Ambivalence, Politics, and Public Policy
For
Matthew and Kathryn
Jessica, Charlie, Nicole, Patrick,
Deena, Jarren, and Bryan
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Conflict is the root of politics. Often, when we think about political conflict, we think about the issues that divide northerners from southerners, have-nots, moralists from secularists, minorities from majorities, and women from men. After all, as James Madison reminded us in *Federalist 10*, differences in interests, abilities, and lifestyles that give rise to conflicts between people are “sown in the nature of man.” But, conflict also exists within individuals’ own thought processes. Poor people are more likely than rich people to see and value the societal advantages that accrue from social welfare policies, yet many rich individuals and poor individuals alike might value both economic opportunity and a tightly woven social safety net. Environmentalists are more likely than local developers to prefer conservation measures to unbridled economic growth, but each side (and especially people on neither side) might see both the upsides and the downsides of government regulation of property. Even on the culturally divisive issue of abortion, many people feel torn between two “rights”—that of the woman to decide whether to abort, and that of the fetus whose fate rests with her decision. The chapters in this book help us to understand how ambivalence affects the electoral choices and the politics of key issues that face voters in contemporary democratic societies.

A companion volume published earlier, *Ambivalence and the Structure of Political Opinion* (see Craig and Martinez 2005), focused mainly on conceptualization and measurement of ambivalence, its origins, and the role that ambivalence plays in shaping people’s general political outlooks. The essays presented here continue these same themes, but with a greater emphasis on the effects of ambivalence on voter decision making and its consequences for interpreting public opinion on many of the central public policy issues of our day. There is, for example, a consideration of the relationship between ideology and ambivalence (are liberals or conservatives more likely to be ambivalent?), the extent to which value conflict is a source of ambivalence, the effect of ambivalence on the structure of citizens’ issue
preferences, and the question of whether ambivalence moderates or mediates the effects of those preferences on voter choice.

To repeat, conflict among groups is at the root of political conflict. In chapter one, an analysis of the 2000 American National Election Study leads Howard Lavine and Marco Steenbergen to conclude that “group ambivalence” (similar levels of support for conservative and liberal groups) has more consistent effects than “candidate ambivalence” or “party ambivalence” on a variety of behaviors and attitudes. Most significantly, people who are most ambivalent about group evaluations tend to decide later whom to support for president, are more likely to split their ticket on election day (supporting one party for president and another for Congress), have less stable evaluations of presidential candidates, and are less likely to utilize their issue preferences in forming a presidential vote choice. When voters are ambivalent about the groups that define their political space, their choices appear to become significantly more difficult.

Whether elections are contested in an electoral space characterized by sharply defined partisan cleavages, or on the shifting sands of a dealigned and malleable electorate, campaigns seek to mobilize candidates’ base constituencies while also perhaps changing a few minds among those favoring the opponent. Typically, only a handful of voters are converted in any given election—but even a small number can represent the balance of power in a hard-fought race. In chapter two, Patrick Fournier examines the factors that distinguish voters who shift their preferences over the course of a campaign from “standpatters,” with specific attention to the effects of ambivalence on the stability of candidate preference. Fournier employs a measure of “actual ambivalence” in candidate preference, conceptually based on the well-known concept of cross-pressures (see Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954) and constructed using responses to closed-ended questions similar to those that are asked in most standard election studies. Analyses of panel data from three presidential elections in the United States, three national elections in Canada, two national elections in Britain, and a provincial election in Ontario show that ambivalence is indeed related to the probability of changes in voter preferences; that is, voters who change their minds are likely to have had some reason to do so before the campaign even began.

The question of how to balance an individual’s opportunity to succeed (or fail) and society’s responsibility to provide a social safety net has been at the heart of democratic politics in industrial and postindustrial societies for at least the better part of a century. In chapter three, Jason Gainous and Michael Martinez examine data from a recent statewide survey in Florida and propose that conflict between individualism and egalitarianism, the relative importance of these two core values to the individual, and the person’s
policy preference each play a role in shaping ambivalence on social welfare policy. Moreover, Gainous and Martinez find (in contradistinction to Zaller and Feldman 1992) that voters who tend to have liberal dispositions are less rather than more ambivalent about social welfare issues.

Although social welfare remains a persistent issue, cultural issues such as abortion and gay rights also are central in defining the current political landscape in the United States. In chapter four, we (along with coauthors, James Kane and Jason Gainous) examine two statewide surveys and find a fair amount of ambivalence on these presumably “easy” issues in Florida. Notably, ambivalence regarding both abortion and gay rights appears to have multiple dimensions; that is, people who are ambivalent about one aspect of the issue are not necessarily ambivalent about other aspects as well. In addition, though we find that conflict among core values (including support for traditional lifestyles, traditional marriage roles, and egalitarianism) is a source of ambivalence on both dimensions of both issues, the evidence suggests that such conflict is far from the whole story.

Racial politics are often seen as “black and white,” both as an erroneous description of the groups on either side of the American racial divide and as a depiction of the starkness of public opinion about racial issues. In chapter five, however, Christopher Federico offers evidence that many white Americans have conflicted views in their perceptions of blacks. Echoing Gainous and Martinez’s findings with respect to social welfare, Federico’s analysis of the 1991 National Race and Politics Study suggests that white conservatives are more ambivalent about race than are white liberals. Moreover, the relationship between ideology and racial ambivalence is amplified among whites by higher levels of education. Federico also shows value conflict (this time between humanitarian concerns and individualism) is at the root of educated whites’ racial ambivalence, but that conflict is better conceptualized in race-specific terms than as a reflection of one’s general, overarching principles.

The politics of growth management in our urban areas reflects the balance between respect for the environment and expanding opportunities for economic growth. In chapter six, Dennis Chong and Yael Wolinsky-Nahmias examine the precursors to the defeat of a November, 2000, ballot measure in Arizona that would have forced local communities to develop urban growth boundaries and comprehensive land use plans. Looking at a 1998 statewide survey, Chong and Wolinsky-Nahmias find relatively small blocs of “no growth” and “no restraint” voters, and conclude that it is the large group of citizens falling in between these two extremes who are most susceptible to campaign messages that frame the issues and, in this case, prime anxieties about such things as “special interests,” local control, and
the prospect of litigation. While most voters are sympathetic to protecting
the environment in the abstract, widespread ambivalence about specific
policy proposals can create an opening for opponents to exploit.

Americans are a religious people, perhaps surprisingly so considering the
country’s high level of economic development (Wald 2003: 9); however, as
Ted Jelen shows in chapter seven, many citizens possess conflicted attitudes
about the role of religion in politics. Specifically, a plurality of respondents
in a Washington, DC-area survey endorsed both a “high wall of separation”
between church and state and protection of our Judeo-Christian heritage.
Jelen finds that liberals and less devout people tend to experience more atti­
tude conflict, and concludes that this “symbolic” ambivalence moderates
the impact that religious beliefs have on attitudes about the appropriateness
of moments of silence in school (but not prayers at high school football
games).

In chapter eight, Christopher Armitage and Mark Conner review the
contributions presented in Ambivalence and the Structure of Political
Opinion (Craig and Martinez 2005) as well as this volume, and discuss how
they help to frame our conceptualization of attitudinal ambivalence and its
consequences. Armitage and Conner point out that even though the differ­
et essays vary in their approaches to understanding the factors that under­
lay ambivalence, important common themes about the consequences of
ambivalence nevertheless do emerge. The authors conclude by outlining an
agenda of unanswered questions related to ambivalence that are ripe for
future research.

We hope that these two books together will help to raise awareness,
among scholars and practicing politician alike, that citizens’ thoughts and
feelings about contemporary issues are often complex and multifaceted. It
would be a gross exaggeration for us to claim that all voters are ambivalent
(as many clearly are not), but it is important to recognize that many people
do have both positive and negative attitudes and feelings about some of the
choices they must make. Taking ambivalence into account gives us a
broader understanding of how a significant proportion of the public grapples
with the tough political issues they face at election time, and in the
course of their everyday lives.
Recent insights about attitude structure and process have spawned a new understanding of the nature and dynamics of mass opinion. On the structural side, there is mounting evidence that political opinions are more complex than the unidimensional summary statements (e.g., unfavorable or favorable, cold or warm, negative or positive) routinely used to measure them. On the processing side, opinions often are not directly retrieved from memory in summary form but, instead, are constructed episodically on the basis of an “on-the-spot” memory search using whatever considerations are momentarily salient (Tourangeau, Rips, and Rasinski 2000; Zaller and Feldman 1992; but see Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989; Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995). Although political scientists have only recently begun to incorporate these insights into empirical models of political behavior, they have long recognized that opinions are infused with conflicting beliefs and feelings. The authors of *The American Voter* wrote, for example, that an individual voter’s “system of partisan attitudes” could be consistently favorable toward one party, or that the elements of the system could be in conflict (Campbell et al. 1960; also see Free and Cantril 1967; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944). Contemporary research suggests further that ambivalence—an internalized conflict about a specific political choice—is a prevalent characteristic of political belief systems, with important implications for how citizens make political decisions.

Earlier theories assumed that inconsistent and unstable opinions reflected either uncrystallized views (Converse 1964) or deficient measurement (Achen 1975). Analysts now believe that these phenomena may also reflect attempts at reconciling strongly held but conflicting principles and considerations simultaneously present in the political culture (Feldman and Zaller 1992). Whether because disputes activate widely shared but inherently incompatible
values (Alvarez and Brehm 2002), because few citizens possess the political wherewithal to resist arguments counter to their values and interests (Zaller 1992), or because electoral contests provide ample amounts of positive and negative information about each of the competing campaigns (Lavine 2001), many citizens appear to embrace central elements of both sides of political debates. For example, Americans often express support for both individualism and egalitarianism on questions of welfare spending and racial policy (Feldman and Zaller 1992; Katz and Hass 1988); feminism and religion on abortion (Alvarez and Brehm 2002; Craig, Kane, and Martinez 2002); and moral traditionalism and social tolerance on debates about gay rights (Craig et al. 2005b). At a more general level, citizens frequently express opposing beliefs about the proper role of government in society (Cantril and Cantril 1999; Free and Cantril 1967). Finally, in the electoral realm, as much as one-third of the voting public report having conflicted reactions toward presidential candidates and the political parties (Basinger and Lavine 2005; Lavine 2001; Meffert, Guge, and Lodge 2000). Taken together, these findings imply that positive attitudes are not simply the diametric opposite of negative attitudes, such that the more one likes a political object the less one dislikes it. Instead, political attitudes are often simultaneously positive and negative, or ambivalent.1

Beyond the question of prevalence, research has shown that ambivalence has important consequences for political judgment and choice. In the public opinion realm, attitudes marked by ambivalence tend to be held with less confidence and more difficult to retrieve (less cognitively accessible) than relatively one-sided or “univalent” opinions (Bargh et al. 1992; Huckfeldt and Sprague 2000; Lavine, Borgida, and Sullivan 2000); consequently, they are less stable over time and more vulnerable to persuasion (Bassili 1996; Zaller and Feldman 1992; Craig, Martinez, and Kane 2005a). More generally, ambivalence appears to render policy choice fundamentally difficult and unreliable, and contextually dependent on temporarily salient considerations (Alvarez and Brehm 1995, 2002; Haddock 2003; Lavine et al. 1998; Tourangeau et al. 1989a). In their examination of abortion attitudes, for example, Alvarez and Brehm (1995) found that respondents who valued both women’s rights and religion (the main underpinnings of pro-choice and pro-life positions, respectively) revealed considerably greater error variance in their policy choices than did respondents who valued one of these considerations to the relative exclusion of the other.

Ambivalence has also been shown to influence electoral decision-making in presidential and congressional contests. Conflicted attitudes toward presidential candidates often produce unstable electoral judgments, and weaken the effects of both personality assessments and issue proximity on vote choice (Lavine 2001). In House elections, Basinger and Lavine (2005) found that