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# The Electoral Consequences of Ambivalence Toward Presidential Candidates

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It is widely acknowledged that political opinions are not simply positive or negative, but are often simultaneously positive and negative, or “ambivalent.” Although there is evidence that ambivalence influences the dynamics of public opinion on policy issues, little is known about its role in contributing to electoral decision making. Using National Election Studies data from 1980 to 1996, I examine the consequences of ambivalence toward presidential candidates for electoral judgment and choice. Results revealed that ambivalence created instability in candidate evaluations, substantially delayed the formation of citizens’ voting intentions, conditioned the influence of both personality assessments and issue proximity on summary candidate evaluation, and ultimately weakened the prediction of vote choice. Throughout the analyses, the effects of ambivalence were independent of and typically larger than those of partisanship strength, information, education, and attitude strength, and could not be meaningfully accounted for by any of these factors. In broad terms, ambivalence would appear to capture a unique and fundamental—although to date largely ignored—aspect of mass belief systems and electoral choice.

Nearly all contemporary public opinion research rests on the assumption that political attitudes are unidimensional and bipolar—i.e., positive, negative, or neutral evaluative responses (e.g., Green and Citrin 1994; Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989). In studies of mass belief systems and electoral behavior, for example, attitudes toward policies, candidates, and groups are typically operationalized as summary statements that range from “unfavorable” “oppose,” “cold,” or “negative” at one end of the continuum to “favorable,” “support,” “warm,” or “positive,” at the other. This view implies that positive attitudes are the diametric opposite of negative attitudes, such that the more one likes a political object the less one dislikes it. Unfortunately, this structural assumption masks a fundamental and readily acknowledged aspect of belief systems, namely, that individual opinions are not simply positive or negative evaluative tendencies, but instead are often simultaneously positive and negative (Alvarez and Brehm 1995; Cacioppo, Gardner, and Berntson 1997; Feldman and Zaller 1992; Hochschild 1981; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1998; Lavine et al. 1998; Nelson 1999; Zaller and Feldman 1992). That is, rather than endorsing one side of a political debate and refuting the other, individuals often embrace central elements of both sides.

Citizens who internalize elements of both sides of a political conflict are not necessarily revealing doorstep opinions (i.e., nonattitudes, Converse 1964); nor do their opinions reflect deficiencies in survey measurement (Achen 1975). Rather, such complex attitudes often represent the problem of reconciling strongly held but conflicting principles and considerations simultaneously present in the political culture in order to make difficult political choices (Alvarez and Brehm 1995; Feldman and Zaller 1992; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1998). Recent work in particular suggests that *ambivalence*—an individual’s endorsement of competing considerations relevant to evaluating an attitude object—is a prevalent characteristic of the public’s political opinions, and that ambivalence has nontrivial implications for political judgment and choice. For example, policy attitudes marked by evaluative

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conflict are held with less certainty and are more difficult to retrieve from memory (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1998), less stable over time (Zaller and Feldman 1992), and more vulnerable to persuasion than relatively one-sided (unambivalent) attitudes (Bassili 1996). These phenomena may be diagnostic of the operation of more immediate and fundamental dynamics of ambivalence, namely that it renders the political choice process excessively difficult and unreliable (Alvarez and Brehm 1995) and contextually dependent on whatever relevant considerations are momentarily salient (Lavine et al. 1998; Tourangeau et al. 1989). For example, in their examination of abortion attitudes, Alvarez and Brehm (1995) found that respondents who highly valued both women's rights *and* religion (the primary 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. It is these basic consequences of ambivalence—judgmental unreliability and context dependence—that are used in the present research to construct an argument relating ambivalence to the nature and functioning of electoral attitudes and decision making.

To date, insights about ambivalence have come mainly from studies of policy issues (e.g., Alvarez and Brehm 1995, 1997, 1998; Feldman and Zaller 1992; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1998; Steenbergen and Brewer 2000; Tetlock 1986; Zaller and Feldman 1992). Political scientists know comparatively little about how ambivalence might influence electoral attitudes and voting behavior (although see Lavine et al. 1998; Meffert, Guge, and Lodge 2000). However, there are reasons to expect that evaluative conflict with respect to presidential candidates may be especially consequential. The flow of persuasive information during presidential election campaigns is both intense and two-sided (and citizens pay more attention to it than during off-election periods). Some of that information will cast each candidate in a favorable light and some in an unfavorable light. Moreover, unlike issue debates, even politically quiescent individuals will collect a large amount of (inconsistent) information about the candidates, making it likely that a substantial portion of the public will react to them with at least a modicum of ambivalence (Meffert, Guge, and Lodge 2000; Saris and Galhofer 2000). Furthermore, conflicted attitudes toward the candidates' character and issue positions should provide ambiguous voting cues, resulting in weaker effects of these factors on overall candidate evaluation. In the next section, I present a theoretical argument linking ambivalence toward presidential candidates to electoral decision making. Then, using National Elec-

tion Studies (NES) data from the 1980–1996 presidential elections, I show that ambivalence creates instability in candidate evaluations, substantially delays the formation of citizens' voting intentions, diminishes the influence of both personality assessments and issue proximity on summary candidate evaluation, and ultimately weakens the prediction of vote choice. Moreover, I show that the moderating effects of ambivalence are not reducible to (and are typically greater than) those of information, education, political interest, strength of partisanship, or alternative indicators of attitude strength (e.g., extremity or certainty of opinion). I also show that the effects of ambivalence are candidate-specific, and not the result of general dispositions of particular individuals to be high or low in ambivalence toward all candidates. Finally, I address the descriptive and theoretical implications of ambivalence for the efficacy of mass political persuasion.

### **Ambivalence and the Opinion Response Process**

Specifying how ambivalence might affect electoral judgment and decision making requires an understanding of how political opinions are typically constructed. Recent studies of social cognition and public opinion have mounted strong evidence challenging the notion that citizens possess fixed attitudes in the traditional sense of the term; i.e., stable, preformed summary opinions that can be directly summoned from memory. Instead, the evidence points to the idea that most people possess rather poorly integrated belief elements that might or might not be used to construct a summary opinion at a given time (Tourangeau, Rips, and Rasinski 2000; Wilson and Hodges 1992; Zaller and Feldman 1992). According to this view, opinions are constructed on the spot on the basis of whichever considerations are recently activated or at the “top of the head” (Zaller 1992). Thus, rather than retrieving a representative sample of beliefs, people tend to oversample from whichever beliefs are most salient or accessible at the time. When political opinions are construed in this way, *ambivalence*—the variability in the considerations associated with an attitude object—becomes a central construct in regulating the dynamics of political choice. The essential idea is this: when ambivalence is high, stochastic processes and systematic changes in political context can result in the retrieval of belief elements used to construct an attitude at Time 1 that differ greatly in valence from those used to construct the attitude at Time 2. In sum, when ambivalence is high, candidate

evaluations should be unstable over the course of a presidential campaign.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, voters with comparatively one-sided candidate attitudes (e.g., many positive beliefs but few or no negative beliefs) should express relatively stable campaign attitudes as the beliefs used to construct them have similar evaluative implications.

Beyond creating temporal instability in summary candidate evaluations, ambivalence should weaken the utility of both personality assessments and issue proximity as predictors of overall candidate evaluation. In essence, voters who are similarly conflicted about a candidate's character and issue positions (i.e., voters with the same "central tendency") may nevertheless reach substantially different summary conclusions about the candidate to the extent that different considerations are salient for different voters when the summary evaluation is expressed. This should occur if contextual and stochastic processes selectively prime positive considerations for some ambivalent voters but prime negative considerations for other ambivalent voters. For example, two voters who agree with a candidate on civil rights but disagree with the candidate on economic issues should nevertheless hold discrepant summary candidate evaluations from one another if civil rights is salient to one voter but the economy is salient to the other. By contrast, one-sided (unambivalent) voters with similar issue proximities and similar (polarized) beliefs about candidate character should form highly similar summary candidate evaluations, as whatever considerations are most salient have similar evaluative implications. Thus, ambivalent voters who endorse similar beliefs about a candidate might nonetheless differ in their overall evaluation of the candidate if context and chance lead them to retrieve beliefs of different valence. In sum, issue proximity and judgments of candidate character should account for more variance in the overall candidate evaluations of one-sided than ambivalent voters.

Finally, I address the question of whether reporting both likes and dislikes about a candidate reflects actual attitudinal conflict (i.e., ambivalence), or merely a show of informedness or evenhandedness on the part of the respondent. For example, when asked in turn about their likes and dislikes about presidential candidates, some respondents are likely to feel compelled to report some of each, in an effort to impress the interviewer as being either informed or balanced in their political judgment (see

Alvarez and Brehm 1995, 1997). If reporting both likes and dislikes indeed represents ambivalence, the formation of crystallized voting intentions among these voters should be delayed until relatively late in the campaign. Ambivalence should lead to shifting political judgments—preferring one candidate and then the other—postponing the formation of firm voting intentions. If, however, reporting both likes and dislikes reflects informedness or evenhandedness (or acquiescence) but not actual conflict, there is no reason to expect that the formation of citizens' vote intentions should be delayed. Thus, by examining the relation between citizens' likes and dislikes about the candidates and the timing of the formation of their vote intentions, the nature and meaning of two-sided electoral opinions can be more easily discerned. Perhaps ambivalent respondents merely lack strong partisan attachments, and that ambivalence *per se* contributes little unique variance in determining when citizens' voting decisions are made. To assess this issue, I determine whether the effect of ambivalence is reducible to weak partisanship or independence (or a lack of information, education, interest, etc.) and compare the relative impact of ambivalence and strength of partisanship on the timing of the formation of citizens' voting intentions.

## Hypotheses

Based on the previous discussion, five hypotheses are derived about the role of ambivalence toward presidential candidates in the electoral context:

- (1) Ambivalence will be associated with instability in summary candidate evaluations over the course of an election campaign, as considerations of different valence may prevail in the construction of candidate attitudes at different times.
- (2) Ambivalent voters will take substantially longer than relatively one-sided voters to reach a crystallized voting intention.
- (3) Assessments of candidate character will explain more variance in the summary candidate evaluations of one-sided than ambivalent voters.
- (4) Issue proximity scores will explain more variance in the summary candidate evaluations of one-sided than ambivalent voters.
- (5) The connection between vote intention expressed approximately six weeks prior to an election and actual vote choice will be stronger among one-sided than ambivalent voters, as the intentions of the latter should be less stable.

<sup>1</sup> This reasoning is akin to Zaller and Feldman's (1992) argument that people have "central tendencies" rather than single attitudes and that the variability around the central tendency increases with ambivalence, creating instability.

## Data and Measures

### Character and Issue Assessments of Presidential Candidates

NES data from the five most recent presidential elections (1980–1996) were used to test these hypotheses.<sup>2</sup> Each of these presidential election year interviews included items assessing the extent to which the major party candidates possessed a variety of positive character traits (e.g., decent, compassionate, intelligent, moral, inspiring, cares about people like you, leadership, commands respect). In all surveys, the trait items read as follows:

Think about [candidate]. The first phrase (or word) is [trait]. In your opinion does the phrase [trait] describe [candidate] EXTREMELY WELL (=1), QUITE WELL (=2), NOT TOO WELL (=3), or NOT WELL AT ALL (=4)?

The trait items were recoded so that higher numbers indicated more positive assessments of candidate character. Composite character assessment scores were constructed for each candidate by averaging the trait items ( $\alpha$ 's ranged from .86 in 1980 to .93 in 1984 and were highly similar across levels of ambivalence).<sup>3</sup> For each election year, a comparative character assessment score was constructed by subtracting each respondent's composite score for the Democratic candidate from his or her composite score for the Republican candidate.<sup>4</sup>

A single issue proximity score was constructed for each respondent in each election year by averaging all issues for which both respondent attitudes and respondent perceptions of the candidates' attitudes were available (the number of issues ranged from four in 1992 to ten in 1996). The formula used to construct issue proximity was:

$$IP = \sum_{i=1}^n |V_i - D_i| - |V_i - R_i|$$

<sup>2</sup>Items pertaining to political information and voting behavior were drawn from the postelection interviews. All other variables were constructed from the preelection interviews.

<sup>3</sup>The 1980 interview consisted of six positive trait terms and three negative trait terms. The 1984 interview consisted of 16 positive terms. The 1988–1996 interviews included nine positive terms. However, in 1996, the interview did not include the trait items “intelligent” and “compassionate” for Dole in the preelection interview. Thus, for the 1996 data, character assessments were based on the seven trait items available for each candidate. Mean values were substituted for missing data; respondents failing to answer more than half of the trait items were deleted from the analyses reported below.

<sup>4</sup>I decided against creating multiple trait categories (e.g., corresponding to “integrity” and “competence” factors derived from factor analyses, e.g., Markus 1982) as this would have resulted in highly collinear trait  $\times$  ambivalence interaction terms.

where  $V_i$  is the voter's position on issue  $i$ ,  $D_i$  is the mean perception of the Democratic candidate's position on issue  $i$ , and  $R_i$  is the mean perception of the Republican candidate's position on issue  $i$  (Markus 1982). Using the respondents' mean placement of the candidates rather than each respondent's own placement helps to reduce projection (i.e., “projecting” one's own opinion onto the preferred candidate, see Alvarez and Nagler, 1995, 1998).

### Ambivalence

There are two challenges in measuring ambivalence. The first is identifying the types of reactions that give rise to an evaluative conflict (Steenbergen and Brewer 2000; Meffert, Guge, and Lodge 2000). The second is the manner in which those reactions should be numerically operationalized. As my concern is with positive and negative evaluations of the candidates' character and issue preferences, the NES candidate open-ended likes/dislikes items provide a highly suitable means for assessing candidate-centered evaluative conflict (see Zaller 1992). References to personal attributes of the candidates are among the most frequently mentioned response categories in the open-ended likes/dislikes probes, substantially outnumbering references to issue positions and party ties (see Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk 1986; Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1979). The likes/dislikes questions for candidates ask whether “there is anything in particular about [candidate] that might make you want to vote [FOR or AGAINST] him? Four follow-up probes are provided (“Anything else?”). Thus, respondents are invited to provide up to five likes and five dislikes for each of the two major party candidates.

The problem of integrating these positive and negative reactions into a numerical index requires a theory of the conditions necessary to arouse ambivalence. Behavioral conflict theorists (e.g., Mowrer 1960) and contemporary attitude theorists (e.g., Hass et al. 1991; Thompson, Zanna, and Griffin 1995) cite two necessary and sufficient conditions for the arousal of ambivalence. First, the conflictual (positive and negative) reactions to the attitude object should be similar in magnitude. As one component becomes stronger than the other—in the present case as the number of likes and dislikes becomes unequal—the attitude should polarize toward positivity or negativity, thereby reducing ambivalence. Second, ambivalence would seem to require that the positive and negative components be of at least moderate intensity. Thus, ambivalence should be greater when voters have several positive and negative reactions to a candidate than when they have only one positive and one negative reaction. Taking these two ideas together, ambivalence is

a positive function of the similarity and intensity of the positive and negative evaluative components. Thompson, Zanna, and Griffin (1995) directly incorporate the components of similarity and intensity into the following numerical index of ambivalence:

$$\text{Ambivalence}_{\text{ind}} = \frac{P + N}{2} - |P - N|$$

where  $P$  and  $N$  represent the number of positive and negative reactions to the candidates. Intensity is captured on the left by the average number of positive and negative reactions; similarity is captured on the right by the absolute difference between the number of positive and negative reactions. This formula treats ambivalence toward individual candidates (hence the “ind” subscript) as the intensity of the positive and negative components corrected by their dissimilarity (Breckler 1994; Thompson, Zanna, and Griffin 1995). For each of the three types of *individual* candidate analyses reported below (i.e., the role of ambivalence in moderating the stability of individual candidate evaluations and in moderating the effects of issue proximity and character assessments on individual candidate evaluations), I computed this formula for each of the two major party candidates using the candidate-centered likes/dislike counts. For the analyses involving the effects of issue proximity and character assessments on overall candidate evaluations, I computed two  $\text{Ambivalence}_{\text{ind}}$  scores for each candidate, one for ambivalence about the candidate’s character and one for ambivalence about the candidate’s perceived issue positions. Candidate *character* ambivalence scores were constructed for each respondent using the NES candidate likes/dislikes master code categories corresponding to candidate character. Candidate *issue* ambivalence scores were constructed using the candidate likes/dislikes master code categories corresponding to candidate issue positions.<sup>5</sup> For the stability analyses, I computed  $\text{Ambivalence}_{\text{ind}}$  scores for each candidate using all likes/dislikes (i.e., references to issues, character, party) for that candidate.

A variation on the Thompson, Zanna, and Griffin (1995) ambivalence formula was used in the two meta-candidate analyses (timing of the formation of vote intention and vote choice):

<sup>5</sup>Candidate character ambivalence scores were constructed using the “Experience and Ability,” “Leadership Qualities,” and “Personal Qualities” NES master code categories for candidates. Candidate issue ambivalence scores were constructed using the “Government Management,” “Government Activity/Philosophy,” “Domestic Policies,” and “Foreign Policies” master code categories. Finally, responses coded under the “Group Connections” category were added to both the character and issue ambivalence scores, as these responses picked up on both character- and issue-related considerations.

$$\text{Ambivalence}_{\text{comp}} = \frac{P_R + P_D + N_R + N_D}{4} - \left[ |P_R - P_D| + |N_R - N_D| \right]$$

where  $P_R$  and  $P_D$  represent the number of positive reactions to the Republican and Democratic candidate respectively, and  $N_R$  and  $N_D$  represent the number of negative reactions to the candidates. This formula is different from  $\text{Ambivalence}_{\text{int}}$  (which compares the intensity and similarity of positive and negative affect for a *single* candidate) in that it compares the overall intensity of affect toward both candidates (on the left) corrected by the extent to which the respondent’s positive and negative reactions vary *between* the candidates (on the right).  $P_R$ ,  $P_D$ ,  $N_R$ ,  $N_D$  range from 0 to 5, and thus  $\text{Ambivalence}_{\text{comp}}$  ranges from a low of  $-7.5$  when reactions are highly polarized such that one candidate is strongly liked and the other is strongly disliked (e.g., when  $P_R$  and  $N_D$  are 5 and  $N_R$  and  $P_D$  are 0) to  $+5.0$  when reactions to both candidates are highly intense and ambivalent (i.e., when all four components are 5).<sup>6</sup> Thus,  $\text{Ambivalence}_{\text{comp}}$  captures the extent to which respondents’ feelings toward the candidates are similar or polarized, with overall ambivalence increasing as intensity of feeling toward the candidates increases.

## Control Variables

Isolating the unique effects of ambivalence required the inclusion of several control variables related to cognitive ability and attitude strength. First, educated and informed citizens are better able to put their political beliefs together in a coherent manner than are their less educated or informed counterparts (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Luskin 1987; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991; Zaller 1992); therefore, it is important to separate any effects of ambivalence from those stemming from these cognitive characteristics. Second, attitude extremity, certainty, and ambivalence are empirically related indicators of attitude strength (Krosnick et al. 1993; Lavine et al. 1998); specifically, they each provide information about the clarity of evaluative responses. Moreover, because ambivalence, extremity, and certainty produce similar attitudinal effects (they each moderate the effect of attitudes on behavior, e.g., Gross, Holtz, and Miller 1995; Tesser, Martin, and Mendolia 1995; for a review, see Petty and Krosnick 1995), it is important to isolate the effects of ambivalence from those of related

<sup>6</sup>Intermediate  $\text{Ambivalence}_{\text{comp}}$  scores result when reactions are less intense. When reactions to the candidates are polarized but weak (e.g., when  $P_R$  and  $N_D$  are 3 and  $N_R$  and  $P_D$  are 1),  $\text{Ambivalence}_{\text{comp}}$  scores are less negative (e.g.,  $-2$ ), and when reactions are ambivalent but weak (e.g., when all four components are 2),  $\text{Ambivalence}_{\text{comp}}$  scores are less positive (e.g.,  $+2$ ).

properties of attitude strength. Finally, some scholars (e.g., Smith 1980) have interpreted the absolute *number* (rather than the content; e.g., levels of conceptualization, Campbell et al. 1960) of open-ended responses to reflect political sophistication. Therefore, in estimating the effects of ambivalence, it is important to control for the influence of the sheer number of open-ended responses.<sup>7</sup>

## Results

The data reported below are presented in the following order: (1) time of reported crystallization of voting intention; (2) stability of summary candidate evaluations; (3) effects of character assessments and issue proximity on summary candidate evaluations; and (4) effects of vote intention on vote choice. For each analysis, I examine whether the effects depend on ambivalence and compare the strength of ambivalence effects with those from standard models of candidate evaluation and vote choice. First, however, I report the incidence of ambivalence toward the candidates as well as the correlations of ambivalence with control variables. Ambivalence rates for each election are reported in Table 1. For calculating incidence rates, respondents were coded as ambivalent if they reported at least one positive and one negative reaction toward a candidate (the table thus provides incidence rates but not information about the degree of ambivalence). Respondents were coded as having one-sided attitudes if they had at least one positive *or* negative reaction to a candidate, but not both types of reactions. Finally, respondents were coded as indifferent if they proffered no likes or dislikes about a candidate. As can be seen in the

<sup>7</sup>Extremity scores are character assessment and issue proximity scores folded at the midpoint. Items to assess the certainty of character assessments were available only in 1996. In 1996, certainty was measured with two three-point items in which respondents were asked "How certain are you of this?" (very certain, pretty certain, not very certain) after rating the character of Dole and Clinton on the attributes "moral" and "gets things done." A single certainty score was computed for each candidate by averaging respondents' answers to the two items. A measure of the total number of likes/dislikes for each candidate was computed by adding the number of positive and negative reactions to that candidate. Information was assessed with items measuring recognition of and knowledge about political figures (e.g., Al Gore, Newt Gingrich, Yasser Arafat), the ideological orientation of presidential candidates and parties, and civics questions (e.g., Who nominates judges to the Federal Courts?). The following variables were used to construct unit weighted information scales for each election: 1996: v1189–v1192, v369, v371, v379, v380 (8 items,  $\alpha = .76$ ); 1992: v5916–v5921 (6 items,  $\alpha = .72$ ); 1988: v871–v979 (9 items,  $\alpha = .68$ ); 1984: v1006–v1009, v126, v130, v138, v134 (8 items,  $\alpha = .81$ ); 1980: v268, v269, v278, v279, v64–v76 (17 items,  $\alpha = .85$ ).

table, ambivalence toward the candidates was fairly widespread, ranging from 21.7 percent toward Mondale in 1984 to 34.2 percent toward Carter in 1980 and averaged 27.7 percent. One-sided reactions toward the candidates (avg. 55.1 percent) were twice as prevalent as ambivalent reactions, whereas indifferent reactions (avg. 17.1 percent) occurred only 60 percent as often as ambivalent reactions. There do not appear to be any discernable trends in ambivalence rates across time, party, or incumbency. In sum, ambivalence rates were nontrivial and relatively constant across context and time.

Displayed in Table 2, averaged across candidates and election years, are the correlations of ambivalence<sub>ind</sub> with several control variables, along with whether the respondent voted in the relevant election. These relationships are quite modest, with none explaining as much as 10 percent of the ambivalence variance. The strongest of the relationships is with the extremity of respondents' character assessments. Overall, while ambivalent attitudes are slightly less polarized and are held with a bit less confidence, these aspects of attitudes and respondents are largely independent of ambivalence.

In the analyses that follow, each of these control variables (excluding voted/not voted) were entered into regression models along with partisanship, ideology, and political interest.<sup>8</sup> The candidate evaluation and time of reported crystallization of vote intention models were estimated using ordinary least-squares regression. The vote choice models were estimated using logistic regression. To facilitate comparison of the coefficients, all variables were recoded to a 0 to 1 scale. Moreover, to ease the interpretation of key interactions and to reduce multicollinearity between individual and crossproduct terms, all variables were centered about their means (Aiken and West 1991).

## Ambivalence and the Crystallization of Voting Intentions

To assess *when* during a presidential campaign voters reported forming their voting intentions, each of the NES surveys asked "How long before the election did you decide that you were going to vote the way you did (1 = "knew all along/from the first" to 10 = "on election day")?" The estimated effects of ambivalence<sub>comp</sub>, strength of political predispositions, and a variety of control variables on the reported time of crystallization of voting in-

<sup>8</sup>In a second specification of the models, interactions of the control variables with key predictors (e.g., character assessments, issue proximity, vote intention) were added. The results were highly similar to models in which the control variables are entered solely as main effects.

**TABLE 1** The Prevalence of Ambivalence toward Presidential Candidates, 1980–1996

	Election									
	1980		1984		1988		1992		1996	
	Reagan	Carter	Reagan	Mondale	Bush	Dukakis	Bush	Clinton	Dole	Clinton
Ambivalent	32.9%	34.2%	32.8%	21.7%	24.4%	22.5%	31.4%	26.5%	22.9%	27.3%
One-Sided	51.8%	57.8%	55.9%	60.0%	50.2%	54.0%	54.2%	55.1%	53.4%	59.0%
Indifferent	14.9%	7.4%	11.3%	18.3%	25.4%	23.5%	14.5%	18.4%	23.7%	13.7%
<b>N</b>	<b>1,455</b>	<b>1,455</b>	<b>2,017</b>	<b>2,018</b>	<b>2,035</b>	<b>2,033</b>	<b>2,475</b>	<b>2,474</b>	<b>1,708</b>	<b>1,698</b>

**TABLE 2** Correlations between Ambivalence and Control Variables (averaged across candidates and elections)

	Information	Education	Extremity of Character Assessment	Extremity of Issue Proximity	Total Number of Likes/Dislikes	Certainty	Voted in Election?
Ambivalence	.02	.10	-.25	-.10	.10	-.13	-.03

*Note:* All correlations (except information and voted in election; 0 = didn't vote; 1 = did vote) are significant beyond .001, and, with the exception of certainty—which is based on 1996 data only—are averaged across candidates and election years. The averaging was accomplished by transforming each set of 10 correlations (two candidates and five election years) from *r* to *z*. They were then averaged and transformed back to *r*. Extremity scores refer to character assessments and issue proximity scores folded at the midpoint.

tention are shown in Table 3. As can be seen in the table, strong partisans, those interested in politics, and those with polarized character assessments were consistently more likely to form crystallized voting intentions earlier in the election campaign than weak partisans/independents, those reporting little political interest, and those with moderate assessments of candidate character. The expected effect of ambivalence was also significant and correctly signed in every election. As ambivalence increased, voting intentions crystallized later in the campaign. Moreover, for all but the 1980 election, ambivalence exerted the strongest effect of all the variables in the model, and in all cases the effect of ambivalence exceeded those of strength of partisanship and political interest. Holding the other variables at their means, the predicted timing of vote intention score (across elections) at maximum ambivalence is 6.00 (on the 1–10 scale), corresponding to voters making up their minds five to seven weeks before the election. In contrast, at minimum levels of ambivalence, the predicted timing score is 3.85, corresponding to voters making up their minds in late July, just before the second party convention.

These results suggest that harboring both positive and negative reactions toward the candidates led a substantial proportion of voters to remain unforecasted into the last stages of a campaign. This finding is consistent with the idea that ambivalent voters resonate with as-

pects of the messages of both campaigns, making the choice process comparatively difficult. That ambivalence delays the crystallization of vote intention bolsters the idea that two-sided evaluations (reporting both likes and dislikes) represent actual conflict of opinion rather than an exhibition of informedness or evenhandedness or acquiescence on the part of respondents (see Alvarez and Brehm 1995, 1997). For example, if respondents feel compelled to report both positive and negative reactions to candidates in order to impress the interviewer as being informed or evenhanded—but experience no actual conflict—there is no reason to believe that the expression of two-sidedness should delay the formation of vote intentions. Given that ambivalent voters delay their decision, they are also likely to exhibit unstable candidate evaluations. The next section examines this hypothesis.

### Ambivalence and the Stability of Candidate Evaluations

To determine whether ambivalence toward a given candidate promoted instability in the overall evaluation of that candidate (and not toward both candidates generally), two interaction terms were constructed. For analyses involving a Democratic candidate, the first interaction term involved multiplying ambivalence<sub>ind</sub> scores toward the Democratic candidate by the preelection candidate

**TABLE 3** Reported Time of Crystallization of Electoral Preference as a Function of Ambivalence and Control Variables

	Election				
	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996
Ambivalence	.20** (.09)	.34*** (.06)	.24*** (.06)	.44*** (.06)	.44*** (.08)
Education	.08 (.06)	.01 (.04)	.05 (.04)	-.03 (.04)	-.05 (.05)
Information	-.11 (.08)	-.09* (.04)	-.08 (.06)	-.06 (.04)	-.05 (.07)
Certainty of Character Assessments	—	—	—	—	.00 (.06)
Strength of Partisanship	-.11** (.04)	-.11** (.04)	-.12*** (.04)	-.20*** (.03)	-.26*** (.05)
Strength of Ideology	-.03 (.05)	-.02 (.04)	-.09*** (.03)	-.09** (.03)	-.08 (.05)
Extremity of Character Assessments	-.53*** (.07)	-.22*** (.06)	-.20** (.07)	-.34*** (.06)	-.14 (.08)
Extremity of Issue Proximity	-.05 (.08)	-.01 (.08)	-.14 (.08)	.01 (.03)	.19 (.17)
Political Interest	-.08* (.04)	-.12** (.04)	-.20*** (.04)	-.04** (.015)	-.18*** (.05)
Total Number of Likes/Dislikes	.12 (.07)	.11 (.07)	.23*** (.06)	.25*** (.06)	.07 (.08)
Constant	.53*** (.09)	.28*** (.06)	.32*** (.06)	.44*** (.06)	.60*** (.09)
<i>N</i>	780	1,133	1,027	1,054	609
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.23	.19	.21	.19	.23
Standard error	.31	.28	.27	.32	.32

Note: All variables are scaled from 0 to 1. Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients. Standard errors are in parentheses. \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ .

evaluation scores of the Democratic candidate (*matched interaction*; e.g., ambivalence toward Clinton  $\times$  evaluation of Clinton). In the second interaction term, ambivalence<sub>ind</sub> scores toward the Republican candidate were multiplied by the preelection candidate evaluation scores of the Democratic candidate (*mismatched interaction*; e.g., ambivalence toward Dole  $\times$  evaluation of Clinton). For analyses involving a Republican candidate, the matched interaction term consisted of the product of ambivalence<sub>ind</sub> scores toward the Republican candidate and preelection candidate evaluation scores of the Republican candidate. The mismatched interaction term consisted of the product of ambivalence<sub>ind</sub> scores toward the Democratic candidate and preelection candidate

evaluation scores of the Republican candidate. The dependent variable in each analysis is the postelection candidate evaluation (an interval of approximately six weeks). The hypothesis that ambivalence promotes instability is captured by a negatively signed interaction, indicating that the positive slope of preelection candidate evaluations on postelection candidate evaluations will be attenuated as ambivalence increases. Importantly, if the effect of ambivalence is candidate-specific, only the matching interaction term in each analysis should be significant. That is, ambivalence toward one candidate should decrease evaluative stability toward that candidate only and not toward the other major party candidate in a given election year.

**TABLE 4** Postelection Candidate Evaluation as a Function of Preelection Candidate Evaluation, Ambivalence, and Control Variables

	Election									
	1980		1984		1988		1992		1996	
	Reagan	Carter	Reagan	Mondale	Bush	Dukakis	Bush	Clinton	Dole	Clinton
Preelection Candidate Evaluation	.56*** (.02)	.61*** (.02)	.67*** (.02)	.53*** (.02)	.52*** (.02)	.49*** (.02)	.60*** (.02)	.56*** (.02)	.57*** (.02)	.71*** (.02)
Ambivalence (Republican)	.04 (.03)	.05 (.03)	.03 (.03)	.01 (.02)	.05 (.03)	.03 (.03)	.08*** (.02)	.08*** (.02)	-.02 (.03)	-.06** (.02)
Ambivalence (Democrat)	.05 (.03)	.15*** (.03)	-.03 (.03)	-.05 (.03)	-.02 (.03)	.02 (.03)	-.01 (.03)	-.02 (.03)	-.01 (.02)	.02 (.02)
Party ID	.10*** (.02)	-.06*** (.02)	.08*** (.01)	-.08*** (.02)	.12*** (.02)	-.09*** (.02)	.10*** (.01)	-.10*** (.01)	.03 (.02)	-.07*** (.02)
Ideology	.10*** (.03)	-.03 (.03)	.04* (.02)	-.05** (.02)	.07** (.02)	-.03 (.02)	.07** (.02)	-.08*** (.02)	.07** (.03)	-.08*** (.02)
Education	.03 (.02)	-.02 (.02)	.00 (.02)	.01 (.02)	-.04 (.02)	.03 (.02)	.00 (.02)	.01 (.02)	.03 (.02)	-.02 (.02)
Information	.07** (.03)	-.03 (.03)	.00 (.01)	-.01 (.02)	.02 (.02)	-.04 (.02)	.06*** (.02)	-.03* (.015)	.00 (.02)	-.07*** (.02)
Total Number of Likes/Dislikes	.001 (.03)	-.05 (.03)	.05** (.02)	.08*** (.02)	-.02 (.03)	.03 (.02)	-.03 (.02)	.06** (.02)	.00 (.02)	.01 (.02)
Extremity of Preelection Evaluation	.05** (.02)	.10*** (.02)	.02 (.02)	.02 (.02)	.04* (.02)	.03 (.02)	.05*** (.01)	.01 (.02)	.04* (.02)	.01 (.02)
Certainty of Character Assessment	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	-.01 (.02)	.01 (.01)
Ambivalence (Republican) x Preelection Candidate Evaluation	-.23 (.14)	.003 (.12)	-.37*** (.09)	-.12 (.09)	-.07 (.11)	-.30** (.11)	-.25** (.08)	.11 (.09)	-.32** (.12)	-.06 (.08)
Ambivalence (Democrat) x Preelection Candidate Evaluation	-.02 (.11)	-.45*** (.14)	.01 (.10)	-.10 (.12)	-.03 (.11)	-.36** (.12)	-.15 (.09)	-.50*** (.11)	.04 (.10)	-.21** (.08)
Constant	-.06*** (.02)	-.06*** (.02)	.02* (.01)	.03** (.01)	-.01 (.01)	-.015 (.01)	-.01 (.01)	.02* (.01)	-.01 (.01)	-.01 (.01)
N	1,174	1,191	1,694	1,690	1,559	1,547	2,000	1,988	1,348	1,417
R <sup>2</sup>	.53	.57	.66	.50	.53	.46	.57	.53	.51	.78
Standard error	.16	.17	.16	.16	.17	.17	.17	.17	.15	.13

Note: All variables are scaled from 0 to 1. Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients. Standard errors are in parentheses.  
 \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ .

Estimates of the effects on postelection candidate evaluation are shown in Table 4. As can be seen in the table, partisanship and ideology exerted fairly consistent if modest effects on postelection candidate evaluations. Unsurprisingly, the conditional effect of preelection can-

didate evaluation (when ambivalence is at its mean) consistently exerted the largest effect on postelection candidate evaluations. However, this conditional effect was significantly moderated by the correct (matched) candidate-specific ambivalence term in four of five elections

for Democratic candidates (all but 1984), and in three of five elections for Republican candidates (1984, 1992, and 1996). In each of these cases, the interaction was of the correct (negative) sign and of substantive magnitude. Moreover, only one of ten mismatched interactions was significant (Dukakis in 1988), and their average magnitude was a trivial  $-.05$ .

Predicted postelection candidate evaluation scores were calculated at minimum and maximum levels of candidate-specific ambivalence and preelection candidate evaluation (corresponding to the 1st and 99th percentile ranks for each of these variables), with values of the other predictor variables held at their means. When ambivalence was at its minimum, predicted postelection scores (averaged across candidates and elections) ranged across 67 percent of the scale (.19 to .86) as a function of preelection evaluations. However, when ambivalence reached its maximum, predicted postelection scores ranged across just 43 percent of the scale (.36 to .79; a 36 percent reduction in the effect). Among the important implications of ambivalence-driven instability is the idea that ambivalence should diminish the effects of character assessments and issue proximity on overall candidate evaluations, as ambivalent respondents with similar "central tendencies" might nevertheless idiosyncratically weight their positive or negative beliefs when expressing overall candidate evaluations. This hypothesis is directly tested in the next section.

### **Ambivalence, Character Assessments, Issue Proximity, and Summary Candidate Evaluation**

To estimate whether candidate-specific ambivalence moderated the influence of character assessments and issue proximity on summary candidate evaluations, two separate ambivalence<sub>ind</sub> scores were constructed for each analysis, one corresponding to ambivalence about the candidates' character (i.e., to what extent does the respondent hold mixed beliefs about the candidates' personality traits?), and the other corresponding to ambivalence about the candidates' issue positions (i.e., to what extent does the respondent have mixed reactions to the candidates' perceived issue positions?).

To estimate the moderating effects of ambivalence, two matched and two mismatched interaction terms were constructed. In the first pair of terms, candidate character ambivalence<sub>ind</sub> scores were separately multiplied by the matched and the mismatched character assessment scores (e.g., Clinton ambivalence  $\times$  Clinton character assessment, and Dole ambivalence  $\times$  Clinton character assessment, respectively). These interaction terms test whether the slope of the character judgment factor varies as ambivalence changes. In the second set of

interaction terms, candidate issue ambivalence<sub>ind</sub> scores were separately multiplied by the matched and the mismatched issue proximity scores. These terms test whether the slope of the issue proximity factor varies as ambivalence changes. The prediction is that both of the matched (but not the mismatched) interaction terms will be negative, indicating that the positive slopes of character assessments and issue proximity on summary candidate evaluations decrease as ambivalence toward that candidate increases. The dependent variable in the analysis is the preelection summary candidate evaluation (the NES feeling thermometer item).

Estimates of the effects on summary candidate evaluation are shown in Table 5. As the table indicates, both partisanship and ideology consistently influenced overall candidate evaluations. Moreover, although the conditional effect of character assessment (when ambivalence is at its mean) was substantially linked to overall candidate evaluations in every election year, the conditional effect of issue proximity (at mean ambivalence) was comparatively small and significant in only six of ten analyses. The major question of interest is whether the effects of character assessment and issue proximity vary by levels of ambivalence toward the candidate in question but not toward the other candidate in a given election year. This indeed appears to be the case. The matched interaction of ambivalence toward the Democratic candidate by character assessment were significant, of the correct negative sign, and of substantive magnitude in all five election years, indicating that the positive slope of each of these variables on summary candidate evaluations decreased as ambivalence increased. In contrast, none of the mismatched interactions for Democratic candidates approached significance. For Republican candidates, three of the matched character assessment interactions were significant and of substantive magnitude (1980, 1992, and 1996), whereas only one of five mismatched interactions was significant (Dole in 1996). For issue proximity, three of the matched interactions of ambivalence toward the Democratic candidate by issue proximity were significant, of the correct positive sign, and of substantive magnitude (1984, 1988, 1992), whereas only one mismatched interaction was significant for Democratic candidates (Carter in 1980). Finally, two of the five matched interactions (and none of the mismatched interactions) of ambivalence toward the Republican candidate by issue proximity were significant (1984 and 1992).

Predicted summary candidate evaluation scores (calculated at minimum and maximum levels of candidate-specific ambivalence, character assessment, and issue proximity) ranged across 89 percent of the scale (.07 to .96) as a function of character assessments at minimum ambivalence, but ranged across only 48 percent of the

**TABLE 5** Summary Candidate Evaluation as a Function of Character Assessment, Issue Proximity, Ambivalence, and Control Variables

	Election									
	1980		1984		1988		1992		1996	
	Reagan	Carter	Reagan	Mondale	Bush	Dukakis	Bush	Clinton	Dole	Clinton
Character Ambiv. (Republican)	.15*** (.04)	-.01 (.04)	.09* (.04)	-.13*** (.04)	.09 (.05)	.03 (.05)	.05 (.04)	.055 (.03)	.09* (.04)	-.02 (.04)
Character Ambiv. (Democrat)	-.01 (.04)	.06 (.04)	.04 (.04)	.06 (.04)	-.01 (.04)	.09* (.04)	-.01 (.04)	.10** (.04)	-.16*** (.05)	.14** (.05)
Issue Ambiv. (Republican)	.08* (.04)	.09* (.04)	.07** (.03)	-.04 (.03)	.09* (.04)	.07 (.04)	.11*** (.03)	-.05 (.03)	.10* (.05)	.10** (.04)
Issue Ambiv. (Democrat)	.04 (.04)	.16*** (.04)	.05 (.03)	.02 (.04)	-.01 (.04)	.07 (.05)	-.01 (.04)	.07 (.04)	.02 (.05)	.01 (.05)
Character Assessment	.87*** (.03)	.95*** (.03)	.80*** (.03)	.74*** (.03)	.81*** (.04)	.81*** (.04)	.79*** (.03)	.72*** (.03)	.65*** (.04)	.76*** (.03)
Issue Proximity	.036 (.02)	-.02 (.02)	.15*** (.02)	-.16* (.03)	.10*** (.03)	-.11*** (.03)	.03 (.02)	-.037 (.02)	.10*** (.03)	-.10*** (.03)
Party ID	.09*** (.02)	-.11*** (.02)	.16*** (.02)	-.23*** (.02)	.22*** (.02)	-.23*** (.02)	.15*** (.02)	-.19*** (.02)	.14*** (.02)	-.15*** (.02)
Ideology	.08** (.03)	-.03 (.03)	.07** (.03)	-.06* (.03)	-.01 (.03)	-.09** (.03)	.09*** (.02)	-.09*** (.02)	.06* (.03)	-.09** (.03)
Education	-.06** (.02)	-.03 (.02)	.01 (.02)	-.02 (.02)	.00 (.02)	-.02 (.03)	.02 (.02)	.00 (.02)	.01 (.02)	.00 (.02)
Information	.06* (.02)	-.02 (.02)	.00 (.02)	-.06** (.02)	.00 (.03)	-.06 (.03)	-.07*** (.02)	-.03 (.02)	-.06* (.03)	-.04 (.022)
Certainty of Character	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.01 (.02)	.06** (.02)
Extremity of Character Assess.	-.04 (.03)	-.07** (.02)	-.15*** (.02)	-.04 (.03)	-.07** (.03)	-.08* (.04)	-.03 (.02)	.01 (.02)	.00 (.03)	-.05** (.02)
Extremity of Issue Proximity	.01 (.02)	-.02 (.02)	.03 (.02)	-.03 (.02)	-.01 (.02)	-.03 (.02)	-.01 (.02)	-.01 (.02)	.01 (.02)	-.06*** (.02)
Total Number of Likes/Dislikes (Character)	.06* (.03)	.10*** (.03)	.07** (.02)	.04 (.03)	.07* (.04)	.12*** (.03)	.06** (.02)	.04 (.03)	.01 (.03)	-.03 (.03)
Total Number of Likes/Dislikes (Issues)	-.01 (.03)	-.02 (.03)	-.02 (.02)	.02 (.02)	.01 (.03)	.04 (.04)	.00 (.03)	.00 (.03)	.02 (.04)	.05 (.03)
Ambivalence X Character Assess. (Republican)	-.59** (.21)	-.04 (.20)	-.27 (.16)	-.22 (.24)	-.05 (.28)	-.22 (.35)	-.66** (.18)	.04 (.18)	-.12*** (.23)	-.18 (.16)
Ambivalence X Character Assess. (Democrat)	.13 (.17)	-.58*** (.19)	.01 (.17)	-.58* (.26)	.02 (.20)	-.85** (.25)	-.29 (.19)	-.97*** (.21)	.55* (.26)	-.63** (.20)
Ambivalence X Issue Proximity (Republican)	-.19 (.14)	.37** (.14)	-.26* (.12)	.21 (.13)	-.22 (.15)	-.15 (.16)	-.34** (.10)	-.18 (.10)	-.27 (.17)	.14 (.16)
Ambivalence X Issue Proximity (Democrat)	-.06 (.12)	.01 (.12)	-.11 (.14)	.32* (.14)	-.11 (.18)	.36* (.18)	-.19 (.14)	.56*** (.12)	-.15 (.19)	.14 (.17)
Constant	.56*** (.01)	.57*** (.01)	.65*** (.01)	.57*** (.01)	.63*** (.01)	.58*** (.01)	.52*** (.01)	.55** (.01)	.51*** (.02)	.61*** (.02)
N	1,023	1,029	1,070	1,069	971	965	1,461	1,456	867	901
R <sup>2</sup>	.63	.69	.66	.66	.64	.59	.65	.63	.61	.80
Standard error	.15	.16	.16	.15	.17	.18	.16	.15	.15	.14

Note: All variables are scaled from 0 to 1. Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients. Standard errors are in parentheses.

\* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ .

scale (.34 to .82) at maximum ambivalence (a 46 percent reduction in the effect). Similarly, predicted summary candidate evaluation scores ranged across 26 percent of the scale (.46 to .62) as a function of issue proximity at minimum ambivalence, but were completely flat (.60 to .60) at maximum ambivalence.

These analyses provide further evidence that ambivalence has important consequences for electoral choice. Not only does it promote instability in candidate evaluations, ambivalence weakens the predictive utility of two prime ingredients of candidate evaluation: judgments of candidate character and agreement/disagreement with the candidates' positions on salient campaign issues. If the reporting of two-sided attitudes merely reflected an exhibition of informedness or evenhandedness (or a willingness to provide "on the spot" responses to the interviewer's invitation to list both likes and dislikes about the candidates), we would not expect high levels of "ambivalence" to consistently reduce the predictive impact of these factors. That ambivalence does have such effects suggests that voters who experience evaluative duality find it particularly difficult to put their political ideas together in a consistent way. Perhaps most strikingly, the issue proximity scores of highly ambivalent voters bore no relation at all to their overall views of the candidates, whereas issue-based candidate evaluation was clearly in evidence among low ambivalence voters. The final empirical question is whether ambivalence diminishes the predictive impact of voters' summary candidate judgments (operationalized here as vote intentions; candidate evaluations produced highly similar results). This final hypothesis is examined below.

### Ambivalence, Vote Intention, and Vote Choice

The hypothesis that ambivalence weakens the connection between voting intentions (expressed in the preelection interview) and reported vote choice is captured by a negatively signed interaction of ambivalence<sub>comp</sub> and vote intention (0 = intention to vote for Democratic candidate; 1 = intention to vote for Republican candidate) on vote choice (0 = voted for Republican; 1 = voted for Democrat; nonvoters excluded). The logit estimates are given in Table 6. Unsurprisingly, vote choice was consistently predicted by partisanship and vote intention. The primary question is whether ambivalence moderated the impact of vote intention. The ambivalence  $\times$  vote intention interaction was significant and correctly signed in all election years (except 1992, which was marginally significant,  $p = .07$  two-tailed). At minimum ambivalence, voters were highly likely to vote for the intended candidate (predicted probability of .96 for voters intending to vote

for the Democratic candidate, and .91 for voters intending to vote for the Republican candidate). However, the correspondence between vote intention and subsequent vote choice was much weaker (and not significantly different from chance in any of the election years) among voters at maximum ambivalence; here, the predicted likelihood of voting for the intended candidate was only .68 for the Democrats, and .71 for the Republicans.

## Implications and Conclusions

Recent studies of public opinion have cast doubt on the traditional assumption that people have fixed opinions on a range of political matters that they can directly retrieve from memory and report as survey responses. Instead, according to Zaller and Feldman and others, people "carry around in their heads a mix of only partially consistent considerations and ideas" (1992, 579). Conceptually, people (on most issues) thus possess a distribution of possible attitudes depending on the valence and extremity of each available consideration and the likelihood that a given consideration will be used in constructing the opinion at a given time. This theory of the nature of political attitudes accords central importance to ambivalence in contributing to the dynamics of public opinion and electoral choice. The essence of the idea is that stochastic processes can create variability in the considerations used to construct an opinion at a given time. This provides a compelling explanation for why ambivalent policy attitudes are unstable, susceptible to response effects (at least in some studies), and associated with greater error variance.

While we know quite a bit about how ambivalence functions in the realm of policy attitudes, political scientists have devoted scarce attention to understanding how ambivalence functions in the domain of electoral attitudes and decision making. However, as election campaigns subject voters to an intense, two-sided flow of persuasive information that rarely if ever obtains for issue conflicts, many voters are likely to accept aspects of messages from competing campaigns, creating at least a modicum of ambivalence toward the candidates. The major question addressed in this research is: *How does ambivalence affect the process of electoral decision making?* The results strongly support the contention that ambivalence conditions central aspects of electoral choice. Across several elections, ambivalence consistently weakened the connections between judgments of candidate character and issue proximity on one hand and overall candidate evaluations on the other. Ambivalence also weakened the

**TABLE 6** Vote Choice as a Function of Vote Intention, Ambivalence, and Control Variables

	Election				
	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996
Ambivalence	-3.06 (2.38)	-1.08 (1.36)	.81 (1.28)	3.53 (1.97)	-.17 (1.79)
Vote Intention	6.36*** (.85)	5.86*** (.53)	3.97*** (.42)	6.49*** (.66)	5.70*** (.68)
Party Identification	3.55*** (.77)	2.76*** (.73)	3.35*** (.61)	3.46*** (.79)	1.15 (.79)
Ideology	.56 (1.16)	2.72** (1.15)	2.41** (.94)	2.86* (1.39)	2.59* (1.28)
Education	-.24 (.87)	.14 (1.00)	-.06 (.73)	1.72 (.97)	.99 (.93)
Information	-1.12 (1.12)	-1.86* (.83)	.25 (.97)	.94 (1.17)	1.87 (1.12)
Certainty of Character Assessment	—	—	—	—	-.56 (1.05)
Extremity of Character Assessment	.88 (1.42)	-.50 (1.73)	-5.49*** (1.51)	1.14 (1.92)	.93 (1.62)
Extremity of Issue Proximity	.64 (1.38)	-.33 (1.77)	-1.49 (1.50)	-.90 (1.77)	-.47 (1.86)
Extremity of Comparative Candidate Evaluation	-4.27*** (1.37)	1.10 (1.11)	3.81*** (.95)	-.64 (1.40)	-.01 (.01)
Total Number of Likes/Dislikes	.53 (1.06)	.68 (1.18)	-.03 (.95)	-2.86* (1.39)	-.37 (1.18)
Ambivalence x Vote Intention	-11.16** (4.86)	-7.03** (2.41)	-10.53*** (2.39)	-5.94 (3.47)	-8.45** (3.47)
Constant	1.41 (1.17)	-1.18 (.96)	-2.79*** (.82)	-5.00*** (1.18)	-3.78** (1.33)
<i>N</i>	540	780	675	861	589
% of Cases Correctly Predicted	94.26	96.15	94.22	97.86	95.93

Note: All variables are scaled from 0 to 1. Entries are logit coefficients. Standard errors are in parentheses.

\* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ .

influence of vote intention on subsequent vote choice. In each case, the electoral attitudes and behavior of ambivalent citizens were more difficult to predict, presumably because those with similar “central tendencies” relied on considerations of different valence when overall candidate evaluations, vote intentions, and vote choice were expressed. Ambivalence also promoted instability in candidate evaluations and was among the most important determinants of whether voters remained undecided into the last month of the general election campaign. Importantly, the ambivalence interactions in the stability, character assessment, and issue proximity analyses were over-

whelmingly candidate-specific effects; of twenty-three significant ambivalence interactions in these analyses, twenty of them were cases in which attitudes toward a candidate interacted with ambivalence toward that specific candidate. Throughout the analyses, the effects of ambivalence were independent of partisanship strength, information, education, extremity, certainty, and the number of candidate likes and dislikes, and could not be meaningfully accounted for by any of these factors. In broad terms, ambivalence would appear to capture a unique and fundamental—although to date largely ignored—aspect of mass belief systems and electoral choice.

Why should ambivalence produce unstable electoral attitudes and weaken the linkages among components of electoral attitudes and decision making? One likely explanation is that ambivalence increases voters' receptivity to persuasion attempts from each of the competing campaigns. According to the McGuire-Zaller model of attitude change (McGuire 1968; Zaller 1992), persuasion depends on the conjunctive probability that a message will be received and be accepted as valid. Reception is largely a function of information, whereas acceptance is a function of the extent to which the message (e.g., a TV ad, a political debate) squares with the voter's political predispositions (e.g., values, ideology). Thus, if a message is received, and if it resonates with an internalized consideration, acceptance of the message—and thus attitude change—is facilitated (McGuire 1968; Zaller 1992; for a review of reception-yielding models, see Eagly and Chaiken 1993). Because by definition ambivalent voters have available in memory and have internalized at least some of the considerations offered by both sides of the political spectrum, the acceptance function of the persuasion model should generally be higher among ambivalent than one-sided voters. Thus, instability in candidate preference, difficulty in forming a firm voting intention, as well as the conditioning effects of ambivalence in weakening the influence of character assessments and issue proximity can be understood in terms of the propensity of ambivalent individuals to accept partisan messages from each of the competing campaigns.<sup>9</sup> The final result is that electoral choice among ambivalent voters is simply more difficult to predict.

There is growing recognition that ambivalence toward issues, candidates, and groups is widespread and that it has significant consequences for political judgment and decision making. At the very least, ambivalence is implicated as an antecedent, consequence, or moderator of such phenomena as opinion instability, motivated political reasoning, and the clarity and predictability of political choice. Thus, perhaps the reality of mass belief systems isn't—as Converse argued (1964)—that the public has too few political beliefs, but rather that they have too many, and that “they tend to have roughly as many ideas on one side of the issue as on the other” (Sniderman and Saris 2000, 5). What perhaps this suggests ultimately is that people want something from the political

system that it simply does not provide—a candidate who shares their positions on all salient campaign issues, who possesses both competence and integrity of character, whose party identification matches their own, and so on.

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<sup>9</sup> This conclusion would seem to be at odds with research showing that instability is associated with very little true attitude change (e.g., Achen 1975). However, significant real change does occur with respect to attitudes toward presidential candidates during election campaigns (see Feldman 1989). More generally, temporal instability should increasingly reflect true attitude change when the attitude object is subject to intense, ongoing political debate.

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