

# The Multiple Causes of Citizen Ambivalence: Attitudes about Social Welfare Policy

JASON GAINOUS\*, MICHAEL D. MARTINEZ\*\* & STEPHEN C. CRAIG\*\*

\*Department of Political Science, University of Louisville, KY, USA; \*\*Department of Political Science, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, USA

**ABSTRACT** *Prior research has focused almost exclusively on value conflict as a source of attitudinal ambivalence, with mixed and often modest empirical results. Using data from a 2004 survey of voters in Florida, we examine multiple potential sources of ambivalence about social welfare policy. We find that ambivalence is rooted in value conflict, as well as in affective conflict, ambivalence about government, partisan ambivalence, value importance, and group membership. Our results suggest that while value conflict is one of several factors that foster ambivalence, it does not have the greatest effect.*

In recent years, political scientists have begun to pay greater attention to the idea that individuals' political attitudes are often mixed. That is, at least some people some of the time simultaneously feel good and bad about a given policy (Alvarez & Brehm, 1995; Craig et al., 2002; Feldman & Zaller, 1992; Gainous & Martinez, 2005), candidate (Abelson et al., 1982; Lavine, 2001), institution (McGraw & Bartels, 2005), party (Basinger & Lavine, 2005; Greene, 2005), group (Federico, 2005), or any of a range of other political attitude objects. Although the most common explanation for such ambivalence is the presence of value conflict (Alvarez & Brehm, 1995; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Feldman & Zaller, 1992; Katz & Hass, 1988; Martinez et al., 2005; Zaller, 1992), Armitage and Conner (2005) maintain that empirical support for this claim is not entirely persuasive, and they have urged researchers to look for other antecedents of ambivalence. In this paper, we do so with respect to citizens' attitudes about social welfare (Feldman & Zaller, 1992; Gainous, 2008a; Gainous & Martinez, 2005; Jacoby, 2002; Martinez et al., 2005; Steenbergen & Brewer, 2004). Our findings suggest that the roots of ambivalence about social welfare policy are multifaceted; although value conflict plays a role, it is only part of the story – and perhaps not the most important part. Instead, social

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*Correspondence Address:* Jason Gainous, Department of Political Science, University of Louisville, Ford Hall Room 205, Louisville, KY 40292, USA. Email: [jason.gainous@louisville.edu](mailto:jason.gainous@louisville.edu)

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welfare ambivalence appears also to be a function of ambivalence about related objects, conflicting bases of attitudes, attitude importance, and group membership.

We begin with a discussion of the conceptualization of ambivalence, followed by a consideration of the theoretical and empirical importance of both value conflict and other potential sources of ambivalence. We then describe our research design and present results that confirm the existence of multiple sources of ambivalence with respect to preferences on one policy domain, social welfare. In conclusion, we offer some thoughts about the significance of these findings and their implications for understanding the origins of ambivalence in other attitude domains.

### The Concept of Ambivalence

Researchers traditionally have assumed that attitudes can be measured as if they lie somewhere along a bipolar continuum that ranges from positive (or favorable) to negative (or unfavorable), with a neutral point in between (Thurstone, 1928; Thurstone & Chave, 1929; see Eagly & Chaiken 1993 for a review). This unidimensional view conforms to our intuitive sense that people tend to think in bipolar terms about most things. When they watch a movie or eat a meal, for example, people usually classify it as either "good", "bad", or "so-so". On the surface, describing something as both one thing *and* the other may seem counterintuitive. Yet people can, and evidently do, evaluate objects as if they contained separate components. Abelson and his colleagues (1982: 627) noted that President Jimmy Carter evoked both anger and sympathy in the same people and, more generally, that "good feelings and bad feelings [about presidential candidates] are nearly independent of each other". Likewise, many individuals – though by no means all – have been observed simultaneously to express positive *and* negative opinions regarding candidates, policies, governmental institutions, and other political objects.

Attitude inconsistency is nothing new to public opinion scholars, of course. Remarkably low attitude constraint across policy domains and highly unstable responses to the same questions over time led Converse (1964, 1970) to conclude that all but a handful of Americans were innocent of ideology, and that many door-step opinions about political issues reflected little more than random noise, or *non-attitudes*. Although Achen (1975) provided a more charitable interpretation of respondents' likelihood of holding *true attitudes*, as well as a more critical assessment of researchers' abilities to design survey questions to measure those attitudes reliably, improvements in question wording (Sullivan et al., 1978) left a good deal of response instability unexplained.

Zaller and Feldman (1992; Feldman, 1995; Zaller, 1992) have argued that much response instability stems neither from a lack of sophistication on respondents' part nor from inadequacies of measurement, but rather from the fact that each person has his or her own "distribution of considerations" (Feldman, 1995: 266). Such distributions vary from person to person, and from issue to issue. For any given issue, it might be narrow for a few people who possess relatively crystallized opinions that combine to form a rigid and stable, ideologically-rooted belief system. But for many

others who are non-ideological and open to information from a variety of sources, their distribution of considerations on the same issue might reflect a combination of individualist and communitarian ideals, a blend of moralist and secular values, or an assortment of liberal and conservative beliefs. Those mixed distributions may frustrate some individuals' ability to reach a summary judgment about an issue, but many others can reach a position on the issue by sampling from the range of their distribution of opinions. But, because those samples are heavily biased by whatever happens to be salient to the individual at the time, people may reach different conclusions about their opinion on the same issue from one day to the next. From this perspective, response instability stems less from the absence of any true opinion (or, following Converse, 1964, "non-attitudes") than from the presence of *multiple* and conflicting considerations about the same issue, which, following Zaller (1992), we define as ambivalence.

Ambivalence is a key element of contemporary theory on public opinion, and numerous studies have documented its cognitive and behavioral consequences. Some suggest, for example, that ambivalence moderates attitude stability (Bargh et al., 1992; Hill & Kriesi, 2001; Zaller & Feldman, 1992), while others report that ambivalent attitudes exert less impact on evaluations of political leaders than do non-ambivalent attitudes (McGraw et al., 2003) and that policy ambivalence attenuates the effect of policy preferences on evaluations of political leaders and institutions (Craig et al., 2005b). However, despite the growing appreciation of ambivalence as an important aspect of public opinion, our current understanding of its sources is limited.

#### *Value Conflict as an Antecedent to Ambivalence*

To date, much of the literature on the sources of political ambivalence has focused on value conflict. Political core values are overarching normative principles and belief assumptions about government, citizenship, and society (McCann, 1997), and ambivalence is often thought to result when an issue crosscuts those values for an individual. For instance, egalitarians generally support and individualists generally oppose redistributive social welfare policies (Feldman, 1988; Feldman & Steenbergen, 2001; Feldman & Zaller, 1992; Goren, 2001; McCann, 1997; also see Gilens, 1995).<sup>1</sup> Conflict theory suggests, however, that people who value *both* egalitarianism and individualism are more likely to be ambivalent about social welfare and other policies where those values intersect.

Early studies of ambivalence about political issues seemed to support the value conflict thesis. Feldman and Zaller (1992) found evidence that survey respondents who placed roughly equal importance on egalitarian and individualist values were more likely to express conflicting considerations, spontaneous statements of ambivalence, and two-sided remarks ("although I think X, I nevertheless favor Y") than those who did not. Alvarez and Brehm (1995) inferred the presence of ambivalence in citizens' attitudes about abortion from patterns of error variance in heteroskedastic probit models of binary choice. Similarly, Albertson et al. (2005) inferred

ambivalence on admission standards and allowing welfare for immigrants from the positive association between error variance and simultaneously holding both egalitarianism and traditional "law and order" values. Martinez and his colleagues (2005; see also Craig et al., 2005b; Gainous & Martinez, 2005) offered additional qualified evidence in support of the argument that ambivalence is rooted in the clash of core values; specifically, they reported a relationship between value conflict and ambivalence about both abortion and gay rights.

On the other hand, some evidence casts doubt on the idea that ambivalence is rooted in value conflict. Steenbergen and Brewer (2004), for example, found little support even for the existence of social welfare ambivalence, much less that it is closely linked to value conflict. Similarly, Jacoby (2002) concluded that for most people, strong value hierarchies result in relatively little value ambivalence (or value conflict) and the limited amount of conflict that exists is not strongly related to citizens' ambivalence about government spending.

Overall, the literature is inconsistent and at times contradictory. In reviewing these and other findings, Armitage and Conner (2005) asserted that moderate, mixed support for the value conflict hypothesis may reflect a weak theoretical premise. First, it is possible that the values typically examined by researchers are, in fact, not always diametrically opposed (also see Albertson et al., 2005). Second, values may be less stable than theory leads us to expect because most people do not feel intensely about them. If value structures are fairly malleable, value conflict itself might be an unstable state, easily resolved by cognitive processes that are unrelated to ambivalence (see Abelson, 1959).

More fundamentally, the theory that value conflict is at the root of ambivalence rests on an assumption that values underlie political attitudes, which in our view is not so much wrong as it is incomplete. There is plenty of empirical support for the proposition that political attitudes are related to values (Feldman, 1988; Hurwitz & Peffley, 1987, 1992; Jacoby, 2002, 2006, among many others), which provides a theoretical basis for the expectation that conflicting values might yield a wider distribution of considerations. But as Kinder (1983) once observed in a comment about the field's obsession with ideology, political attitudes have multiple origins; in a similar vein, Armitage and Conner (2005) speculated that conflict among the *several* bases (or origins) of attitudes might promote ambivalence.

#### *Affective Conflict as an Antecedent to Ambivalence*

One of those bases is affect. The essence of politics is rooted in conflict between groups, and individuals' affect toward those groups also shape their opinions about policy. For example, while opposition to social welfare is based, in many instances, on a commitment to conservative ideological principles, a firm belief in individualism, or a rejection of egalitarian values, it may also be shaped by negative affect toward, or stereotypical beliefs about, blacks (Dyck & Hussey, 2008; Gilens, 1995; Goren, 2008; Jacoby, 2008; Kinder & Winter, 2001; Nelson, 1999; Sniderman et al., 1991); similarly, racial intolerance and group stereotypes are associated with preferences for

more punitive and less rehabilitative criminal justice policies (Peffley & Hurwitz, 2002; Percival, 2009). But just as some individuals feel conflicted about principles, they may also have both positive and negative views about the people associated with particular policies. Consequently, policy preferences should reflect some mix of an application of principles (values) with a consideration of whose ox is likely to be gored – and, therefore, *both* value conflict *and* affective conflict are potential sources of ambivalence (Steenbergen & Brewer, 2004; also see Lavine & Steenbergen, 2005). Going further, we anticipate that ambivalence is associated with *conflict between values and affective bases of opinion*.

While scholars have considered the possibility that *potential* (or operative) ambivalence is a source of *felt* (or subjective) ambivalence about the same attitude object (Holbrook & Krosnick, 2005; Martinez et al., 2007), little is known about whether people who are ambivalent toward one attitude object tend to be ambivalent about related attitude objects. In the case of ambivalence regarding policy options, there are at least two sets of attitude objects of interest. The first of these has to do with government itself. There is evidence that social welfare preferences are intertwined with feelings of political trust, as opposition to income redistribution programs stems partly from people's lack of faith in government's management skills, efficiency, or fairness (Hetherington, 2005). If ambivalence is transitive across related domains, individuals who feel both positively and negatively about government may also be more inclined to feel both positively and negatively about major governmental programs, including social welfare. With government being the vehicle for distributing benefits, it stands to reason that mixed feelings about government would lead to mixed feelings about its outputs.

The other attitude objects we need to consider are the political parties that propose and implement policies. Since the New Deal, issues relating to social welfare policy have been a defining characteristic of party politics at both the elite (Ansolabehere et al., 2001; Barrett & Cook, 1991; Sinclair, 1978) and mass levels (Berelson et al., 1954; Campbell et al., 1960; Layman & Carsey, 2002; Stonecash, 2000). Again, if ambivalence is transitive across related attitude objects, we would expect that ambivalence about political parties would result in ambivalence about one of the principal policy concerns of both parties.

#### *Other Attitude Attributes and Ambivalence*

Ambivalence, certainty, importance, extremity, elaboration, and accessibility are all considered aspects of attitude strength (Krosnick & Petty, 1995). While it is generally believed that these attributes are multidimensional and have distinctive effects on attitude stability, priming, and framing (Craig et al., 2005a; Krosnick et al., 1993; Miller & Peterson, 2004), there also is support for the idea that some attributes affect others. For example, Bizer and Krosnick (2001) provide experimental and survey evidence indicating that attitude importance affects accessibility, but not vice versa. Here, we examine how two other attributes (attitude importance and attitude extremity) might be related to ambivalence.

Attitude importance is the degree to which people care deeply about an issue and its significance to their daily lives (Boninger et al., 1995; Krosnick & Abelson, 1992). We expect that those who place great importance on any *base* of an issue attitude will usually be less ambivalent about the issue itself. Research has shown that people's value structures tend to be hierarchical (Jacoby, 2002; Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 1992). Value conflict should not lead to ambivalence if an individual places more importance on one value than on the other; instead, the preferred value will prevail and determine the individual's response to the issue in question. Jacoby (2002) demonstrated that Americans infrequently place equal importance on the values of equality and liberty, among others. Thus, if conflict between two values is an antecedent to policy ambivalence, lower levels of ambivalence should be expected among people who consider one of those two values to be much more important than the other. More generally, we expect that ambivalence will be structured by the relative importance that individuals place on a base of the attitude at hand.

Attitude extremity, connoted by the distance from the midpoint on traditional attitude scales (Abelson, 1995; Krosnick & Abelson, 1992), is another attribute of attitudes that is potentially an antecedent to ambivalence. Research shows that ambivalence is associated with weaker, and less extreme, attitudes (Bassili, 1996; Craig et al. 2002). Extreme attitudes imply the existence of a relatively narrow distribution of considerations near one end of the policy spectrum, which suggests that those who have extreme attitudes about a policy in either direction are less likely to have mixed feelings about it.

#### *Group Membership and Ambivalence*

Prior research indicates that ambivalence on a range of issues varies across groups in society, including, for example, those based on political ideology (Feldman & Zaller, 1992; Gainous, 2008a), religious identification (Jelen, 2005), and race (Federico, 2005). Early studies asserted that voting behavior was largely a group-driven activity (Berelson et al., 1954), and since then the idea has persisted that group membership is essential to understanding political behavior (Mutz & Mondak, 1997; Zinni et al., 1997). The basic argument is that individuals rely on cues and shortcuts when making choices and forming preferences, and that group identification is ideal for this purpose. Groups help to provide individuals with standards and norms from which they can evaluate their political world. We hypothesize that group membership may preclude certain individuals from experiencing ambivalence. Specifically, we examine the relationship between ambivalence, gender, and race. It is known that females and blacks are generally more supportive of social welfare policies (Bobo & Kluegel, 1993; Gilens, 1988, 1995; Goren, 2001; Kaufman & Petrocik, 1999; Kinder & Winter, 2001; Tate, 1994), and we therefore expect that they will be less ambivalent about such policies.

To recap, much of the literature on the sources of ambivalence has focused on value conflict, and less attention has been given to other possible antecedents such

as affective conflict, conflict between values and affect, other attitude attributes, and group membership. In the following analysis, we examine the role that each of these factors plays in shaping ambivalence about one policy area, social welfare. Part of our motivation in choosing this particular policy comes from the historical importance of the issue: questions regarding the proper extent of government's social safety net have formed the basis of a primary political cleavage since at least the New Deal. But more importantly from a theoretical perspective, we want to be as generous as possible to the current prevailing theory about the antecedents of ambivalence. If value conflict has any effect on ambivalence, we should see it in the clash of individualist and egalitarian values on the question of how much government should reallocate wealth in society. While our current investigation is confined to that policy, our more general goal is to provide at least a beginning of a broader understanding of several underpinnings of ambivalence.

### Data and Measurement

The data used here are from a telephone poll conducted between 10 and 22 May 2004 by the Florida Voter survey organization. Six hundred and seven respondents were chosen randomly from a list of registered voters in the state of Florida. Up to four callbacks were made to each working number in an effort to obtain a completed interview. A total of 67 questions were asked in the survey, which included measures of social welfare attitudes, political trust, ambivalence about government, values and value importance, group affect, and a variety of demographics. The margin of error is plus or minus four percentage points.<sup>2</sup>

The dependent variable, *social welfare ambivalence*, is measured by asking respondents to indicate *both* how positively *and* how negatively they viewed several aspects of social welfare policy, using batteries of questions that were introduced as follows:

I'm now going to read you a series of statements about the kinds of things some people think the government should be doing to address certain problems that are facing the country. After each, I'd like you to rate the statement on a 4-point scale to indicate how *positively* you feel toward it. If you do not have any positive feelings, give it the lowest rating of 1; if you have some positive feelings, rate it a 2; if you have generally positive feelings, rate it a 3; and if you have extremely positive feelings, rate it a 4. Please rate each statement based solely on how positively you feel about it, *while ignoring or setting aside for the moment any negative feelings you may have*. The first statement is ...

The statements (below) were read and respondents were asked to rate each one separately. Then, following some filler questions, the introduction was repeated except with the words "positive" and "positively" replaced by "negative" and "negatively". If a person seemed unsure or confused at any point, interviewers were told to repeat the instructions as many times as necessary.

Specific aspects of social welfare policy that respondents were asked to evaluate are as follows: "The government should ..."

- ensure that every citizen has adequate medical insurance;
- provide programs to help homeless people find a place to live;
- ensure that every child has access to a good education;
- provide programs that improve the standard of living of poor Americans;
- see to it that everyone who wants a job has one;
- provide childcare programs to assist working parents;
- ensure that the retirement benefits that citizens have built up over the years are protected.

Measures of *social welfare ambivalence* were calculated using an algorithm developed by Thompson et al. (1995):<sup>3</sup>

$$\text{Ambivalence} = [(P + N) / 2] - |P - N|$$

where P is the positive reaction score and N is the negative reaction score. The first term gives higher scores to people whose opinions are more *intense*, while the latter term accords higher scores to those whose positivity and negativity scores are more *similar*. The combination of relatively intense positive *and* negative opinions is the operative definition of ambivalence.<sup>4</sup> The range of scores for each of the seven items described above is -0.5 through 4.0, with intervals of 0.5.

Table 1 illustrates the calculation and frequencies of the ambivalence scores for "provide programs that improve the standard of living of poor Americans". The modal category in the cross-tabulation for this item includes about a quarter of our respondents who were extremely positive and not at all negative about their support for this particular aspect of social welfare policy; there also were a few univalent opponents with "extremely" negative and no positive feelings about any such government programs – as well as many respondents who combined "some" or "generally" positive feelings with "some" or "generally" negative feelings, and a handful who expressed both "extremely" positive *and* "extremely" negative feelings toward the policy. In the Zaller and Feldman (1992) model, the latter two groups presumably have multiple and varied considerations that might lead them to lend varying levels of support for government safety nets depending on the context. Overall, application of the Thompson et al. (1995) algorithm to these survey responses reveals high levels of ambivalence among some people and low levels (or none at all) among others.

Respondents also answered questions that were used to construct measures of our independent variables, which are described in detail in the Appendix. An index of *value conflict* was based upon beliefs about *individualism*<sup>5</sup> and *egalitarianism*. Other questions elicited separate positive and negative feelings about the federal, state, and local governments, the two political parties, and perceived beneficiaries of social welfare policies (poor people and blacks); these items were used to develop

**Table 1.** Calculation and frequencies of ambivalence scores on “standard of living” item

|   |                      | “...how positively you feel about it, while ignoring or setting aside for the moment any negative feelings you may have.” |                       |                            |                            |
|---|----------------------|---|-----------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
|   |                      | 1<br>No<br>positive   | 2<br>Some<br>positive | 3<br>Generally<br>positive | 4<br>Extremely<br>positive |
| “...how negatively you feel about it, while ignoring or setting aside for the moment any positive feelings you may have.” | 1 No negative        | 1   | 0.5                   | 0                          | -0.5                       |
|   | 2 Some negative      | (2.3%)  | (2.8%)                | (8.6%)                     | (25.7%)                    |
|   | 3 Generally negative | 0.5   | 2                     | 1.5                        | 1                          |
|   | 4 Extremely negative | (2.3%)  | (9.9%)                | (14.8%)                    | (5.6%)                     |
|   |                      | 0   | 1.5                   | 3                          | 2.5                        |
|   |                      | (0.7%)  | (6.4%)                | (10.4%)                    | (2.1%)                     |
|   |                      | -0.5  | 1                     | 2.5                        | 4                          |
|   |                      | (3.6%)  | (1.6%)                | (1.0%)                     | (2.1%)                     |

Number of cases = 607.

Note: Data are from a *Florida Voter* survey of registered voters conducted in May 2004. Cell entry indicates Ambivalence score (calculated as [(P + N)/2] - |P - N|), with the total percentage of the sample represented by that cell in parentheses. Mean Ambivalence score = 0.97, standard deviation = 1.26.

indicators of *ambivalence* about these three sets of attitude objects.<sup>6</sup> *Relative importance* was derived from questions tapping the importance of individualism and egalitarianism, and *attitude extremity* from a folded spending/services scale. Finally, we included dummy variable controls for *black* and *female* respondents.

It is possible that our measure of social welfare ambivalence in part reflects simple preferences about social welfare policy, as unsurprisingly it is correlated with its component parts. Specifically, ambivalence scores are inversely related to positive preferences ( $\tau_b$  statistics ranging from -0.14 on “job guarantee” to -0.50 on “retirement benefits”) and positively related to negative preferences ( $\tau_b$  statistics ranging from 0.54 on “job guarantee” to 0.84 on “education”). One way of dealing with this would be to include positive and/or negative preferences as covariates in our model. However, this resulted in problematically high multicollinearity. Instead, we addressed the possibility that preferences may be confounding our measure of ambivalence by including an alternate control for *social welfare preference*, measured using a spending/services scale (see Goren, 2001, 2008; Jacoby, 2002, 2005, 2006; Kaufmann, 2004; Kinder & Mendelberg, 2000; Kinder & Sanders, 1996; McAdams, 1986 for examples of research using a form of this same indicator of social welfare preference). This covariate has no particular substantive interest for us, but its inclusion in the model will help ensure that any observed relationships with ambivalence do not simply reflect spurious correlations with issue position.

In sum, we anticipate that ambivalence about social welfare will be a function of

Ambivalence = *f* (value conflict, affective conflict, value-affective conflict, ambivalence about government, ambivalence about parties, value importance, relative value importance, attitude extremity, female, black, preferences).

### Results

The results in Table 2 suggest that, while there is some degree of variability in the levels of ambivalence observed across the seven program areas that form the basis for the social welfare ambivalence index, ambivalence is fairly common in all of them.<sup>7</sup> The degree of variation across areas is far from trivial, however. For the sample as a whole, mean scores are higher on policies that would assist the homeless, improve the standard of living for poor Americans, ensure full employment, and provide childcare programs to assist working parents; on each of these issues, more than half the sample have ambivalence scores greater than zero. Ambivalence is less common with regard to universal medical insurance, programs to ensure that all children receive a good education, and protecting retirement benefits. Overall, despite the variation that is evident here, a single seven-item social welfare ambivalence index scales well. A principal components factor analysis confirmed that the ambivalence scores on all seven items load on a single factor. The dependent variable in the analysis that follows is an additive index constructed from the seven separate ambivalence scores ( $\alpha = 0.860$ ).<sup>8</sup>

Ambivalence about government appears to be fairly common as well. Table 3 reveals that many Florida voters have mixed feelings – especially toward the government in Washington (77.1% with scores greater than zero), but also to some extent toward state (69.5%) and local government (68.7%). Further, people who are

**Table 2.** Frequency and intensity of ambivalence about social welfare

| Condition             | Mean score | Standard deviation | % Ambivalent |
|-----------------------|------------|--------------------|--------------|
| Standard of living    | 0.97       | 1.26               | 61.4         |
| Homeless              | 0.95       | 1.27               | 61.4         |
| Job guarantee         | 0.89       | 1.36               | 56.5         |
| Childcare             | 0.76       | 1.29               | 52.6         |
| Medical insurance     | 0.41       | 1.32               | 35.4         |
| Retirement benefits   | 0.36       | 1.46               | 28.0         |
| Education             | 0.31       | 1.40               | 27.3         |
| Ambivalence index     | 4.65       | 6.90               | 48.3         |
| Number of cases = 607 |            |                    |              |

*Note:* Data are from a *Florida Voter* survey of registered voters conducted in May 2004. Table entries indicate the (a) mean ambivalence score for each item (scores ranging from -0.5 to +4.0), and for the combined scale (scores from -3.5 to +28.0); (b) associated standard deviation; and (c) percentage of respondents with scores greater than zero for a given item. The 48.3% listed at the bottom of column three is the mean percentage who are ambivalent across the seven items.

**Table 3.** Frequency and intensity of ambivalence about government and parties

|                       | Mean score | Standard deviation | %<br>Ambivalent |
|-----------------------|------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| Federal Government    | 1.22       | 1.03               | 77.1            |
| State Government      | 1.10       | 1.09               | 69.5            |
| Local Government      | 1.09       | 1.11               | 68.7            |
| Republican Party      | 0.61       | 1.10               | 63.3            |
| Democratic Party      | 0.89       | 1.16               | 70.0            |
| Number of cases = 607 |            |                    |                 |

*Note:* Data are from a statewide (Florida) survey of registered voters conducted in May 2004. Table entries indicate (a) mean score for each item (ranging between -0.5 and +4.0 for individual ambivalence items); (b) associated standard deviation; and (c) percentage of respondents with scores above zero for ambivalence.

ambivalent about one level of government tend to be ambivalent about the others as well ( $\tau_{ij}$  for national-state is 0.38, for national-local 0.15, and for state-local 0.28, all coefficients significant at  $p < 0.05$ ). On the whole, this evidence suggests that many people are not resolutely cynical, but rather harbor mixed feelings about government at all levels (see Cook & Gronke, 2005). The same can be said for ambivalence about political parties. While mean ambivalence scores for both parties are lower than for levels of government, the ambivalence is still high (63.3% for the Republican Party and 70.0% for the Democratic Party).

Because the ambivalence index is best seen as an ordinal variable, we employed an ordered logit procedure to estimate our multivariate model. Table 4 presents the estimated coefficients and standard errors, as well as predicted ambivalence scores for those at the 25th and 75th percentile on each independent variable while holding other variables at either their mean (continuous) or mode (discrete). This allows us to gauge the effects of each potential source of ambivalence at low and high levels for the "typical" respondent.

Our most basic finding, as shown in Table 4, is that there are multiple antecedents to ambivalence about social welfare policy.<sup>9</sup> Once again, the existing literature's focus on value conflict as a precursor to ambivalence is borne out in our analysis: individuals who expressed greater support for both individualism and egalitarianism tended to exhibit higher levels of ambivalence, *ceteris paribus*. Based on estimates derived from this model, those with value conflict at the 25th percentile and at the respective means and modes of other variables had an expected value of 2 on the ambivalence scale, while those at the 75th percentile had an expected value of just 3.5.

More importantly from our perspective, other forms of attitude conflict also contribute to ambivalence. In fact, affective conflict about perceived beneficiaries (poor people and blacks) is one of the strongest predictors of social welfare ambivalence, *ceteris paribus*; those at the 25th percentile have an expected value

**Table 4.** Ordered logit model of social welfare ambivalence

|  | Coefficient | SE   | P-value | 25th | 75th |
|--|-------------|------|---------|------|------|
| Value conflict                           | 1.31        | 0.30 | 0.00    | 2    | 3.5  |
| Local government ambivalence             | 0.21        | 0.07 | 0.00    | 1    | 3    |
| State government ambivalence             | -0.00       | 0.08 | 0.98    | -    | -    |
| Federal government ambivalence           | 0.19        | 0.08 | 0.02    | 2    | 3    |
| Republican party ambivalence             | 0.07        | 0.07 | 0.33    | -    | -    |
| Democratic party ambivalence             | 0.15        | 0.07 | 0.02    | 2.5  | 3.5  |
| Conflicting feelings about beneficiaries | 3.34        | 0.48 | 0.00    | 0.5  | 3.5  |
| Beneficiaries/values conflict            | 0.05        | 0.53 | 0.92    | -    | -    |
| Egalitarianism importance                | -0.23       | 0.09 | 0.01    | 3    | 2    |
| Individualism importance                 | -0.27       | 0.09 | 0.00    | 3    | 1.5  |
| Relative importance                      | -0.14       | 0.09 | 0.11    | -    | -    |
| Attitude extremity                       | -0.05       | 0.10 | 0.63    | -    | -    |
| Female                                   | -0.26       | 0.15 | 0.07    | 3    | 2.5  |
| Black                                    | -0.94       | 0.27 | 0.00    | 2.5  | -0.5 |
| Social welfare preference                | -1.72       | 0.05 | 0.00    | 3.5  | 2    |
| -2 log likelihood                        | 4154.64     |      |         |      |      |
| Nagelkerke Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>         | 0.40        |      |         |      |      |
| N  | 607         |      |         |      |      |

*Note:* Data are from a Florida Voter survey of registered voters conducted in May 2004. Thresholds have been suppressed. 25th and 75th represent the predicted response category for each of the variables when held at the respective percentiles holding each of the other variables at their mean for continuous variables and their mode for discrete variables. The value for gender and race represents the predicted response category for males and non-blacks (under the 25th column) and females and blacks (under the 75th column). The predicted responses are displayed only for the significant predictors ( $p \leq 0.10$ ).

of 0.5 on the ambivalence index, compared with 3.5 for those at the 75th percentile – twice the effect of value conflict. While this result could be at least partially a product of shared methods variance, correlations of the individual positive and negative items with the ambivalence index (positive feelings about poor people  $\tau_b = -0.20$ , positive feelings about blacks  $\tau_b = -0.17$ , negative feelings about poor people  $\tau_b = 0.33$ , negative feelings about blacks  $\tau_b = 0.37$ ,  $p < 0.01$  in all instances) suggest that the observed effect is not entirely produced by use of the same algorithm. Clearly, researchers should be looking more closely at conflict between attitudes other than core values to identify the sources of ambivalence generally.

While our results show that both value conflict *and* affective conflict are associated with higher levels of ambivalence about social welfare policy, we do not see a significant effect of affective-value conflict on ambivalence, controlling for other variables in the model. In other words, ambivalence is higher among people who

value both individualism and egalitarianism *and* among people who having conflicting feelings about the beneficiaries, but we cannot conclude from our data that ambivalence stems from conflict between values and feelings.

Ambivalence about government (as the provider of social welfare) is also positively correlated with ambivalence about policy direction. We anticipated that ambivalence about the federal government would have the greatest impact because social welfare programs are primarily a Washington responsibility, but our expectation is not entirely borne out. On the one hand, the coefficients for local and federal government ambivalence are positive and significant; on the other, the correlation between state-level and social welfare ambivalence is indistinguishable from zero. The latter finding is more or less in line with what we originally predicted, though we are puzzled by the fact that social welfare ambivalence is about as closely related to ambivalence toward local government as it is to ambivalence toward the government in Washington. The inter-quartile range of expected values for local government ambivalence is 1 to 3, while the corresponding range for federal government ambivalence is 2 to 3. Thus, the effects of ambivalence about both local government and the federal government are slightly greater than that of value conflict.

Since both major political parties have staked out positions on social welfare policy, we anticipated that ambivalence about each would be positively correlated with social welfare ambivalence; this expectation also receives mixed support. Our estimate of the effect of ambivalence about the Republican Party on social welfare ambivalence is zero, whereas ambivalence about the Democratic Party is significant, with an inter-quartile expected value range from 2.5 to 3.5. Perhaps the distinction lies in the Democrats' "ownership" of the social welfare issue (Petrocik, 1996), such that there is transitivity in mixed feelings about Democrats and "their" policy, but not between feelings about Republicans and an issue that is not clearly their own.

We also see in Table 4 that value importance accounts for a portion of the variation in social welfare ambivalence. As respondents attach greater importance to both egalitarianism and individualism, social welfare ambivalence tends to drop accordingly (with an inter-quartile range of 3.0 to 2.0 for egalitarianism and 3.0 to 1.5 for individualism). On the other hand, greater *differentiation* between the importance of individualism and egalitarianism was not significantly distinguishable at a traditional threshold level ( $p = 0.11$ ). Our results here suggest that a person's strong commitment to a core value can override certain types of attitude conflict in shaping attitudes about social welfare policy. In other words, while such conflict may tend to heighten ambivalence, ambivalence nevertheless becomes less likely to occur when one value is more deeply held than the other.

There is no significant effect of attitude extremity on ambivalence in our analysis. The estimated coefficient is negative as expected but is not statistically discernable from zero. There are significant differences in social ambivalence between women and men ( $p = 0.07$ ) when controlling for other variables in our model. Women are less likely to express ambivalence (2.5 compared to men at 3.0). Our estimated

model also suggests that blacks are significantly less ambivalent than non-blacks, *ceteris paribus*. In fact, African-American membership represents one of the largest effects observed, as the expected value for blacks is  $-0.5$  (compared to  $2.5$  for non-blacks). The importance of race in shaping social welfare ambivalence is undoubtedly the result of longstanding social, political, and cultural factors in American politics. Finally, our control variable for social welfare preference is also significant. A preference for increasing spending is negatively associated with ambivalence (with an inter-quartile range of  $3.5$  to  $2$ ).

### Conclusion

The findings presented above suggest several points about attitudinal ambivalence as a general phenomenon. First, while Armitage and Connor (2005) questioned the theoretical underpinnings of value conflict as an antecedent to ambivalence, our results indicate that such conflict does play a role even when other factors are controlled. At the same time, we found substantial evidence supporting their argument that political scientists and social psychologists should consider a broad range of potential sources of ambivalence. Our data show, for example, that just as affect is a separate base of opinion, affective conflict has an independent (in this case stronger) effect on social welfare ambivalence beyond that of value conflict. Ambivalence is also somewhat transitive between related attitude objects, as people who were ambivalent about social welfare policy tended to be more ambivalent about both government and the party most closely associated with social welfare programs. We found support for the idea that ambivalence is related to other attitude attributes; specifically, value importance appears to reduce a person's ambivalence about social welfare (though extremity does not). Finally, group membership has an effect on ambivalence that is unaccounted for by other factors, as we found blacks are less ambivalent about social welfare than are non-blacks. In short, value conflict is just one of several sources of ambivalence about social welfare.

The correlations between social welfare ambivalence and ambivalence about government and parties raises questions regarding the conditions under which ambivalence in one domain is related to ambivalence in another. We hypothesized that ambivalence about two separate attitude objects might be based on the substantive relationship that exists between them; for example, following Hetherington (2005), it seems likely that positive and negative feelings regarding government's ability to fairly and efficiently implement policy will be related to positive and negative feelings about the policy itself. Future research might explore whether ambivalence about other substantively related attitudes is conditioned by contextual factors (such as framing) or personality factors (such as a high need for cognition, or low need for certainty). In addition, other methodological approaches such as focus groups and/or interviews may provide additional theoretical insight into alternative sources of ambivalence that could then be tested using survey research and controlled experiments.

More generally, we hope that this attempt to enhance the theoretical justification for the inclusion of multiple potential antecedents to ambivalence encourages similar investigations into the origins of ambivalence in other domains. Our finding that conflicting bases of social welfare attitudes help to shape ambivalence could be extended to explore whether there is a relationship between ambivalence about the political parties and ambivalence about candidate preference, participation, or any other standard election-related choice behavior. Likewise, our discovery that the importance of an attitude (in this case, core values) can mitigate ambivalence also calls for further examination. The personal importance one places on religion, for example, might be expected to influence the likelihood of ambivalence toward abortion. Finally, the notion that social group memberships help to determine how ambivalent a person is could be investigated with regard to other issues. For instance, if someone has a rural background as opposed to an urban one, he or she might be less prone to ambivalence about gun rights.

While all of these examples are purely speculative, they illustrate how one might go about trying to build generalizable theory concerning the origins of attitudinal ambivalence. At the very least, our findings indicate that conflict among core values is not the only, nor even necessarily the principal, source of ambivalence with regard to social welfare policy.

## Notes

1. Other core values may be important as well. Feldman and Steenbergen (2001: 659), for example, found that *humanitarianism*, defined as "the belief that people have responsibilities toward their fellow human beings and should come to the assistance of others in need" also is a significant predictor of support for social welfare.
2. Using American Association for Public Opinion Research's final disposition standards (AAPOR, 2000; also see <http://www.aapor.org/pdfs/standarddefs2004.pdf>), the response rate was 39.2%. Additional information regarding the survey can be obtained from the Graduate Program in Political Campaigning at the University of Florida. We addressed the problem of missing data by using a multiple imputation procedure: Five replicate datasets were created based on the data, with the missing data in each replication being replaced by draws from the posterior distribution of the missing value conditional on observed values (Little & Rubin, 1987; see also Horton & Lipsitz, 2001). The analyses that follow are based on the mean results of the five replicate imputed datasets.
3. This model is derived from a version of the semantic differential (Osgood et al., 1957), as modified by Kaplan (1972) in an effort to show that people's overall attitudes are made up of both positive and negative elements. Thompson and her colleagues (1995) adjusted the model to better account for the presence of polarized beliefs. See Craig et al. (2002) for a more complete discussion of this measure as employed in a large-sample survey.
4. In general, operative and subjective measures of ambivalence are only weakly correlated with one another (Bassili, 1996; Gaius, 2008b; Newby-Clark et al., 2002; Priester & Petty, 1996; Thompson et al., 1995), and there is evidence that they represent distinct constructs having different consequences for cognition and behavior (Holbrook & Krosnick, 2005). The operative measure used here is consistent with our definition of ambivalence as the simultaneous possession of positive and negative evaluations of an attitude object.
5. Our questions were designed to tap support for *economic* individualism, or a belief in the freedom to accumulate wealth. Scholars with a different substantive focus might prefer to measure individualism differently, for example, conceptualizing it in terms of a belief in freedom of expression.

6. We considered the possibility that these measures of ambivalence might be confounded with preferences on these same items, but the bulk of the evidence suggests this is not the case. The correlations between the party and level of government ambivalence scores with their positive and negative components are trivial ( $< 0.3$ ) in every case except one (where the negative component of the local government index is correlated with its ambivalence index,  $\tau_{\text{b}} = 0.34$ ).
7. This finding seemingly contradicts Steenbergen and Brewer (2004), who reported low levels of social welfare ambivalence in the aggregate. However, Steenbergen and Brewer measured ambivalence as conflicting responses to different attitude objects (such as "equality" and "limited government") rather than to the same attitude objects, as we do here. While those authors emphasized the overall low level of attitude conflict, they also reported wide variations in ambivalence across both individuals and attitudes, noting, for example, that more than one-third of the public gave "incompatible" responses to NES questions about "equality" and "limited government".
8. Although people's attitudes about social welfare policies may have multiple dimensions (see Jacoby, 1994), our analysis suggests that ambivalence about such policies is unidimensional. In other words, individuals who are ambivalent about one aspect of social welfare policy often are ambivalent about others.
9. We also estimated separate ordered logit models for each of the seven social welfare items (available from the lead author upon request). While some variation of effects was observed (e.g., local and federal ambivalence were significant predictors in some models but not others; the same was true for value conflict, individualism importance, relative importance, and other independent variables), there were important regularities in the findings. First, conflicting feelings about beneficiaries was a strong predictor of ambivalence in each of the seven separate estimated models. Second, in every model, there were multiple antecedents to ambivalence. Thus, our central finding holds whether or not an index is employed as the outcome variable in the model.

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