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# Who's Ambivalent and Who's Not?

## Social Welfare Ambivalence Across Ideology

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This study uses a fresh approach to measure social welfare ambivalence, addressing the question of who is more ambivalent about such policies—liberals or conservatives. The findings presented here challenge previous assertions that liberals are typically more ambivalent. I argue that conservatives are now more ambivalent than liberals because a change in the tone of elite discourse altered the priming of the potential sources of such ambivalence. The models of ambivalence presented suggest that these primed sources are conflicting thoughts or beliefs (cognitive conflict), conflicting feelings (affective conflict), or beliefs in conflict with feelings (cognitive–affective conflict). The implications of these findings are discussed.

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When we talk about liberals and conservatives in the United States, *social welfare policy* is often at the center of the discussion. Liberals generally support welfare programs, whereas conservatives generally do not (see Cook & Barrett, 1992; Jacoby, 1991). This broad generalization may be accurate, but research suggests that differences across ideology may be a little more complicated. Some evidence indicates that many Americans are actually *ambivalent* when it comes to how they feel about many of these policies (Cantril & Cantril, 1999; Feldman & Zaller, 1992; Hodson, Maio, & Esses, 2001). Furthermore, evidence also suggests that the prevalence of this ambivalence varies across ideology (Feldman & Zaller, 1992; Jacoby, 2002; Steenbergen & Brewer, 2000). The specific questions I address here

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are, first, who is more torn on the issue of social welfare—liberals or conservatives? And second, if one ideological camp is indeed more torn, why?

Previous research has contended that liberals are more ambivalent than conservatives (Feldman & Zaller, 1992; Jacoby, 2002). Although this may have been the case in the 1980s and early 1990s, recent research has indicated that public attitudes about social welfare in general became more favorable by 2000 (Schneider & Jacoby, 2005). The evidence has suggested that this shift occurred as a result of a change in elite discourse. It is possible that this change also altered the distribution of ambivalence across ideology. This is the argument I make here. Specifically, I contend that conservatives are now more ambivalent about social welfare than are liberals because the change of the tone of elite discourse altered the priming of the potential sources of social welfare ambivalence. I offer a fresh approach for measuring social welfare ambivalence adapted from earlier work focused on ambivalence about other policy areas (Craig, Kane, & Martinez, 2002; Craig, Martinez, Kane, & Gainous, 2005) and use it to demonstrate as such.

## Ambivalence and Its Sources

Behavioral researchers have begun to embrace the idea that people do not necessarily have a single “true” attitude on issues but rather have a store of multiple and sometimes conflicting attitudes that they might draw on at any given time (Alvarez & Brehm, 1995; Craig et al., 2002; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Feldman & Zaller, 1992; Newby-Clark, McGregor, & Zanna, 2005; Thompson, Zanna, & Griffin, 1995; Zaller, 1992). The idea that individuals are often *ambivalent*, or that they simultaneously possess positive and negative evaluations of a single attitude object (Alvarez & Brehm, 1995; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Zaller, 1992), has been extensively researched, offering several potential sources.

Collectively, the literature offers three primary sources of ambivalence, including *cognitive conflict*, *affective conflict*, and *cognitive–affective conflict*, but most individual models of ambivalence fail to integrate all three. Since it was asserted in *The American Voter* that citizens have a cognitive map of politics (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960) and that psychological forces shape political behavior, research focusing on political cognition has burgeoned (Popkin, 1991; Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991; for a review, see Iyengar & McGuire, 1993). The basic idea is simple: People make decisions and form attitudes by using cognitive shortcuts such as party identification and media cues, among many others. These shortcuts

permit individuals to make reasonable decisions with minimal effort (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Popkin, 1991). Research has also embraced the idea that individuals' attitudes are likely shaped by individuals' feelings, or affective orientations, and cognitions (Breckler & Wiggins, 1989; Esses, Haddock, & Zanna, 1993; Millar & Tesser, 1986). Concerning ambivalence, the theory is that inconsistencies among separate cognitions and affective orientations, as well as cognitions and affective orientations, may stimulate ambivalence surrounding a particular object.

When it comes to the cognitive foundations of attitudes, many assert that *political core values*, or overarching normative principles and belief assumptions about government, citizenship, and society (McCann, 1997), are a cognitive shortcut. The idea is that individuals do not need a sophisticated ideology to determine their political preferences. Simply, their preferences or political evaluations may be based on how consistent or inconsistent policies or political actions are with certain beliefs they possess (Feldman, 1988). Policies and actions may be judged to be right or wrong based on their congruence with deeply held values (Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 1992). So what happens when an issue pits opposing values against each other? Cognitive conflict, as such, may result in ambivalence. In fact, value conflict is the most often mentioned source of ambivalence (Alvarez & Brehm, 1995; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Katz & Hass, 1988; Katz, Wackenhut, & Hass, 1986; Martinez, Craig, Kane, & Gainous, 2005; Newby-Clark et al., 2005). As values such as *egalitarianism* (Feldman, 1988; Feldman & Steenbergen, 2001; Feldman & Zaller, 1992; Gilens, 1995; Goren, 2001; McCann, 1997) and *economic individualism* (Feldman, 1988; Feldman & Zaller, 1992; Gilens, 1995; Goren, 2001; McCann, 1997) are related to citizens' attitudes about social welfare,<sup>1</sup> conflict between these cognitive orientations may stimulate social welfare ambivalence.

Some contend that affect undermines an individual's ability to make reasoned decisions (Sears, 2000), whereas others argue that it actually contributes to rational decision making (Marcus, 2003; Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000). For instance, group affect, or how individuals feel about the members of particular groups (i.e., race, sexual orientation), is a structural component of attitudes about a host of policies including gay rights (Nelson & Kinder, 1996; Wilcox & Norrander, 2002), affirmative action (Alvarez & Brehm, 1997; Kinder & Sanders, 1996; Kinder & Winter, 2001; Nelson, 1999; Nelson & Kinder, 1996), and social welfare (Bobo & Kluegel, 1993; Cook & Barrett, 1992; Gilens, 1995; Jacoby, 2005; Kinder & Winter, 2001; Nelson, 1999; Sniderman et al., 1991).<sup>2</sup> If individuals' attitudes about social welfare are structured by how they feel about the perceived beneficiaries, and

if they are conflicted when it comes to these feelings, it makes sense that this affective conflict could stimulate ambivalence. Furthermore, if values are a cognitive base of attitudes about social welfare and feelings about the perceived beneficiaries are an affective base, then it is reasonable to expect that conflict between these two components (cognitive–affective) could stimulate ambivalence surrounding this issue.

## The Measurement of Social Welfare Ambivalence

Feldman and Zaller (1992) pioneered exploration into the varying prevalence of social welfare ambivalence across ideology. They argue that conservatives are less ambivalent about social welfare because liberals are more likely to experience value conflict. They contend that conservatives prioritize individualist over egalitarian values, whereas liberals place roughly equal importance on each. As a result, the values of a liberal are more likely to come into conflict, stimulating ambivalence about social welfare.

Using NES data, Feldman and Zaller (1992) measure ambivalence by counting the number of conflicting considerations, spontaneous statements of ambivalence, and two-sided remarks (i.e., “Although I think *X*, I nevertheless favor *Y*.”), finding strong support for the presence of ambivalence in many of the respondents. Although the substantive argument may be compelling, scholars have noted validity issues (Alvarez & Brehm, 1995; Craig et al., 2002). For instance, an individual’s ability to express reasons for supporting or opposing social welfare does not necessarily signify the presence of an underlying conflict, whether between core values or other idea elements (Gainous & Martinez, 2005; Katz & Hass, 1988; Schnell, 1993). They suggest that those who possess conflicting individualist and egalitarian concerns are more likely to be ambivalent, but the evidence is unconvincing because of their measure. They also fail to consider other sources of ambivalence when it comes to attitudes about social welfare and, as a result, have an underspecified model.

Jacoby (2002) also finds support for the contention that conservatives are less ambivalent than liberals. On the other hand, he does not find any significant differences regarding the individual ranking of values across ideology. Contrary to the findings presented here and those of Feldman and Zaller (1992), Jacoby (2002) suggests that social welfare ambivalence is not common (also see Jacoby, 2005) and does not look for differences concerning feelings about the perceived beneficiaries (affective and cognitive–affective conflict). Steenbergen and Brewer (2000) do include all of these sources of

ambivalence and, contrary to Feldman and Zaller and to Jacoby, argue that liberals are less ambivalent than conservatives. Although these findings diverge from the abovementioned studies on this front, they concur with Jacoby that such ambivalence is not widespread for either group.

Steenbergen and Brewer (2000) and Jacoby (2002) share the same issue with their measure of ambivalence. They assume ambivalence about social welfare is present when the theoretical sources of ambivalence can predict the error variance in a model of attitudes about social welfare. This is problematic because error variance is high, by definition, when a larger proportion of people are not predicted accurately by the model, whereas ambivalence exists when *an individual person holds both positive and negative feelings about an issue*. Error variances are an accumulation of errors in the model and may also be a function of nonattitudes, uncertainty, equivocation, or a host of other factors (see Alvarez & Brehm, 1995; also see Craig et al., 2002). Perhaps their findings would change if their measures isolated these possibilities from ambivalence, but the data do not really offer the opportunity to adequately do so.

### **Elite Discourse and the Sources of Social Welfare Ambivalence**

Research using both laboratory (Iyengar, 1991; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Miller & Krosnick, 2000; Valentino, Hutchings, & White, 2002) and natural experiments (Bartels, 1993; Krosnick & Kinder, 1990; Mutz, 1998; Stoker, 1993) has suggested that the public is not immune from elite influence. Political discourse is shaped by public officials, the media, and interest groups, and this discourse provides much of the information citizens have accessible to form an opinion. This information then shapes cognitive and affective processes. For instance, Zaller (1992) asserts that this information is filtered through an individual's psychological predispositions and is then converted into to opinion. He asserts that attitudes are really made up of multiple considerations, and elite discourse may prime conflicting considerations stimulating ambivalence (also see Katz & Haas, 1988).

Schneider and Jacoby (2005) present evidence that indicates this priming effect has a direct impact on public opinion about social welfare. Specifically, they highlight a negative shift in elite rhetoric about social welfare in the mid-1990s that led to less public support for these programs. They then suggest that elite rhetoric began to become more positive toward the end of the decade and support bounced back. I argue that this change in

priming explains why conservatives would now be more ambivalent than liberals. Earlier research indicating the opposite was based on data from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s (Feldman & Zaller, 1992; Jacoby, 2002). If ambivalence is rooted in cognitive, affective, and cognitive–affective conflict and the shift in elite discourse around 2000 (Schneider & Jacoby, 2005) begins to prime these sources of attitudes differently, then there should be a change in the distribution of ambivalence.

Much of the Republican rhetoric in the early 1990s came out of the Reagan era and was centered on individualism and limited government. In the George W. Bush era, this rhetoric has become more positive about the role of government. For instance, Republican Party leadership showed support for increased spending on assistance with prescription drugs, as evidenced by sponsorship of the Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization Act (2003) by the former Republican Speaker of the House, Dennis Hastert. Media coverage of such elite discourse clearly indicates a shift in the way individualist, and, to some degree, egalitarian values are being primed (for evidence of a change in media coverage, see Schneider & Jacoby, 2005).

Furthermore, Bush's 2000 campaign, which focused on "compassionate conservatism," certainly sent cognitive and affective cues that primed egalitarian values, sent a new message concerning individualist pursuits among conservatives, and likely stimulated an affective response as well. According to facts listed on the White House's home page (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/>), the president rejects the old argument of big government versus indifferent government and says that the administration is using an *active* government to promote self-government. It is likely that this shift also stimulated affective responses concerning the less fortunate, including those who would benefit from social welfare programs. Although most Republican rhetoric about helping the poor focuses on private or faith-based initiatives, this change should cue an affective response. On the other hand, Democratic elite discourse remained generally supportive of an expansive welfare state. So internal conflict surrounding this issue is not being primed as heavily on the Democratic side.

The argument here is that these mixed messages have elevated internal conflict among conservatives, and, as a result, conservatives' ambivalence about social welfare has risen. The social welfare measure described below should alleviate some of the measurement issues described above, thus permitting tests of both the differing levels of ambivalence across ideology and the sources of this difference. The central hypotheses tested here are as follows: First, I hypothesize that liberals are less ambivalent than conservatives.

Second, I hypothesize that ambivalence, in general, is stimulated by cognitive, affective, and cognitive–affective conflict. Third, I hypothesize that variance in social welfare ambivalence across ideology can be accounted for by differences in the levels of cognitive, affective, and cognitive–affective conflict. Taken together, support for these hypotheses indirectly offers support to the theory that elite discourse primed these sources of ambivalence.

## Data and Measurement

The present study is based on a telephone poll conducted from May 10 to May 22, 2004, by the *Florida Voter* survey organization.<sup>3</sup> A total of 607 respondents were randomly chosen from a list of all registered voters in the state of Florida.<sup>4</sup> Only those whose names were drawn from the list were actually interviewed. Up to four callbacks were attempted on all working numbers and initial refusals. Using the American Association for Public Opinion Research's final disposition standards, the response rate was 39.2% (see <http://www.aapor.org/>). The margin of error is plus or minus 4 percentage points. I cannot claim generalizability because the data come from one state. Nonetheless, Florida is a diverse state, and the population approaches national parameters across many categories, including party identification, gender, and ethnicity. The survey itself included measures of values, value importance, feelings about the perceived beneficiaries, attitudes about social welfare, ambivalence about social welfare, and a variety of control variables.<sup>5</sup>

The dependent variable, ambivalence about social welfare, is measured using a method that was adapted from the experimental literature by Craig and his colleagues (2002). Gainous and Martinez (2005) use this same measure. Respondents were asked 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 a number of filler questions, the introduction was repeated except with the words *positive* and *positively* replaced by *negative* and *negatively*. Interviewers were told to repeat the instructions as many times as necessary when respondents seemed unsure or confused at any point.

The 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 child care programs to assist working parents.
- Ensure that the retirement benefits that citizens have built up over the years are protected.

Measures of ambivalence about social welfare policy were calculated using the following algorithm developed by Thompson and her colleagues (1995; also see Kaplan, 1972):<sup>6</sup>

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

in which P is the positive reaction score and N is the negative reaction score. The range of scores for each of the seven items described above is  $-0.5$  to  $4.0$ , with intervals of  $0.5$  (see Craig et al., 2002). Then, an index of ambivalence was constructed. A principal components factor analysis confirmed that all seven load on a single factor, and the reliability of an additive index constructed from them is very high ( $\alpha = .860$ ).<sup>7</sup> This high value may also be indicative of response set. Because the questions are all posed in the same direction, it is possible that respondents had a tendency to repeat the same response. In addition, the questions are all posed from a liberal point of view. That is, they are all framed around what “the government should” do. This could stimulate more ambivalent responses from conservatives because it primes ideas about what government should do, and as a result of conservatives’ beliefs in limited government, they may offer more ambivalent responses than they would if all the statements were not one way.

On the other hand, this measure addresses the potential validity issues of the previously discussed measures by including indicators of both positive and negative components of an attitude. Again, those measures that infer

ambivalence from the error in prediction equations (Jacoby, 2002; Steenbergen & Brewer, 2000) are likely capturing other things because error variance is certainly the product of numerous factors, including nonattitude, uncertainty, or even underspecification of the model (see Alvarez & Brehm, 1995; also Craig et al., 2002). Although the new measure could suffer from some of the same problems, the likelihood of validity problems is decreased by simply gauging positive and negative responses instead of inferring them. The same can be said for how the new measure compares to that utilized by Feldman and Zaller (1992). Although expressing support and opposition for social welfare in an open-ended question could certainly be an indicator of the simultaneous possession of positive and negative feelings, this phenomenon is more clearly observed by simply asking respondents for both.

The validity of the new measure can be at least partially confirmed by seeing how well it correlates with theoretical predictors of ambivalence. Although attitude strength is not the same thing as ambivalence, research has suggested that ambivalence is associated with weaker attitudes (Bassili, 1996; Craig et al., 2002). The data here confirm as such. There is a negative relationship between social welfare ambivalence and social welfare attitude extremity ( $\text{taub} = -.11, p < .001$ ).<sup>8</sup> Although the magnitude of the relationship is modest, the statistical significance is high. In addition, the models that follow also confirm the construct validity of the new measure because cognitive, affective, and cognitive–affective conflict are all significant predictors of it. Of course, this assumes that the theory is correct and that these measures are valid.

The models that follow include a series of independent variables. First, I employed a traditional 7-point indicator of ideology. Respondents were read the following statement:

We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. On a scale of 1 through 7, where “1” is *very liberal* and “7” is *very conservative*, where would you place yourself on this scale or haven’t you thought much about this?

For the purpose of this analysis, this measure was collapsed so that those who reported a score of 1 to 3 were categorized as liberals, 4 as moderates, and 5 to 7 as conservatives. These cutoffs were chosen to clearly delineate between liberals and conservatives as separate groups. This allows the differences to show more clearly in the tests that follow. If the scale were not collapsed, the tests would tell us if people categorized as a 1 on the scale were more ambivalent than those who were a 2, or 3 to 4, and so on. The purpose is to look for distinct differences across groups.

Before creating a measure of cognitive conflict, individual measures of individualism and egalitarianism were constructed. Respondents were read a series of companion statements and asked to say which came closer to their own opinion. For individualism,<sup>9</sup> the item pairs were (a) the government should see to it that every person has a job and a good standard of living, or the government should just let each person get ahead on his or her own, and (b) we need a strong government to handle today's complex economic problems, or the free market can handle these problems without government being involved. For egalitarianism, the item pairs were (a) we have gone too far in pushing equal rights in this country, or we should do more to make sure that everyone is treated equally, and (b) if people were treated more equally in this country, we would have many fewer problems, or this country would be better off if we worried less about how equal people are. In all cases, responses were coded from 1 (*strong support for the first statement in the pair*) to 5 (*strong support for the second statement*); for the second egalitarianism pair, this scoring was reversed to provide consistency in direction of wording. The two sets of items were then combined into indices with scores ranging from 2 to 10 (high values reflecting stronger support for individualist or egalitarian values).<sup>10</sup>

I calculated a measure of cognitive conflict, which captures the magnitude of the difference between these values, using the same algorithm as the one described earlier for measuring social welfare ambivalence, that is,

$$\text{cognitive conflict} = \frac{|\text{individualism} + \text{egalitarianism}|}{2} - |\text{individualism} - \text{egalitarianism}|$$

with higher values representing more conflict. This measure was then normalized by centering it between 0 and 1.<sup>11</sup>

Even if the theory that value conflict stimulates ambivalence is correct, it is possible that *value hierarchies* (Jacoby, 2002; Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 1992) are structured in ways that sometimes serve to reduce the likelihood of ambivalence occurring. If an individual places more importance on one value than another, the conflict will not necessarily matter; simply, the preferred value will prevail and determine the person's response to the issue in question. Jacoby (2002) presents evidence suggesting that most citizens infrequently place equal importance on values of equality and liberty, among others. Thus, if conflict between egalitarianism and individualism is *potentially* a source of ambivalence about social welfare policy, lower levels of ambivalence should be expected among people who consider one of those two values to be much more important than the other.

So I use a measure of value importance as a control. It is based on responses to two separate items, introduced as follows: “As you know, not everyone agrees on the different goals or values that our nation ought to pursue. I’m going to list three different goals and have you tell me how important each of them is to you personally.” Egalitarianism and individualism importance was then determined based on answers to a pair of questions:

- a. The first goal is *equality*, by which we mean a narrowing of the gap in wealth and power between rich and poor. How important is equality to you—extremely important, important, only somewhat important, or not important at all?
- b. And the third goal is *a free marketplace*, by which we mean all citizens having a chance to get ahead on their own without the government getting involved. How important is a free marketplace to you—extremely important, important, only somewhat important, or not important at all?<sup>12</sup>

Responses were recoded so that higher values represent greater importance. In addition, the relative importance of one value as opposed to the other was calculated as the absolute value of individualism importance subtracted from egalitarianism importance; higher numbers indicate that one of these values has priority over the other for the individual.

It has been suggested that attitudes about social welfare are shaped in part by one’s perceptions of which groups gain most from the various programs. Apart from the obvious (poor people), many citizens think of African Americans as being among the principal beneficiaries of governmental welfare policies (Bobo & Kluegel, 1993; Cook & Barrett, 1992; Gilens, 1995; Sniderman et al., 1991; also see Jacoby, 2005). Accordingly, feelings about welfare beneficiaries were measured with two additive indices, one for positive feelings and another for negative feelings. These indices are based on answers to two questions tapping respondents’ affect toward “poor people” and “Blacks.” Respondents were read the following introduction:

Next, I’d like to do the same thing except with a list of different *government institutions* and *groups* that are active in politics. Once again: If you do not have *any positive* feelings toward the institution or group, 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 institution or group 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 group is. . . .

Then, the names of the groups and institutions were read (including poor people and Blacks), and respondents were asked to separately rate each one. Then, like the social welfare items, the introduction was repeated except with the words *positive* and *positively* replaced by *negative* and *negatively* following a number of filler questions. As before, scores range from 1 (*no positive or negative feelings*) to 4 (*extremely positive or negative feelings*) and from 2 to 8 after summing each respectively. The positive items and negative items scaled well together, indicating that people shared similar feeling across these two groups (positive feelings  $\alpha = .772$ , negative feelings  $\alpha = .868$ ).

I used these indices as the affective components for the measure of affective conflict by summing the positive responses to poor people and Blacks, summing the negative responses to poor people and Blacks and then plugging these indicators into the same algorithm used above, juxtaposing positive responses against negative responses. This index was normalized to have values that range between 0 and 1.

Next, I used the values and feelings about the perceived beneficiaries indices to construct a measure of cognitive–affective conflict. The idea here is that conflict between individualist values and positive feelings about the perceived beneficiaries and between egalitarian values and negative feelings about the perceived beneficiaries should stimulate ambivalence. Rather than doing separate measures for each, the index for positive feelings about the beneficiary and individualist values is inverted and each is added to negative feelings about the beneficiary and egalitarian values respectively. Flipping them gives them the same directional effect on attitudes about social welfare. Because there is no reason to expect that conflict is more likely to stimulate ambivalence for individualist–positive feelings or egalitarian–negative feelings conflict, inverting the indices permits one measure of cognitive–affective conflict. After summing the inverted indices with the noninverted ones, each was rescaled so that all values fall between 0 and 1. Then, I constructed an index of cognitive conflict via the same algorithm used for the other indicators. This index was also normalized to have values between 0 and 1.

I employed two other control variables as well. First, I included a measure of income to control for variation in attitudes about social welfare based on self-interest (see Goren 2001). Respondents were asked to place themselves in one of the following categories: between \$0 and \$10,000, between \$10,000 and \$30,000, between \$30,000 and \$50,000, between \$50,000 and \$70,000, and \$70,000 or more).

Evidence has suggested that there is a relationship between ambivalence and levels of political sophistication. Zaller (1992) proposes that individuals can reliably resist the arguments to which they are exposed only to the extent

that they possess information about these arguments. He asserts that, in combination with the idea that most Americans are not very politically aware, citizens will be unlikely to exhibit high levels of resistance because of low levels of information. Thus, in an environment wherein communications on both sides of the issues is evenly distributed, it is likely that individual attitudinal ambivalence will arise. Alvarez and Brehm (1995, 1997) also argue that those who are least informed are more likely to be ambivalent across several policy domains. They ask political knowledge questions in each study to measure information levels. The present study also employed a measure of political knowledge. Respondents were read the following introduction:

Here are a few questions about the government in Washington. Many people don't know the answers to these questions, but even if you're not sure I'd like you to tell me your best guess.

Then, they were asked the following questions: (a) "First, do you happen to know what job or political office is currently held by John Ashcroft?" (b) "Who has the final responsibility to decide if a law is constitutional or not—is it the president, Congress, or the Supreme Court?" (c) "Would you say that one of the parties is more conservative than the other at the national level? If yes: Which party is more conservative?"<sup>13</sup> Dummy variables were created for each correct response (0 = *incorrect*, 1 = *correct*). Those who responded with "don't know" were also counted as incorrect. An additive index was constructed by adding the three together ( $\alpha = .36$ ), in which higher values represent more political knowledge.

## Results

### **Differences in the Prevalence of Ambivalence Across Ideology**

The results shown in Table 1 suggest several important points. First, liberals are less ambivalent than conservatives when it comes to how they evaluate social welfare programs. Next, although liberals may be less ambivalent than conservatives, it appears that they experience a considerable amount of ambivalence as well. Finally, 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, and this variation is far from trivial.

**Table 1**  
**Prevalence of Social Welfare Ambivalence Across Ideology**

	Mean Ambivalence			Percentage Ambivalent	
	Liberals	Conservatives	<i>p</i> Value	Liberals	Conservatives
Standard of living	0.67	1.05	.00	48.8	64.2
Homeless	0.79	0.95	.15	57.5	60.8
Job guarantee	0.79	0.92	.27	54.3	57.0
Child care	0.67	0.77	.36	51.2	52.2
Medical insurance	0.06	0.54	.00	21.3	40.3
Retirement benefits	0.21	0.41	.12	22.0	30.6
Education	0.13	0.33	.09	20.5	29.0
7-item index	3.32	4.98	.01	39.4	46.4
Number of cases	127	372			

Note: Data are from a Florida Voter survey of registered voters conducted in May 2004. *p* value represents the probability that we cannot reject the null hypothesis that there is no difference between liberals and conservatives across these items (*t* tests, equal variances assumed). Percentage ambivalent entries in the table indicate the proportion who have ambivalence scores greater than 0. Percentages for the 7-item index are an average of the 7 individual percentages.

Mean ambivalence scores for liberals are lower across all seven policy areas. As a result, liberals have a lower score on the index. These differences are significant at the .01 level concerning ambivalence about universal medical insurance and improving the standard of living of poor Americans. The probability that there is no difference across ideology regarding ambivalence about programs to ensure that all children receive a good education is .09, .12 for protecting retirement benefits, and .15 for programs to protect the homeless. The difference concerning ensuring full employment and providing child care programs is relatively higher than the other policy areas (.36 for child care and .27 for the job guarantee item). Most important, the difference across ideology on the index of social welfare ambivalence is significant with a *p* value of .01, suggesting that there is a clear overall pattern in which liberals are less ambivalent than conservatives.<sup>14</sup>

Although liberals may be less ambivalent than conservatives, it appears that ambivalence is fairly common for both. If a score of higher than zero is considered as evidence of some degree of ambivalence (see Craig et al., 2002), the percentage of conservatives in the sample who are ambivalent ranges from 29.0% (ensuring that every child has access to a good education) to 64.2% (programs to improve the standard of living for poor Americans). The percentage of liberals who are ambivalent ranges from 20.5% to 57.5% on the same policy areas. Again, this variation across policy areas, for both

liberals and conservatives, is not trivial. The percentage of those who are ambivalent is higher on policies that would assist the homeless, improve the standard of living of poor Americans, ensure full employment, and provide child care programs to assist working parents. On each of these issues, more than half of the Florida sample, liberals and conservatives, 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.

### **Differences in the Sources of Ambivalence Across Ideology**

Now I address the potential sources of the differences between liberals and conservatives. Table 2 contains each group's mean scores for cognitive conflict, affective conflict, and cognitive–affective conflict. Mean scores for values, value importance, the relative difference of importance, and positive and negative group affect are also included. As expected, liberals are generally more egalitarian and less individualist than are conservatives. Liberals are more likely than conservatives to rate egalitarianism highly. Although they rate individualism lower, the difference is not significant. The difference across ideology concerning the relative difference of the importance of these values is not significant either. It appears that conservatives are slightly more likely to have cognitive conflict.

When it comes to affective conflict and cognitive–affective conflict, liberals are slightly less likely to experience these types of conflict, but these differences are not significant. Unexpectedly, conservatives have more positive feelings about Blacks and poor people than liberals. This is contrary to common stereotypes. There is evidence that suggests conservatives are more mixed when it comes to racial issues (Federico, 2005), but no research that tells us why conservatives would have greater affect toward Blacks and the poor. This could be a social desirability effect in which conservatives are compensating for the popular negative stereotypes by positively responding toward these groups. It may also be a response to the changing cues sent by Bush's "compassionate conservatism." In addition, the Bush administration made a concerted effort in his 2000 election to appoint more minorities to high office, including the nomination of Condoleezza Rice to secretary of state, among others. Although these bivariate descriptions are illustrative, it cannot be concluded that any of these types of conflict are good explanations for why conservatives appear to be more ambivalent than liberals until this proposition is tested in a multivariate setting.

**Table 2**  
**Differences Across Ideology: Sources of Ambivalence**  
**About Social Welfare**

	Liberals	Conservatives	<i>p</i> Value
Cognitive items			
Egalitarianism (0-1)	0.79	0.66	.00
Individualism (0-1)	0.37	0.46	.00
Egalitarianism importance (1-4)	3.31	2.85	.00
Individualism importance (1-4)	2.98	3.09	.22
Relative difference (0-3)	0.88	0.95	.48
Cognitive conflict (0-1)	0.39	0.43	.08
Affective items			
Positive group affect (0-1)	0.27	0.33	.02
Negative group affect (0-1)	0.21	0.25	.15
Affective conflict (0-1)	0.29	0.32	.24
Cognitive–affective conflict (0-1)	0.34	0.37	.17
Number of cases	127	372	

Note: Data are from a Florida Voter survey of registered voters conducted in May 2004. *p* value represents the probability that we cannot reject the null hypothesis that there is no difference between liberals and conservatives across these items (*t* tests, equal variances assumed).

### Multivariate Test of Difference Across Ideology

The results of the test of both the sources of social welfare ambivalence and the reasons for the difference across ideology are contained in Tables 3 and 4. They lend support to the contention that all three types of conflict are indeed sources of social welfare ambivalence. They also indicate that affective conflict explains more of the variance in ambivalence across ideology than the other types of conflict. But in the end, consistent with the idea that changes in how all types of conflict have been primed, the bulk of variance that is explained here results when they are considered simultaneously. The test involves comparing results across a series of ordered logit models of social welfare ambivalence. If cognitive, affective, or cognitive–affective conflict were the *best* explanation of the difference in ambivalence across ideology, ideology should become insignificant as a predictor of ambivalence about social welfare when the explanation of the variance across ideology is introduced to the model.

The first model (Model I) includes only ideology as an explanatory variable excluding conservatives as the reference category. Model II adds the control variables income and political knowledge. This is followed by introducing the cognitive conflict item (Model III) and the value importance

**Table 3**  
**Source of Differences in Social Welfare**  
**Ambivalence across Ideology**

	Model I	Model II	Model III	Model IV	Model V
Liberal	-0.54*** (0.18)	-0.55*** (0.18)	-0.42** (0.18)	-0.43** (0.18)	-0.35* (0.18)
Moderate	0.01 (0.19)	0.01 (0.19)	0.03 (0.19)	0.11 (0.19)	0.13 (0.19)
Cognitive conflict	—	—	1.54*** (0.29)	—	—
Egalitarianism importance	—	—	-0.46*** (0.09)	—	—
Individualism importance	—	—	-0.39*** (0.09)	—	—
Relative difference	—	—	-0.24*** (0.09)	—	—
Cognitive affective conflict	—	—	—	3.72*** (0.34)	—
Affective conflict	—	—	—	—	4.19*** (0.30)
Income	—	-0.05 (0.07)	-0.03 (0.08)	0.01 (0.07)	0.04 (0.07)
Political knowledge	—	0.11 (0.08)	0.14* (0.08)	0.10 (0.08)	0.06 (0.08)
-2 log likelihood	516.371	2156.35	4295.77	4115.99	3632.48
Nagelkerke pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.02	.02	.14	.21	.30
Number of cases	607	607	607	607	607

Note: Data are from a Florida Voter survey of registered voters conducted in May 2004. Table entries are ordered logit estimates obtained using maximum likelihood estimation. Standard errors are in parentheses. Threshold levels are not shown. Missing values were replaced using multiple imputation.

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

indicators. Next, cognitive–affective conflict is added and the purely cognitive items are removed (Model IV), and then the same is done with affective conflict (Model V). This process allows us to determine if these sources of conflict, and which ones, explain the variance across ideology. Finally, the fully specified models are in Table 4. The affective and cognitive–affective conflict measures are in separate models to avoid multicollinearity.<sup>15</sup> Looking at the magnitude and significance of the estimates for each type of conflict while controlling for the effects of the other serves to confirm the results of the above-described test and also allows us to see if they must be considered simultaneously to explain away the difference.

**Table 4**  
**Fully Specified Models of Social Welfare Ambivalence**

	Coeff.	SE	95% Confidence Interval	
Model 1				
Liberal	-0.33	0.18	-0.69	0.03
Moderate	0.13	0.19	-0.24	0.51
Cognitive conflict	1.32	0.29	0.75	1.90
Cognitive-affective conflict	3.44	0.34	2.78	4.11
Egalitarianism importance	-0.39	0.09	-0.56	-0.22
Individualism importance	-0.35	0.09	-0.51	-0.18
Relative difference	-0.18	0.09	-0.35	-0.01
Income	0.01	0.08	-0.14	0.16
Political knowledge	0.13	0.08	-0.02	0.28
-2 log likelihood	4253.66			
Nagelkerke pseudo $R^2$	.28			
Model 2				
Liberal	-0.27	0.18	-0.63	0.09
Moderate	0.15	0.19	-0.22	0.53
Cognitive conflict	1.54	0.29	0.97	2.11
Affective conflict	3.93	0.30	3.34	4.53
Egalitarianism importance	-0.28	0.09	-0.45	-0.11
Individualism importance	-0.25	0.09	-0.42	-0.09
Relative difference	-0.18	0.09	-0.35	-0.01
Income	0.05	0.08	-0.10	0.20
Political knowledge	0.08	0.08	-0.07	0.24
-2 log likelihood	4199.94			
Nagelkerke pseudo $R^2$	0.35			
<i>N</i>	607			

Note: Data are from a Florida Voter survey of registered voters conducted in May 2004. Table entries are ordered logit coefficients, associated standard errors, and 95% confidence intervals. Threshold levels are not shown. Missing values were replaced using multiple imputation.

First, in Model I, the estimate of the relationship between being liberal and social welfare ambivalence is significant and negative. Because the dummy variable for conservatives is excluded as the reference category, this suggests that, compared to conservatives, liberals are less ambivalent. The significance of ideology does not change at all when the income and political knowledge controls are introduced to the model (Model II), and neither is significant. So these controls do not account for the variance explained by ideology. Next, Model III suggests that cognitive conflict in the form of opposing values is a significant predictor of social welfare ambivalence when controlling for the personal importance individuals place on both individualist

and egalitarian values and the relative difference therein.<sup>16</sup> Each of the value importance controls are significant and negative, indicating that ambivalence is lower as one value becomes more important and as one becomes more important relative to the other. The significance of cognitive conflict taken together with the significance of the importance indicators suggests that regardless of the importance of either value, conflict between the two still stimulates ambivalence. Income remains insignificant but political knowledge becomes significant at the .10 level. The relationship suggests that ambivalence increases as political knowledge increases when controlling for the cognitive items. This is the only model in which this is the case. Although these cognitive items appear to structure ambivalence about social welfare, they do not completely explain the difference across ideology. Ideology remains a significant predictor of ambivalence.

Nonetheless, the magnitude and significance of the ideology estimate do drop off some when cognitive conflict and value importance are added to the model.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, varying value conflict across ideology does begin to explain, at least partially, why conservatives are more ambivalent than liberals. Again, this finding indirectly contributes to the theory that elite discourse has shifted attitudes about social welfare. Before the turn of the century, Republican discourse focused on lowering taxes and protecting individual rights. Although they have not abandoned these ideas, as suggested above, the rhetoric changed, and Republican leadership began to embrace a role for government. Although the data here do not permit a direct test of this change, it has been highlighted in other research (Schneider & Jacoby, 2005). This earlier work provides a theoretical framework to explain the change in the types of cues being sent, and the empirical evidence here is what should be expected based on this shift.

After introducing the cognitive-affect conflict items in Model IV, it would appear that conflict between values and feelings toward the perceived beneficiaries of welfare does not completely explain the variance across ideology. Although the magnitude and significance do again slightly drop off, the effects of ideology are still nontrivial. Finally, in Model V, the results indicate that affective conflict explains more of the variance across ideology than the other types of conflict. Although this may be the case, ideology is still fairly reliable ( $p = .053$ ). This is a significant drop off from the other models, but this is not enough to assert that affective conflict is the sole explanation of why liberals seem to be less ambivalent about social welfare than conservatives.

The models contained in Table 4 suggest that the best explanation in these data of the variance of social welfare ambivalence across ideology is all of the

above. In other words, the simultaneous consideration of each of the types of conflict explains more of the variance across ideology than any one of the types of conflict.<sup>18</sup> The significance and magnitude of the estimate for ideology dissipate more than in any of the single conflict models in the cognitive and cognitive–affective conflict model ( $p = .07$ ) and become insignificant in the cognitive–affective conflict model ( $p = .14$ ). All of the cognitive and affective items are significant in both models (0 is not bounded in any of the 95% confidence intervals). This indicates that cognitive, cognitive–affective, and affective conflict are significant sources of social welfare ambivalence even when controlling for each other. The value importance indicators remain significant and negative. The income and political sophistication controls are not significant.

The results do suggest that the affective component explains more of the variance than the cognitive, but this is most pronounced when controlling for the cognitive components. This makes sense given the theory that the changing cues in elite discourse have centered on both cognitive and affective messages that could influence social welfare attitudes. Again, these data offer no direct test of this change, but the results are consistent with the theory.

## Conclusion

The findings presented in this study offer several conclusions. First, social welfare ambivalence appears to be fairly common. Next, the results also indicate that self-identified liberals are less ambivalent about social welfare than their ideological counterparts. Finally, the results suggest that although affective conflict appears to explain more of the ideological differences in ambivalence, this is mostly true when they are all considered simultaneously. Nonetheless, the fact that how people feel about the perceived beneficiaries is the most powerful explanation of ambivalence in general is powerful in itself, regardless of its relationship to ideology. This speaks volumes about the structural components of social welfare attitudes in general and about where Americans are when it comes to attitudes about race. We know that the bulk of social welfare resources are distributed to poor Whites, but clearly the perception is that African Americans are the primary beneficiaries. These ideas certainly call for further investigation.

Taken all together, the findings here lend support to the contention that elite discourse does in fact shape public opinion. This is not new, but the results here indicate that this relationship may be slightly more complicated

than previously noted. Research has presented evidence that attitudes are not simple bipolar evaluations. Rather, they are made up of a range of considerations, often resulting in ambivalence. Therefore, it should be expected that the relationship between elite discourse and attitudes is more complex. The evidence presented here certainly suggests this to be the case. It appears that elite discourse helps shape public opinion but has not eliminated social welfare ambivalence among either liberals or conservatives.

This opens the door for further investigation. For instance, research has suggested that ambivalent attitudes may not be stable (Bargh, Chaiken, Govender, & Pratto, 1992; Hill & Kriesi, 2001; Zaller & Feldman, 1992). If ambivalent attitudes are less stable and elite discourse influences ambivalence, the magnitude of the effect of elite discourse on ambivalent attitudes should be greater. Simply, those who are ambivalent may be more malleable. This still remains to be seen. Furthermore, more needs to be done to explore how social welfare ambivalence affects voting behavior. Potentially, the relationship between social welfare policy preferences and vote choice could be moderated by ambivalence. Simply, the link between such preferences and vote choice may be weaker for those who are ambivalent. If the prevalence of ambivalence varies across ideology, this potential moderating effect may vary across ideology as well. Because liberals appear to be less ambivalent than conservatives, the moderating effect between policy preference and vote choice may not be as strong for them. These are questions that also need to be answered.

Although the results here do suggest that social welfare ambivalence varies across ideology, they also suggest that ambivalence among liberals is not trivial. Apparently, the public, including liberals and conservatives, is just not ready to choose one side over the other.

## Notes

1. Feldman and Steenbergen (2001) contended that “humanitarianism” is also important as a predictor of citizens’ attitudes about social welfare.

2. Nelson (1999) did suggest that cognitive elements of out-group attitudes dominate affect in their influence on policy opinion, but this study is not concerned with the primacy of one effect over another.

3. Additional information can be obtained from the author or from *Florida Voter* directly (954-584-0204).

4. Registered voters were used as the sampling frame as opposed to the general population because the survey was focused on voting behavior.

5. Although the modal number of missing values was less than 1% across the variables used here, these values were replaced anyway to avoid the loss of any information. I employed the MICE (multiple imputation using chained equations; see Horton & Lipsitz, 2001) routine

in the R statistical package to impute missing data. MICE replaces each missing value with a random draw from a distribution estimated from a maximum likelihood function based on other variables in the data set. The imputed data set was based on the mean values from five replicate data sets created by MICE. The substantive results did not change after imputation, but this process does provide more precise results.

6. This model is derived from a version of the semantic differential (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 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, Kane, and Martinez (2002) for a more complete discussion of this measure as employed in a large-sample survey.

7. It is important to note that people's attitudes about social welfare policies may have multiple dimensions (see Jacoby, 1994), but as confirmatory factor analysis indicates here, ambivalence about such policies appears to be unidimensional. In other words, people who are ambivalent about one type of policy are often ambivalent about others.

8. Social welfare attitude extremity was measured by asking respondents the following question:

Some people think the government should provide fewer services, even in areas such as health and education, in order to reduce spending. Others feel it is important for the government to provide more services to citizens even if it means an increase in spending. Which of these positions is closer to your own views? [Do you feel strongly or not so strongly about this?]

Answers were scored from 1 (strongly prefer fewer services and reduced spending) to 5 (strongly prefer more services even if it means higher taxes). The scale was then folded such that more extreme attitudes (1 and 5 scores) were coded as 3, moderate attitudes (2 and 4 scores) were coded as 2, and weak attitudes (3 score) as 1. This item was part of an experiment in which half the sample was asked the question with one additional option ("Or are you torn between the two?") added at the end. People were naturally more likely to select a "mixed" response that was presented to them (24.0% said they were torn) than to volunteer one on their own (12.5%). Both groups are combined for purposes of the analysis here. Previous work using these data in a model of ambivalence about social welfare demonstrated that the impact of the wording difference was trivial (see Gainous & Martinez, 2005). Also, if there is a negative relationship between attitude extremity and ambivalence, and if conservatives are more ambivalent than liberals, we might also expect conservatives to have weaker attitudes. The evidence to suggest this is the case here is limited ( $t$  test equal variances assumed  $p = .14$ ).

9. These 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.

10. Correlations (Pearson's  $r$ ) are .180 ( $p < .001$ ) for the two individualism pairs and .244 ( $p < .001$ ) for the two egalitarianism pairs. The stronger relationships that are typically found when similar items are presented individually to respondents rather than as pairwise comparisons (e.g., Goren, 2001) may be, to some degree, a product of the response set problem that often plagues agree-disagree questions.

11. Because the correlations between the separate value items were relatively low, I created separate conflict scales involving every possible single-item combination, and the substantive results of the tests that follow did not change.

12. The survey included a measure of the importance of traditional moral values, which was asked between these two questions.

13. No responses to the first part of the question were coded as incorrect.

14. Although previous research has specifically dealt with liberals and conservatives, the theory here might suggest that moderates would be more ambivalent than liberals and less ambivalent than conservatives. *t* tests partially confirm this expectation. Moderates are more ambivalent than liberals ( $p = .054$ ) but not significantly less ambivalent than conservatives ( $p = .883$ ).

15. These items are strongly related ( $\text{taub} = .62, p < .001$ ), but neither is strongly related to cognitive conflict.

16. Cognitive conflict is also significant without controlling for the personal importance placed on each value.

17. This change is significantly less pronounced if the value importance indicators are not included.

18. The pseudo  $r^2$  is also highest in these models, indicating that more variance is explained in the fully specified models.

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