to politics. So, the relationship currently has really changed from the way it used to be in 2016, yes, they had ideas, but right now the democrats are really trying to outdo what the Republicans had then.'

#### Extract 10 - Democrat

'Not anything bad intended for a person who is a supporter of Trump. I'll say, currently, I look at a person definitely not be thinking positive of the guy. I'll be negative.'

The participants displayed in extracts 9 and 10 suggest that bias is expected from political competition. The Republican participant talks about it as 'rivalry' and the Democrat admits that they would have negative feelings towards supporters of the opposition. Bias between competing groups is an expectation of political competition in the US. Yet, this bias is impacting perceptions between the competing groups.

### Issues voters

The final theme centres around issues voters. Issues voters are those that cast their votes based on specific socio-political issues.

Extract 11 - Remain:

'... the family that I have there are quite poor, and they do have quite a few immigrants who live with them, and they get on really well with them I don't think they were making the association between people they knew, and the word immigrant as a whole. And, but then seeing each individual problem but not putting them all together.'

The first extract suggests that members of the competing group are not making connections between immigrants they know, and the broad term of immigrants utilised in the media as well as in political debate. They also share that the Leave voters they have experience with did not have a holistic view of how political issues or social issues were inter-connected. Instead, they imply Leavers are focused on individual issues. This idea is mirrored in perceptions of Republicans by a Democratic participant, as we can see with the second extract.

Extract 12 - Democrat:

'I think people will because I think they I think there are a lot of people who are one issue voters who really care about one thing, and it doesn't matter how bad the other things are essentially.'

Taken together, these extracts provide insight into a theorisation that an analytical way of thinking that research suggests is common of the Western world is activated here (Pennycook et al., 2014). This is because these participants suggest that voters of their competing group, focus on singular issues rather than the holistic view of how things are connected which contrasts to analytical cognition techniques. This motivates a line of discussion and research to address whether different patterns in cognition, i.e., analytical, or holistic, are more common of different ends of the bipartisan spectrum.

## Discussion

The aim of this paper was to examine group member perceptions on political motivations and intergroup political competition in the UK-EU Referendum and US Presidential Election held in 2016. The UK event was used as an example of a newly formed political voting group and the US as an established voting identity. Both events were comparable due to the cross over on many themes that motivated discussion and alliances. This was to assess if there are similarities in the ways in which identity impacts perceptions of voters. The motivation of this is to outline whether models assessing these and other political events need to include bias and intergroup competition as well as feelings of belonging, as moderating variables to understand more about the opinions and perceptions of the voters. It feeds into debates on the role of identity in politics and how that can be used as a model to explain bias and prejudice as well as decision making in political contexts.

### **Representation and national identity**

A key finding was that the national identity and feeling represented by one's national identity was a main motivation of political decision making (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016; Capelos & Katsanidou, 2018; Roccas & Brewer, 2002), both driving voting in these events as well as a reaction of the outcome of the votes too. Whilst the Remainers thought of the national identity as centred around the values of 'honesty' and 'rule of law', the Leavers thought of the national identity as 'not multicultural'. This suggests that the way in which each group is defining the national identity differs. The Remainers focus on values and the Leavers focused on what was not representative of the national identity. Further, in the US groups, the Democrats saw the US identity as diverse and multicultural, but the Republicans saw the US identity as the Constitution. This is supportive of an identity threat response (Abrams and Travaglino, 2018; Major, Blodorn and Blascovich, 2018; Vyver et al., 2018), where some groups feel politics is not representing the values of the nation and others feel like the nation is not representing their identity. This dual approach to looking at representation may perhaps shed some light on intergroup differences in perceptions and the focus of political decision making. Integrating identification, identity formation and the emotive responses to these being threatened will carry forward our understanding of political groups and motivations for political behaviour.

### **Bias and prejudice**

Another main finding was that all groups experienced bias. Yet, a main difference between the established group identities (US groups) and newly created group identities (UK groups), was the impact of bias between these groups. We had Leavers who were called "racist" for their voting preference, Remainers who felt or experienced bias towards targeted aspects of their personality identity, i.e., racial identity or gender identity or age. According to social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), targeting specific characteristics of individual members of opposition groups is a way to maintain the esteem one feels from belonging to their own group. For instance, the Leavers were in the context of having won the vote, the bias they experienced were from those who disagreed with their stance but also who had lost the political competition. On the other hand, the Remainers explained they experienced bias in discussion about the underlying values and information supporting maintaining the status quo and so they were personally targeted. Both are methods of identity protection once the status of the group is under real or perceived threat (Castelli and Carraro, 2010; Vyver et al., 2018). Further, in the US events, there was the expectation and acceptance that bias is a part of the process of political competition (Cerny, 2009). One possible explanation for this is that identity protection methods are used to ease the feelings associated with political and socio-cultural change (Capelos, Chrona, Salmela & Bee, 2001). This leads to the question as to whether bias is a driver of perceptions of differences in political groups and how this interacts with intergroup differences.

### **Issues voters**

Finally, the concept of issues voters (Azari and Hetherington, 2016) was raised by the participants in both the UK and US groups. Issues voters focus on one element or factor rather than a more collectivist view of political change and outcome. The Remainers and the Democrats both outlined how their opposition (Leavers and Republicans respectively), were focusing their political decision making on single issues. To put this into perspective, this could suggest that “liberal” voters viewed their “conservative” counterparts as less holistic in their thinking and more analytical or focused (Nisbett et al., 2001). This pathway suggests a further perception of bias is activated. It also suggests that differences in thinking styles might shed more light on partisanship divides and explain how information in political contexts might need to vary to account for different types of thinkers. Therefore, a pathway to examine in the literature is to see whether the difference between issues voters and big picture voters could be due to different cognitive styles that are often associated with differences in upbringing from different cultures, i.e., the Eastern holistic and Western analytical debate.

## **Considerations and Conclusion**

Whilst this paper provides several factors that suggest pathways to expand our understanding of political motivations and behaviour, there are a few limitations we must consider. For instance, the political environment has changed since the political events in 2016 and data collection in 2021. Therefore, it is important to consider which changes may have an effect. There have been politically driven social movements that have occurred since the 2016 vote. The context of the Covid-19 pandemic has seen an increased reliance on healthcare services amongst many socio-economic changes. The protests triggered by the death of George Floyd centring on ‘Black Lives Matters’ saw a rise in awareness of the systemic racial inequalities that exist in our cultural and socio-political worlds. The ‘Take Back The Night’ movement that occurred in 2021 to stand against sexual and domestic violence gave light to the gender inequalities and increased prevalence of violence during the context of Covid-19. These social movements created awareness, and for some, created change. These social movements also link to many of the same narratives that impacted the voting behaviour of those who took part in the UK-EU Referendum vote and US Election vote in 2016. The point here is that these events may have created political shifts, if not at a macro-level, then at least in terms of the perspectives of potential voters. Therefore, the context and perceptions of voters as well as their scores on values and motivations of their political decision making is important to consider.

This exploratory research raises several questions for further research to navigate. One notion is that models moving ahead should make space to evaluate the establishment of a political group identity before understanding how such identities can impact political decision making and behaviour. Therefore, the context of the political event as well as intergroup bias should be controlled for when assessing intergroup differences. Finally, what is motivating belonging to political groups and

how that impacts intergroup perceptions should be considered too. This includes considering how different thinking styles born from the cultures we grow within, might impact some of these perceptions. Much research has been conducted on these events since 2016, the next steps are expanding our perspectives on them and applying that to alternative events that share similarities and differences with the UK-EU Referendum and US Election of 2016.

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