

6. Ambivalence Toward American Political Institutions

Sources and Consequences

Kathleen M. McGraw and Brandon Bartels

The characterization of attitudes as lying along a single bipolar (negative to positive) continuum has widely been rejected as inadequate in social and political psychology. Instead, scholars recognize that attitudes can have separate positive and negative components—a two-dimensional view which contends that ambivalence is fundamental to our understanding of attitudes. As the contributions to this volume illustrate, within a relatively short period of time scholars have made important advances in demonstrating the role that ambivalence plays in the expression of attitudes about social and political policies, individuals, and social groups.¹ However, there has been no consideration of ambivalence toward another object of tremendous importance to the political system, namely, the institutions of American government.

Our starting point is a simple one: Although Congress, the Supreme Court and the presidency are at the center of the U.S. governmental system, there has been remarkably little consideration of public opinion about those institutions from a cross-institutional, comparative perspective. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995) provide a commendable exception to this general rule, but their analysis is best regarded as a starting point. In *Congress as Public Enemy*, the authors demonstrated that public attitudes and views about Congress, the Supreme Court and the president are distinct from one another; they also persuasively made the case that it is important to understand why those distinctions exist, and why they matter for democratic governance. Yet their analysis is incapable of shedding light on the micro-foundations of citizens' institutional attitudes. Our goal is to

extend Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's arguments for studying and comparing public opinion regarding the three branches of government. We will do this by examining the extent to which attitudes about those institutions are characterized by ambivalence, exploring the sources of ambivalence, and considering its consequences.

To place our investigation in proper context, we start with an overview of how ambivalence has been conceptualized in previous scholarship. We then briefly describe what might be construed as the "two faces of ambivalence," namely, that ambivalence may promote both normatively desirable *and* undesirable outcomes in political judgment and decision-making. The subsequent analysis involves an exploration of (1) the extent of Americans' ambivalence about Congress, the president, and the Supreme Court; (2) the relationships between ambivalence and basic political orientations of trust, efficacy, and support for democratic processes, and (3) the consequences of ambivalence for the mass public's evaluations of the institutions of government. We close by summarizing our results and discussing their implications.

CONCEPTUALIZATION AND OPERATIONALIZATION OF AMBIVALENCE

Ambivalence has been conceptualized in a variety of ways, and there is little doubt that diverging conclusions about its incidence and consequences are tied to specific conceptual and measurement decisions. Let us therefore consider some of the different approaches taken by scholars in earlier studies. Hochschild (1981), for example, wrote that she used ambivalence "as a generic term to indicate a wide range of views" and argued that various expressions of ambivalence—including helplessness, anger, inconsistency, confusion—are critical (pp. 239–242) for understanding the concept. In Hochschild's analysis, it is these overt manifestations that really define ambivalence. In contrast, Zaller and Feldman (1992) defined ambivalence (axiomatically): "Most people possess opposing considerations on most issues, that is, considerations that might lead them to decide the issue either way" (p. 585). In this view, it is the mental elements that define ambivalence. The Zaller and Feldman (1992) position corresponds to most social psychological treatments, which conceive of ambivalence as a structural property of attitudes (e.g., Cacioppo and Berntson 1994; Cacioppo *et al.* 1997; Thompson *et al.* 1995). Our treatment follows from this tradition, as we conceive of ambivalence as a structural property of the mental

representation of an attitude, reflecting the coexistence of both positive and negative evaluations of the attitude object.

Three general procedures have been used in previous scholarship to measure ambivalence. In the first, the researcher infers its existence, for example, Hochschild's (1981) intensive interviews, as well as Chong's (1993) and Feldman and Zaller's (1992) analyses of open-ended survey data. Although more complex in application, Alvarez and Brehm (2002; cf. Steenbergen and Ellis, 2003) also use an inferential approach, inferring ambivalence from patterns of error variance in heteroskedastic probit models of binary choice. A second approach requires the self-report of subjective experiences, for example, by asking individuals their agreement with statements such as "I have both positive and negative feelings about—" or "I find myself feeling torn between the two sides of—" (McGraw *et al.* 2003; Priester and Petty 1996, 2001; Thompson *et al.* 1995; Tourangeau *et al.* 1989a).

The third type of measurement strategy involves two steps. First, positive and negative reactions to some target are assessed separately. This is done either holistically, that is, by asking individuals to rate, in an overall fashion, the positivity and negativity of their reactions to the target (e.g., Craig *et al.* 2002; Thompson *et al.* 1995), or by soliciting specific positive and negative reactions (e.g., Lavine 2001; McGraw *et al.* 2003). In the second step, positive and negative reactions are combined to yield a continuous measure of ambivalence (for reviews of various computational formulas, see Breckler 1994; Priester and Petty 1996; Thompson *et al.* 1995). With this third strategy, some researchers have made use of indicators of ambivalence that might be considered primarily *cognitive* in content, that is, tapping positive and negative beliefs about the target (Alvarez and Brehm 2002; Feldman and Zaller 1992; Lavine 2001; McGraw *et al.* 2003; Meffert *et al.* 2000; Steenbergen and Brewer 2000), while others have employed indicators that are more *affective* or emotional (Lavine *et al.* 1998b; Meffert *et al.* 2000; Steenbergen and Ellis 2003).

There are many important unanswered questions regarding the relationships among these various indicators, as well as questions as to which is the superior measure of the construct. Some of these questions are addressed by other contributors to this volume, but they are beyond the scope of the present chapter. Rather, our measurement approach is dictated by the data available to us for exploring institutional ambivalence (described more fully below). Specifically, we make use of the third measurement strategy described above in assessing both positive and negative beliefs about Congress, the Supreme Court, and the president.

The Two Faces of Ambivalence

Ambivalence has been linked to a variety of attitudinal and behavioral consequences, though we postpone detailing expectations about the specific consequences of institutional ambivalence that motivate our analyses until the relevant results are presented. Rather, at this juncture, we simply note that the literature presents two very different portraits of the role ambivalence plays in the political system, and its attendant normative implications. These two portraits emerge from Hochschild's (1981) analysis, where she notes that some people have the ability to cope with conflicting reactions but that "most respondents lack this happy ability to maintain and draw strength from distinctions among beliefs and domains. Most make the distinctions, but react to them with uncertainty and distress, not contentment and 'health' " (p. 240). According to Hochschild, then, the consequences of ambivalence for most people are negative, and this is a view that largely characterizes the public opinion literature. Ambivalence has been linked to response instability and is said to decrease the predictability of public opinion responses, weaken the relationship between intentions and behavior, result in more negative general evaluations, and lead to a variety of negative subjective experiences (in Hochschild's analysis, helplessness, anger, inconsistency, and confusion). From this perspective, ambivalence clearly has negative normative implications for the functioning of the political system: It leads to a polity characterized by negativity and confusion, lacking stable opinions, and therefore subject to manipulation by the media and political elites.

On the other hand, as Hochschild describes, ambivalence does not inevitably lead to negative outcomes, and there is a more modest research tradition demonstrating that ambivalence is associated with deeper and more systematic information processing, the searching out of new information, open-mindedness and a willingness to evaluate evidence in an even-handed fashion, and improved coping with severe health stressors. From this perspective, ambivalence produces a better-informed, more engaged, and more open-minded polity, and thus should have positive normative implications for the functioning of the political system.

Most likely, of course, is that ambivalence manifests itself in a variety of ways that have both positive and negative normative impacts. In the service of truth in advertising, we want to point out that it is not our goal to provide any sort of definitive statement regarding when, why, or how ambivalence produces desirable and undesirable outcomes. However, it is important to be sensitive to the "two faces of ambivalence," and so we proceed in the analyses that follow by being cognizant of each of these two possibilities.

DATA, MEASURES, AND THE INCIDENCE OF INSTITUTIONAL AMBIVALENCE

The data used to explore ambivalence toward U.S. political institutions are drawn from the 1997 American National Election Study (ANES) Pilot Study, which was a telephone re-interview of 551 randomly selected respondents from the 1996 ANES election-year survey. Since Pilot Study respondents were interviewed in both the pre- and post-election waves of the 1996 survey, data are available for each respondent from three points in time (1996_{pre}, 1996_{post}, and 1997).

The 1997 Pilot Study included new instrumentation designed to explore a number of topic areas, including nonelectoral participation, group conflict, religion, and evaluations of President Clinton, the Supreme Court, and Congress. It is this last battery of questions that form the core of our analysis.² Respondents were asked how well a series of six traits described Congress, President Clinton, and the Supreme Court. These traits were (1) doesn't get much accomplished; (2) too involved in partisan politics; (3) doesn't care what ordinary people think; (4) corrupt; (5) too conservative; and (6) too liberal, with response options of "extremely well," "quite well," "not so well," and "not well at all." Responses to four of these trait questions were used to create measures of ambivalence toward each of the three targets. We decided to drop the "too conservative" and "too liberal" measures because it is difficult to classify those responses as reflecting clearly positive or negative beliefs. In contrast, the remaining four traits are all phrased so that *agreement* (responses of "extremely well" and "quite well") reflects a *negative* assessment of the target on that trait. We then infer that *disagreement* (responses of "not so well" and "not well at all") reflect *more positive* assessments of the target on a particular trait dimension.

To our knowledge, these are the only existing available data suitable for a comparative analysis of institutional ambivalence. Their value is that they allow us to compare the incidence, sources, and consequences of ambivalence, based on identical indicators, across the three institutional targets. Of course, "President Clinton" is not an institution, but rather a specific individual who inhabited the office; the institution of the presidency clearly is more than just the officeholder. However, there has been virtually no work on public opinion about the institution of the presidency *per se*, and so our focus on a sitting president is consistent with the existing literature (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). To avoid excessive verbiage, we thus refer to the three "institutional targets" in the analysis and discussion that follows.

By categorizing the four trait attributions into positive and negative responses, we can examine the extent to which opinions about these targets are characterized by ambivalence. Given four traits, three patterns of responses are possible: (1) *nonambivalence*, or a 4–0 mix, where the respondent's beliefs are either all positive or all negative; (2) *weak ambivalence*, or a 3–1 mix, where beliefs are either three positive and one negative, or three negative and one positive; and (3) *ambivalence*, or a 2–2 mix, where beliefs are characterized by two positive and two negatives. Although this tripartite classification scheme is straightforward and does not require any complex statistical estimation, it should be noted that computing ambivalence scores by applying the widely used Thompson *et al.* (1995; see chapter 4 in this volume) algorithm yields exactly the same three categories and incidence rates.

Descriptive data are provided in table 6.1. The top panel summarizes the full distribution of responses to the trait questions. The basic pattern we see is consistent with long-standing differences in evaluations of the three branches of government (see Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). Beliefs about Congress tend to be the most negative, with 43.9 percent of respondents providing either all or three out of four negative responses. In contrast, beliefs about Clinton and the Supreme Court are predominantly positive, with 56.5 percent and 70.1 percent, respectively, providing either all or three out of four positive responses. A similar pattern is evident in general evaluations of the institutions, as reflected by the thermometer ratings displayed in the middle panel of table 6.1.

There is a mini-debate in the literature concerning the incidence of ambivalence in the American public. Some scholars conclude that it is widespread (Hochschild 1981; Zaller 1992), others that it is a relatively rare phenomenon (Alvarez and Brehm 2002; Jacoby 2002; Steenbergen and Brewer 2000), while still others take a moderate position that the incidence of ambivalence is "nontrivial" (Craig *et al.* 2002; Lavine 2001; Meffert *et al.* 2000). In our view, these debates are premature given a lack of consensus on how ambivalence is most suitably measured, and secondary to the more important questions regarding how variations in levels of ambivalence are systematically related to important political outcomes. The bottom panel of table 6.1 reveals that at least some Americans are ambivalent about the three central institutions of U.S. government. The question of the incidence rate—how much ambivalence is there?—depends on whether we focus on the fully ambivalent, in which case the incidence rate is clearly a sizable minority of the public (14–25 percent, depending on the target), or whether the weakly ambivalent are included (in which case, we are looking at a much larger 50–70 percent). Regardless, ambivalence is most

Table 6.1 Distribution of trait beliefs and level of ambivalence

	Congress	Supreme Court	President Clinton
Trait belief response patterns			
0 Positive–4 Negative	19.3%	6.5%	13.0%
1 Positive–3 Negative	24.6	9.3	16.4
2 Positive–2 Negative	25.0	14.1	14.0
3 Positive–1 Negative	20.5	27.1	20.9
4 Positive–0 Negative	10.6	43.0	35.6
Feeling thermometers			
Mean score	54.7	62.9	58.5
Standard deviation	(17.6)	(17.1)	(26.8)
Distribution of ambivalence			
Nonambivalent	29.9%	49.5%	48.6
Weakly ambivalent	45.1	36.4	37.4
Ambivalent	25.0	14.1	14.0
Number of cases (1996) =	508	495	506
Number of cases (1997) =	544	538	545

Note: Data are from the 1996 American National Election Study (trait beliefs and distribution of ambivalence) and 1997 ANES Pilot Study (feeling thermometers).

pronounced for Congress, but also present in beliefs about the Supreme Court and the president.

Relationships among Institutional Ambivalence Measures

We next consider relationships among the three institutional ambivalence measures, to determine whether they are independent or representative of a more fundamental individual difference or political orientation. There are two competing perspectives here. On the one hand, Thompson, Zanna, and Griffin (1995) concluded that there is a sizable individual difference component to ambivalence about policy issues; people who are ambivalent about an issue like AIDS testing, for example, also tend to be ambivalent about an issue like euthanasia. Similarly, Dennis (1966: 608) speculated that "a general ambivalence to politics" colors public opinion about a variety of political issues. Other scholars have argued that the experience of ambivalence and related phenomena, such as value conflict, are largely target-specific, *not* rooted in fundamental individual differences (Alvarez and Brehm 2002; Lavine 2001; Tetlock 1986). In order to determine which of these perspectives characterizes ambivalence about political institutions, we examined the correlations among the three ambivalence measures (which

Table 6.2 Institutional ambivalence and evaluation correlations

	Congressional ambivalence	Supreme Court ambivalence	Clinton ambivalence	Congressional evaluations	Supreme Court evaluations	Clinton evaluations
Congressional ambivalence	—					
Supreme Court ambivalence	0.068	—				
Clinton ambivalence	0.060	0.148***	—			
Congressional evaluations	0.120**	-0.099*	-0.010	—		
Supreme Court evaluations	0.077	-0.206***	-0.001	0.500***	—	
Clinton evaluations	0.063	-0.073	-0.112*	0.343***	0.259***	—

Note: *** $p \leq 0.001$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; * $p \leq 0.05$. Data are from the 1996 American National Election Study and 1997 ANES Pilot Study. Table entries are Pearson's correlation coefficients ($N = 460$, listwise deletion of missing data).

were recoded to a three-point scale, taking values of 0 [nonambivalent], 0.5 [weakly ambivalent], and 1.0 [ambivalent]). For purposes of comparison, we also include evaluations of the three targets, namely, thermometer ratings of institutions from the 1997 wave of the survey. The correlations are summarized in table 6.2.

There are three noteworthy patterns evident in this table. First, whereas ambivalence toward the Supreme Court and Clinton are modestly and positively related, ambivalence toward Congress is independent of the other two. Second, there is considerably less overlap among the ambivalence measures (mean $r = 0.092$) than among the general evaluation indicators, where the typical finding of strong positive relationships is evident (mean $r = 0.367$; cf. Wilcox *et al.* 1989). The fact that institutional ambivalence measures have very little overlap supports the position that these reactions are largely target-specific, rather than being primarily rooted in a chronic component on which people consistently vary. Finally, we see the first bit of evidence suggesting that the consequences of ambivalence may vary with the institutional target: Ambivalence toward the Supreme Court and Clinton are associated with more *negative* evaluations, whereas ambivalence toward Congress is associated with more *positive* evaluations.

SOURCES OF INSTITUTIONAL AMBIVALENCE

Despite an increasing amount of research on the topic, there has been relatively little consideration of the sources of ambivalence. Hochschild

(1981) and Zaller (1992) imply that ambivalence is nearly ubiquitous and invariant, a claim that would suggest that a search for systematic sources rooted in individual differences is futile. However, the data presented in table 6.1 work against the Hochschild/Zaller perspective, as it is clear that the incidence of ambivalence toward political institutions is neither ubiquitous nor invariant. There has been some consideration of the factors that predict the subjective experience of ambivalence, including the impact of information and the objective mental elements that comprise attitudinal ambivalence (McGraw *et al.* 2003; Priester and Petty 1996), interpersonal attitudinal discrepancies (Priester and Petty 2001), and personality characteristics such as need for cognition and fear of invalidity (Thompson *et al.* 1995). More relevant to our purposes, given the data available to us, there are some hints in the literature that ambivalence about political issues varies as a function of core demographic characteristics and attitudinal characteristics (Craig *et al.* 2002; Steenbergen and Brewer 2000), as well as core political values (Craig *et al.* 2002; Mulligan and McGraw 2002).

We explored the impact of a variety of such factors on ambivalence toward the three institutional targets. We underscore that this exercise is largely exploratory and only loosely guided by theoretical expectations. Our model includes key demographics (sex, race, age, political sophistication), core political attitudes (partisanship, ideology), and a set of more general political and moral orientations (trust, efficacy,³ support for democratic processes, moral conservatism, religiosity).⁴ Question wordings for all variables, recoded to scales with scores ranging between 0 and 1, are provided in the Appendix. Table 6.3 reports both bivariate correlations and the results from a multivariate ordinary least squares regression.

Given the low adjusted R^2 s evident in the table, it is clear that these models do not do an especially good job of explaining the variance in institutional ambivalence. This pessimistic observation can be tempered somewhat by taking into consideration the explanatory power of the same set of variables for predicting respondents' evaluations (i.e., thermometer ratings) of the targets (not reported in tabular form). The discrepancy in R^2 s is enormous for the Clinton models (adjusted $R^2 = 0.042$ versus 0.478 for ambivalence and evaluations, respectively), and so it is clearly the case that the model does a very poor job of explaining ambivalence toward Clinton. By the same token, the models using the same set of variables to predict evaluations of Congress and the Supreme Court are not nearly as robust as for the Clinton evaluation models (adjusted $R^2 = 0.203$ and 0.108, respectively, for the thermometer ratings), and so the discrepancy between the evaluation and ambivalence models is not nearly so great for those two targets.

Table 6.3 Sources of institutional ambivalence

	Congress		Supreme Court		Clinton	
	r	b (s.e.)	r	b (s.e.)	r	b (s.e.)
Female _{1996pre}	-0.055	-0.079 (.037)*	-0.009	0.006 (.036)	-0.004	-0.019 (.036)
Black _{1996pre}	0.129**	0.104 (.067)	0.040	0.050 (.067)	-0.106*	-0.150 (.066)*
Age _{1996pre}	0.049	0.001 (.001)	0.098*	0.001 (.001)	0.123**	0.003 (.001)**
Sophistication _{1996mixed}	0.033	-0.013 (.025)	0.063	0.077 (.025)**	-0.087†	-0.021 (.024)
Partisanship ₁₉₉₇ (Democrat)	0.071	-0.050 (.058)	0.002	0.066 (.058)	-0.084†	-0.023 (.057)
Partisan Strength ₁₉₉₇	0.128**	0.096 (.046)*	0.046	0.040 (.045)	-0.069	-0.064 (.045)
Ideology ₁₉₉₇ (Liberal)	0.060	0.039 (.042)	-0.048	-0.030 (.041)	-0.098*	-0.032 (.041)
Trust _{1996post}	0.228***	0.257 (.098)**	-0.158***	-0.112 (.096)	-0.018	0.140 (.095)
Efficacy _{1996post}	0.191***	0.157 (.101)†	-0.204***	-0.392 (.100)***	-0.128**	-0.166 (.099)†
Democratic Processes _{1996post}	0.142***	0.080 (.094)	-0.031	0.038 (.095)	-0.068	-0.114 (.093)
Moral Conservatism _{1996post}	-0.109*	-0.269 (.103)**	-0.066	0.035 (.100)	-0.083†	0.018 (.099)
Religiosity _{1996pre}	0.094*	0.199 (.077)**	0.030	0.014 (.075)	0.097*	0.136 (.074)†
Intercept	n/a	-0.035 (.103)	n/a	0.415 (.103)***	n/a	0.333 (.102)***
Adjusted R ²	n/a	0.090***	n/a	0.054***	n/a	0.042**
Number of cases =	444	444	433	433	447	447

Note. *** $p \leq 0.001$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; * $p \leq 0.05$; † $p \leq 0.10$. Data are from the 1996 American National Election Study and 1997 ANES Pilot Study. Entries in columns 1, 3, and 6 are Pearson's correlation coefficients (listwise deletion of missing data). Entries in columns 2, 4, and 5 are unstandardized regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. Postscripts for independent variables indicate the wave of the survey in which each variable was measured.

There are three patterns, and non-patterns, in table 6.3 that strike us as noteworthy. First, we find two sources of ambivalence that are constant across the three targets. One is respondent age: All else equal, older citizens tend to be more ambivalent, a conclusion consistent with prior research (Steenbergen and Brewer 2000). In addition, religiosity and ambivalence are positively related, although the magnitude of that positive effect clearly varies. While such a result may seem surprising, it should be noted that our measure of religiosity does not tap religious fundamentalism, which has been linked to close-mindedness and dogmatism (Saroglou 2002); we would expect these latter characteristics to be associated with less ambivalence rather than more. Ambivalence, however, is often linked with the ability or willingness to be open-minded, and the positive religiosity-ambivalence relationship shown in table 6.3 is consistent with recent evidence (Saroglou 2002) indicating that religiosity is associated with greater openness to experience, one of the "Big Five" dimensions of personality (McCrae and Costa, 2003).⁵ Along the same lines, the strong inverse relationship between congressional ambivalence and moral conservatism may reflect the impact of dogmatism or closed-mindedness, given the substantial overlap among these constructs (Jost *et al.* 2003).

Second, there is a series of variables for which no systematic effects emerged. Other than the positive impact of partisan strength on congressional ambivalence, it seems clear that ambivalence toward the three branches of government is not rooted in the core political cleavages of ideology or partisanship. Further, though scattered effects emerged from our multivariate analyses (sex in the case of Congress, sophistication for the Supreme Court, and race for President Clinton), we can see no consistent effects attributable to key demographic variables.

The third pattern, involving relationships between ambivalence and the basic political orientations of trust, efficacy, and support for democratic processes, strikes us as the most provocative. Consider the effects of this cluster of variables on ambivalence toward the Supreme Court and Clinton. While these effects vary in magnitude, the general pattern is that more *negative* orientations (less trust, efficacy, and support) are associated with greater ambivalence; all the bivariate correlations, and the only significant coefficients in the multivariate analyses, reveal this relationship. The pattern for congressional ambivalence is markedly different, indicating that more *positive* orientations are associated with greater ambivalence; all three bivariate relationships are positive and significant, and two of the relationships (for trust and efficacy) hold even with the multivariate controls. In short, citizens' fundamental levels of affection and disaffection for the political system push them in different directions when it comes to ambivalence toward the three institutions.

Reconciling the implications of this unexpected set of results requires taking into account the sociohistorical context within which opinions about the three institutions are situated (i.e., negative for Congress, variable but positive in the aggregate for President Clinton,⁶ and positive for the Supreme Court). These might be considered default, or baseline opinions. Consider again the top panel of table 6.1, where the modal response pattern for both Clinton and the Supreme Court was "four positive-zero negative." Respondents who expressed positive orientations toward the political system—that is, scoring higher in trust, efficacy and support for democracy—were particularly likely to hold positive beliefs about these two targets. For example, zero-order correlations between trust in government and the number of positive trait beliefs are $r = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$ for Clinton, and $r = 0.14$, $p < 0.01$ for the Supreme Court; results are similar for efficacy and support for democratic processes. It is the disaffected who are more likely to hold negative beliefs, and as a consequence exhibit more ambivalence because the holding of both positive and negative beliefs about these two targets means moving away from a default position of *positivity*.

In contrast, although there is no clear modal response in the trait belief patterns for Congress (table 6.1), it is evident that negativity predominates over positivity. Here, too, we would expect that a more positive orientation toward politics should be associated with granting Congress more positive traits, and this is the case ($r = 0.30$, $p < 0.001$, for trust and the number of positive trait beliefs; results again are similar for efficacy and support for democratic processes). Accordingly, it is individuals with more positive orientations toward the political system who exhibit greater congressional ambivalence because holding both positive and negative beliefs about Congress means moving away from a default position of *negativity*.

THE IMPACT OF AMBIVALENCE ON INSTITUTIONAL EVALUATIONS

Cacioppo's asymmetric nonlinear model of attitude formation (Cacioppo *et al.* 1997) predicts that ambivalence will be associated with more negative evaluations because negative information receives greater weight in the judgment process. Evidence in the realm of candidate evaluations generally supports this prediction (Holbrook *et al.* 2001; McGraw *et al.* 2003). In order to examine whether ambivalence is associated with negative evaluations of the institutions, we re-estimated the table 6.3 models using thermometer ratings of the institutions as dependent variables and adding the

institution-appropriate measure of ambivalence as a predictor—the latter to determine the independent impact of ambivalence on evaluations above and beyond the effects of other variables. For the sake of brevity, we summarize our results rather than reporting them in tabular form. First, although the bivariate relationship between congressional ambivalence and evaluations is weakly positive (see table 6.2), that relationship does not survive the multivariate analysis; in fact, ambivalence appears to have no independent impact on evaluations of Congress ($b = -0.007$, n.s.). In contrast, and in line with expectations, ambivalence toward the Supreme Court and Clinton (especially the former) are associated with more negative evaluations (for the Supreme Court, $b = -0.064$ [0.024], $p < 0.01$; and for Clinton, $b = -0.037$ [0.027], $p = 0.16$).

Meffert, Guge, and Lodge (2000) demonstrated that ambivalence is related to more moderate evaluations of political candidates. Those authors did not consider the negativity hypothesis and, in fact, it is entirely possible for ambivalence to produce both negativity and moderation if the two are correlated with each other. To examine the relationship between ambivalence and the extremity of institutional evaluations, we re-estimated the evaluation models using the folded (at the scale midpoint of 50) thermometer scores as dependent variables. Results are consistent with both Meffert *et al.* conclusions and our own negativity results: Ambivalence toward Congress has no impact on the extremity of the congressional evaluations ($b = -0.001$, n.s.), whereas ambivalence toward President Clinton and the Supreme Court are linked to more moderate evaluations of those targets ($b = -0.051$ [0.019], $p = 0.008$ for Clinton; and $b = -0.061$ [0.018], $p = 0.001$ for the Supreme Court).

FURTHER CONSEQUENCES OF INSTITUTIONAL AMBIVALENCE

Instability

In light of evidence from previous research linking ambivalence to attitudinal instability (Lavine 2001; Zaller and Feldman 1992; also see chapter 4 in the present volume), we wished to assess the extent to which ambivalence leads to unstable opinions about political institutions. Unfortunately, the 1996–97 ANES data are ill-suited for investigating this question because ambivalence was measured in the final wave (ideally, ambivalence would be used to predict *future* instability). Given this caveat, we nonetheless examined the stability of thermometer ratings between the 1996 post-election and 1997 waves. Overall, evaluations of President Clinton were substantially

more stable than evaluations of Congress and the Supreme Court ($r = 0.83, 0.55, \text{ and } 0.45$, respectively, all $p < 0.001$). However, a comparison of the stability coefficients computed separately for ambivalent, weakly ambivalent and non-ambivalent respondents revealed that the stability of the evaluations do not vary as a function of institutional ambivalence.

Uncertainty

A variety of often contradictory arguments have been put forth regarding the relationship between uncertainty and ambivalence. Alvarez and Brehm's (1997) theoretical framework presumes that the two are independent of one another. This appears to be the case for the *subjective*, or self-reported experiences of ambivalence and uncertainty (McGraw *et al.* 2003), but there is evidence indicating that *objective* ambivalence, of the sort we focus on in this chapter, is associated with a greater degree of self-reported uncertainty about candidates' policy stands (Meffert *et al.* 2000) and opinions about candidates (McGraw *et al.* 2003).

There also is little consensus in the public opinion literature regarding the measurement of uncertainty. One strategy relies on explicit "don't know" responses to survey questions (Alvarez and Franklin 1994; Bartels 1986; McGraw *et al.* 2002), and that is the approach taken here.⁷ Specifically, we make use of a series of questions asking respondents to place the three institutional targets on a scale measuring ideology. The respondents were asked, in the 1997 wave, "We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. In your booklet is a seven-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Where would you place Bill Clinton/the U.S. Congress/the Supreme Court on this scale?" Those who responded "haven't thought much about it" or who said they "don't know" are treated as being uncertain about the ideological leanings of the three institutions.

By and large, very few respondents are uncertain about Clinton's ideology (6.7 percent), whereas more are uncertain about the ideological leanings of Congress (20.7 percent) and the Supreme Court (21.4 percent). Given the lack of variance in the Clinton ideological uncertainty measure, it is not surprising that no systematic relationship between ambivalence toward Clinton and uncertainty about his ideology was detected. On the other hand, the results for the other two institutions are suggestive (albeit weak), and counter to the hypothesis that ambivalence is linked to greater uncertainty. That is, ambivalence toward Congress is associated with *less* uncertainty about its ideological leanings, with 19.7 percent, 20.1 percent, and 26.3 percent of ambivalent, weakly ambivalent and nonambivalent

respondents, respectively, providing a "don't know" answer to the question. Likewise, ambivalence toward the Supreme Court is associated with *less* uncertainty about its ideology, with 15.7 percent, 24.4 percent, and 25.9 percent of the ambivalent, weakly ambivalent, and nonambivalent providing a "don't know" response. Generally, these findings support maintaining a distinction between ambivalence and uncertainty in theoretical and empirical work (Alvarez and Brehm 2002; McGraw *et al.* 2003).

Information Seeking

The inverse relationship between ambivalence and uncertainty makes sense, once the role ambivalence plays in information processing and search is taken into account. Specifically, ambivalence has been linked to more systematic information processing and an increased search for information, presumably motivated by a desire to reduce the negative feelings and discomfort that accompanies ambivalence (Jonas *et al.* 1997; Maio *et al.* 1996; Meffert *et al.* 2000; Steenbergen and Ellis 2003). Researchers have recently identified the neurological mechanisms associated with ambivalence that support this logic, as ambivalence has been linked to greater ventrolateral prefrontal cortex activity, the area of the brain implicated in controlled, systematic processing (Cunningham *et al.* 2003).

Although we lack functional neuroimaging data or direct evidence of systematic processing, we can consider the relationship between institutional ambivalence and seeking out information about political matters. The dependent variable in this analysis is based on the responses to a question asked in both the 1996 and 1997 waves: "Some people seem to follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there's an election going on or not. Others aren't that interested. Would you say that you follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, some of the time, only now and then, or hardly at all?" The two responses were highly correlated ($r = 0.66$), and so they were averaged to create a summary "attention to government" variable. We examined the impact of the three institutional ambivalence indicators on this measure, controlling for more general levels of political sophistication (see appendix). Our results are summarized in table 6.4.

Not surprisingly, the propensity to pay attention to political matters is most strongly predicted by political sophistication. More importantly, and consistent with the hypothesis that ambivalence promotes information seeking, ambivalence toward Congress in particular, and to a lesser extent President Clinton, are associated with a person's paying greater attention to politics. This helps to clarify the inverse relationship between ambivalence

Table 6.4 Ambivalence and information seeking

	OLS coefficient estimate	Standard error
Sophistication	0.171***	0.014
Congressional ambivalence	0.068*	0.030
Presidential ambivalence	0.045†	0.032
Supreme Court ambivalence	0.010	0.031
Intercept	0.546***	0.022
Adjusted R^2 =	0.237***	
Number of cases =	470	

Note: *** $p \leq 0.001$; * $p \leq 0.05$; † $p = 0.15$. Data are from the 1996 American National Election Study and 1997 ANES Pilot Study. Attention to government is the dependent variable. Table entries are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients.

and uncertainty: If the ambivalent tend to be more attentive, they should accumulate more information and so be *less*, rather than *more*, uncertain about political matters.⁸

Differentiation between Congress and Own Representative

The results in table 6.4 indicate that ambivalence toward Congress is linked to attention to political matters. This suggests one final consequence of ambivalence, namely, producing differentiation between categorical opinions (in this case, evaluations of Congress as an institution) and opinions about a specific member of that category (evaluations of one's own elected representative in Congress). Although Fenno's (1975) famous paradox, itself arguably a statement of ambivalence (i.e., hate Congress/love my own member), suggests an independence between the two judgments, they are positively related in the aggregate (Born 1990; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). Born also demonstrated that evaluations of Congress and of one's own member tend to be more distinct for the politically sophisticated, presumably because their greater store of political knowledge and willingness to invest cognitive resources lead them to form and maintain separate cognitive representations of the two targets.

The link between ambivalence toward Congress and greater attention to politics suggests that ambivalence may exert an influence similar to that of sophistication on the propensity to differentiate between Congress as an institution and one's own representative. For the sample as a whole, the correlation between thermometer ratings of the respondent's representative and Congress as a whole is significant and positive ($r = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$),

consistent with previous investigations (Born 1990; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). We also computed partial correlations between the two thermometer ratings, controlling for the effects of sophistication, for each of the three levels of congressional ambivalence. As predicted, the relationship between evaluations of Congress and one's own member varied as a function of ambivalence. The relationship is strongest for the nonambivalent (partial $r = 0.46$, $p < 0.001$), slightly weaker for the weakly ambivalent (partial $r = 0.35$, $p < 0.001$) and weakest for the fully ambivalent (partial $r = 0.18$, $p < 0.05$). The difference between nonambivalent and ambivalent is highly significant (following Fisher r to z conversions, $z = 2.45$, $p < 0.01$), though the difference between weakly ambivalent and ambivalent is not as strong ($z = 1.56$, $p = 0.12$).

DISCUSSION

Because a large amount of data has been presented, let us summarize the major findings before discussing their implications. First, it is clear that the institutional attitudes of some Americans can be characterized as ambivalent, that institutional ambivalence tends to be distinct (rather than characterized by cross-institutional overlap), and that the largest amount of ambivalence is evident in attitudes about Congress. Second, there are sources of ambivalence that are unique to each institution, and sources that are relatively constant, including age, religiosity, and more general evaluative orientations toward the political system (although the impact of the latter cluster of variables varies for the institutions; we elaborate on this below).

Third, we identified both evaluative and what might be considered cognitive consequences of holding ambivalent attitudes. Consistent with the Cacioppo model (Cacioppo *et al.* 1997), and the existing literature linking ambivalence to evaluations of political candidates (Holbrook *et al.* 2001; McGraw *et al.* 2003; Meffert *et al.* 2000), ambivalence toward the president and Supreme Court are associated with more negative and more moderate evaluations of those targets. However, ambivalence toward Congress has no detectable consequences for evaluations of that institution. The reverse pattern is evident in the impact of ambivalence on a set of cognitive consequences, where the effects of congressional ambivalence are more pronounced and robust, and the effects of presidential and Supreme Court ambivalence are weak or nonexistent. In particular, congressional ambivalence is linked to less uncertainty about the ideological orientation of Congress, a greater propensity to seek out political information, and differentiation

between evaluations of Congress as an institution and of one's own representative. Arguably, these three consequences reflect a connected underlying dynamic: Ambivalence promotes more attention and learning, which in turn reduces uncertainty and results in separate cognitive representations of the two targets.

In sum, ambivalence toward the core institutions of American government exists, and it has systematic and theoretically meaningful links to important political outcomes. Some of these links are largely consistent with the existing literature on ambivalence in public opinion, whereas others were not anticipated by prior theorizing and scholarship. Most notably, there is a striking divergence between the patterns of relationships that were observed for the Supreme Court and President Clinton, and those observed for Congress. Of course, the conclusion that "Congress is different" should come as no surprise to students of American politics (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). What needs to be addressed are the reasons that these particular inter-institutional differences were observed in regard to ambivalence.

Specifically, there are two key sets of findings where the results for congressional ambivalence diverge from those observed for ambivalence toward the other institutions. First, ambivalence toward Congress is linked to more *positive* general political orientations, whereas ambivalence toward the Supreme Court and the president is linked to more *negative* political orientations. As we argued earlier, these patterns can be understood by taking into account the default, or baseline, opinions about these institutions. If the starting point is largely negative, as in the case of Congress, it is the addition of positive beliefs that creates ambivalence, and the general orientations of trust, efficacy, and support for democratic processes help to produce those positive beliefs. In contrast, if the starting point is largely positive as in the case of the Supreme Court and president, it is the addition of negative beliefs that creates ambivalence, and the source of those negative beliefs can be traced in part to disaffection for the political system.

There are two larger implications that follow from this line of reasoning. The first is that micro-psychological theories of ambivalence have failed to take into account perceptual "figure-ground" mechanisms that might shape substantially the expression and dynamics of ambivalence. In *gestalt* terms, current information that can produce ambivalence is figural against a positive or negative background, and a fuller understanding of how, why, and when ambivalence matters will need to take into account both the background and contemporary information. Second, in terms of macro-political and normative implications, it is clear that ambivalence is neither a uniformly positive nor uniformly negative political phenomenon. Both "faces" of ambivalence are evident in these data. Ambivalence toward the

Supreme Court and the president are linked to political disaffection and more negative opinions, and so ambivalence toward those institutions can be implicated in a larger pattern of dissatisfaction toward the political system. But because ambivalence toward Congress is rooted in positive political orientations, it appears that some forms of ambivalence are part of a more general web of public support for the system.

The same point is implicated in a second area where Congress was found to be "different," that is, in the positive cognitive consequences associated with congressional ambivalence (less uncertainty, more attention to politics, and greater differentiation in evaluative judgments). The observed pattern is consistent with prior research linking ambivalence to more systematic information processing and an increased search for information (Jonas *et al.* 1997; Maio *et al.* 1996; Meffert *et al.* 2000; Steenbergen and Ellis 2003). While this is typically assumed to result from a negative affective state produced by ambivalence, there is to our knowledge no strong evidence supporting the existence of a mediating link and we are not able to bring to bear relevant data for evaluating the hypothesis. The mediating mechanisms are important, and worth understanding. If ambivalence produces negative emotions and discomfort, the enhanced attention to political matters can be understood as a manifestation of the well-known principle that negative affective states produce more effortful and systematic information processing (Marcus *et al.* 2000; Pratto and John 1991; Taylor 1991). It is possible, however, that the relationship between ambivalence and attention is not mediated by negative feelings, and instead is the result of a greater open-mindedness and willingness to engage in cognitive differentiation (Tetlock 1986), which in turn promotes a heightened involvement in the world of politics.

As noted earlier, the literature on ambivalence has been characterized by a variety of measurement approaches, and many unanswered questions regarding the relationships among different measurement strategies remain. We have made use of the best—in fact, the only—existing survey data available for a systematic cross-institutional comparison of ambivalence. Nevertheless, because of the limited nature of the data and because this is a preliminary investigation, we are unable and unwilling to draw any conclusions about whether these same patterns would emerge if different measurement techniques were employed.

Its limitations notwithstanding, we hope that our work here contributes to an improved understanding of attitudinal ambivalence and its importance for understanding a host of political outcomes. In closing, we would echo Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's (1995: 28) assessment that "there comes a point when we must roll up our sleeves, recognize that in the United States

both the separation of powers and the federal structure provide numerous, distinct elements of 'government,' and try to sort through people's attitudes toward these distinct institutions." By ignoring attitudes toward governmental institutions—their structure, how they evolve over time, and why they matter for political judgment, choice, and involvement—scholars miss out on fully understanding a fundamental component of the relationship between the mass public and the political system.

APPENDIX

Question wording and coding schemes for scaled variables used in our analyses are as follows:

Trust in government (1996_{post}, $\alpha = 0.57$): (1) Would you say the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves, or that it is run for the benefit of all the people? (2) Do you think that people in the government waste a lot of the money we pay in taxes, waste some of it, or don't waste very much of it? (3) Do you think that quite a few of the people running the government are crooked, not very many are, or do you think hardly any of them are crooked at all? (4) How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right—just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?

Political efficacy (1996_{post}, $\alpha = 0.72$): (1) Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on. [strongly agree to strongly disagree] (2) People like me don't have any say about what the government does. [strongly agree to strongly disagree] (3) Public officials don't care much what people like me think. [strongly agree to strongly disagree] (4) Over the years, how much attention do you feel the government pays to what the people think when it decides what to do—a good deal, some, or not much? (5) How much do you feel that having elections makes the government pay attention to what the people think—a good deal, some, or not much?

Satisfaction with democratic processes (1996_{post}, $r = 0.29$): (1) On the whole, are you satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in the United States? (2) Thinking of the last election in the United States, where would you place it on this scale of one to five, where one means that the last election was conducted fairly and five means that the last election was conducted unfairly?

Moral conservatism (1996_{post}, $\alpha = 0.65$): (1) The world is always changing and we should adjust our view of moral behavior to those changes. (2) The newer lifestyles

are contributing to the breakdown of our society. (3) This country would have many fewer problems if there were more emphasis on traditional family ties. (4) We should be more tolerant of people who choose to live according to their own moral standards, even if they are very different from our own. [responses to all questions range from strongly agree to strongly disagree]

Sophistication: Average of standardized scores from six component measures ($\alpha = 0.88$): (1) political knowledge [sum of correct responses to questions tapping knowledge of which party controlled the U.S. House and U.S. Senate, and positions held by Newt Gingrich, Al Gore, William Rehnquist, and Boris Yeltsin, all 1996_{post}]; (2) respondent's education; (3) interviewer's pre- and (4) post-election assessment of respondent's knowledge about politics; (5) interviewer's pre- and (6) post-election assessment of respondent's intelligence.

Religiosity (1996_{pre}, $\alpha = 0.77$): (1) Do you consider religion to be an important part of your life, or not? (2) Which of these statements comes closest to describing your feelings about the Bible? One, the Bible is the actual Word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word. Two, the Bible is the Word of God but not everything in it should be taken literally, word for word. Three, the Bible is a book written by men and is not the Word of God. (3) Lots of things come up that keep people from attending religious services even if they want to. Thinking about your life these days, do you ever attend religious services, apart from occasional weddings, baptisms, or funerals? (If yes) Do you go to religious services every week, almost every week, once or twice a month, a few times a year, or never? (4) Outside of attending religious services, do you read the Bible several times a day, once a day, a few times a week, once a week or less, or never? (5) Outside of attending religious services, do you pray several times a day, once a day, a few times a week, once a week or less, or never?

NOTES

1. For recent contributions in political science and political psychology, see Alvarez and Brehm (2002); Cantril and Cantril (1999); Craig *et al.* (2002); Chong (1993); Feldman and Zaller (1992); Hochschild (1981); Holbrook *et al.* (2001); Huckfeldt *et al.* (2004); Huckfeldt and Sprague (1998a, b); Jacoby (2002); Lavine (2001); Lavine *et al.* (1998b, 2000); McGraw *et al.* (2003); Meffert *et al.* (2000); Nelson (1999); Steenbergen and Brewer (2000); Tourangeau *et al.* (1989a); Zaller and Feldman (1992); Zaller (1992). For prominent social psychological treatments, see Breckler (1994); Cacioppo and Berntson (1994); Cacioppo *et al.* (1997); Kaplan (1972); Priester and Petty (1996, 2001); Scott (1966); Thompson *et al.* (1995).
2. The only other analysis of these items of which we are aware is Burden and Box-Steffensmeier (1998).

3. Our five-item measure of efficacy is somewhat unorthodox in that it includes elements of both internal and external efficacy (see Craig *et al.* 1990). Its psychometric properties are adequate, however, and a principle components factor analysis yields a single-factor solution on which all five indicators load.
4. In preliminary statistical tests, we also explored the impact of egalitarian and humanitarian values; no systematic relationships were evident.
5. There is strong, though not complete, consensus among personality theorists that the fundamental dimensions of personality can be reduced to five factors. In addition to Openness to Experience, these include Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Neuroticism.
6. Keep in mind that these data were collected prior to the Monica Lewinsky scandal and the president's subsequent impeachment.
7. There are two principal alternatives used to measure uncertainty. One assesses uncertainty subjectively, in response to a question such as, "How certain are you of [the judgment just provided]?" (Alvarez 1997; Gross *et al.* 1995). The other makes use of deviations from scale midpoints, for example, the discrepancy between a respondent's perception of a candidate's issue position or other attribute and the candidate's "true" position, defined as the sample mean (Alvarez 1997).
8. This causal interpretation, which posits that ambivalence produces more information seeking, is consistent with psychological theory and some experimental evidence (e.g., Maio and Esses 1996). Of course, the alternative causal model, namely, that the seeking of political information produces ambivalence, cannot be ruled out with these data.

7. Patriotic to the Core?

American Ambivalence About America

Jack Citrin and Samantha Luks

In the last scene of Some Like It Hot, Tony Curtis, still in drag, finally tells his ardent suitor, "But I'm a man." Joe E. Brown's reply is, "Nobody's perfect."

Patriotism refers to the love of one's country. The image of the nation as an extended family, expressed by the pervasive use of terms like "mother country," "fatherland," and "band of brothers," makes such love seem natural. Yet the emotions evoked by family frequently are both intense and ambivalent. Some people love their families to a fault, while others do so despite or even because of those faults. Using the same logic, is patriotism blind or can it take the form of a love-hate relationship, with the emotional anguish and erratic behavior that often accompanies a conflicted state of mind?

This chapter explores the phenomenon of ambivalence toward a political love object: the American nation. In the modern world, according to Ernest Gellner (1983), a national identity is a quasi-physical attribute of the self, like one's nose or ears. Having a national identity means being situated, emotionally as well as legally, within a homeland (Billig 1995). In established nations, the meaning and significance of nationality is typically taken for granted. This occurs because, beginning in early socialization, daily life and political events are "flagged" or "framed" in national terms (Billig 1995; Reicher and Hopkins 2001). Transmitting a positive sense of national identity is manifest in the United States, where one pledges allegiance to the flag and sings the national anthem at most sporting events, and where national unity is based on a common civic religion rather than shared ancestry (Huntington 1981). A cross-national study conducted by