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## Endorsing both sides, pleasing neither: Ambivalent individuals face unexpected social costs in political conflicts<sup>☆</sup>

Joseph J. Siev<sup>a,\*</sup>, Aviva Philipp-Muller<sup>b</sup>, Geoffrey R.O. Durso<sup>c</sup>, Duane T. Wegener<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Virginia Darden School of Business, 100 Darden Blvd, Charlottesville, VA 22901, USA

<sup>b</sup> Beedie School of Business at Simon Fraser University, 8888 University Drive, Burnaby, BC V5A 1S6, Canada

<sup>c</sup> DePaul University, 1 E Jackson Blvd, Chicago, IL 60604, USA

<sup>d</sup> The Ohio State University, Department of Psychology, 1835 Neil Avenue, Columbus, OH 43210, USA

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## ABSTRACT

Reducing political polarization requires finding common ground among people with diverse opinions. The current research shows that people generally *expect* that expressing ambivalence about political issues—endorsing some considerations on both sides, for instance—can help them establish positive relations with others holding a wide variety of political views. However, across several policy topics—COVID-19 mask mandates, immigration, and the death penalty—we found that targets expressing a given position with more (vs. less) ambivalence were not liked more, whether perceivers agreed or disagreed with their overall position. In fact, when perceivers agreed with targets' overall positions, they judged those with more (vs. less) ambivalent attitudes as *less* likeable, warm, and competent. Although views of ambivalent targets varied across perceivers, the negative effect when targets and perceivers shared overall positions was larger and more consistent than any positive effects among opposing perceivers. This exposes a mismatch between expectation and social reality: Whereas expressing ambivalence might make intuitive sense toward bridging political divides, we found it was ironically more likely to reduce liking among allies while maintaining disliking among adversaries. These findings speak to the interpersonal dynamics of political polarization, highlighting a potential social disincentive against publicly taking nuanced positions on political issues.

Political polarization is a pervasive social phenomenon, and reducing conflict between people holding opposing positions is an important priority worldwide (Finkel et al., 2020; McCoy, Rahman, & Somer, 2018). Promising approaches to improving relations between political opponents include respectful acknowledgement (Xu & Petty, 2021) and signaling receptiveness (Yeomans, Minson, Collins, Chen, & Gino, 2020), even if one ultimately disagrees. Furthermore, because partisans often hold inaccurate perceptions about their political opponents (e.g., overestimated polarization), simply correcting these erroneous views can also be beneficial (Moore-Berg, Ankori-Karlinsky, & Bruneau, 2020). Altogether, the success of these strategies suggests good news to people who hold two-sided, ambivalent opinions on political issues, for whom such approaches may seem natural. When people express ambivalent political opinions, does this produce similar beneficial effects for their own social likeability and capacity to bridge political divides?

We address this question by examining individuals' judgments of targets who agree or disagree with them on a political issue, and who express high or low levels of ambivalence about their position. Whereas some existing work suggests that people *expect* expressing ambivalence to be perceived positively by others (Pillaud, Cavazza, & Butera, 2013; Toribio-Flórez, van Harreveld, & Schneider, 2020), research on political polarization (e.g., Dias & Lelkes, 2022; Huddy & Yair, 2021; Ryan, 2017) paints a more complicated picture.

### 1. Ambivalence in political attitudes

Expressing attitudinal ambivalence does not preclude taking an overall position on one side or another. For example, one can support a policy proposal despite agreeing with some counterarguments, or one can oppose a political candidate despite agreeing with some of their policy goals. That is, one can hold any degree of un/favorability toward

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\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [sievj@darden.virginia.edu](mailto:sievj@darden.virginia.edu) (J.J. Siev).

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an attitude object with any level of ambivalence (Durso et al., 2021; Durso, Briñol, & Petty, 2016; Hodson, Maio, & Esses, 2001; Luttrell & Sawicki, 2020; Maio, Bell, & Esses, 1996; Maio, Greenland, Bernard, & Esses, 2001; Philipp-Muller, Wallace, & Wegener, 2020; Sawicki et al., 2013; van Harreveld, Nohlen, & Schneider, 2015). Generally, the more that people express both positive and negative reactions, the higher their feelings of ambivalence tend to be. However, even if someone has many conflicting reactions on both sides of an issue, one type of reaction often ultimately still outweighs the other, tipping their overall position to the positive or negative side (Priester & Petty, 1996; Snyder & Tormala, 2017).

For example, during COVID-19, many people supported policies aimed at mitigating spread of the virus, such as social distancing and face mask mandates. However, whereas some supported such policies wholeheartedly, others supported them despite having some reservations, (e.g., concerns about infringing upon individual liberty, personal discomfort with wearing masks). Mask mandate supporters thus varied in what is called their “structural” (or “objective”) ambivalence, i.e., the degree to which they endorsed both positive and negative reactions to mask mandates. The present research focuses on this structural form of ambivalence rather than the related but distinct construct of felt (or “subjective”) ambivalence (Priester & Petty, 1996). A structurally ambivalent and a structurally univalent person holding the same overall level of support for mask mandates might both vote to implement mask mandate policies, but they might behave differently in other ways (Conner & Sparks, 2002; Siev & Petty, 2024). Moreover, others might perceive and evaluate them differently.

Research indicates that ambivalence is especially common in political attitudes: People often hold opinions about political issues, candidates, parties, and elections that involve both positive and negative reactions even while still endorsing one side (Snyder & Tormala, 2017; Thornton, 2013; Warner & Gainous, 2020). For example, analyzing data since 1952 from the American National Election Studies, Mulligan (2011) found that approximately 30% of American voters had some favorability toward both parties at any given time—that is, they were ambivalent about their preference between the parties. Partisans also commonly have some negative views of their preferred political party (Lavine, Johnston, & Steenbergen, 2012). Ambivalence is so pervasive in people’s political opinions that one highly influential perspective on political opinion formation posited an “ambivalence axiom” stating that “[m]ost people are internally conflicted over most political issues” (Zaller & Feldman, 1992). Yet, people still routinely take a position on one side of political issues, and even when two people agree with all the same arguments on both sides of an issue, they may still disagree about which arguments carry the most weight, leading them to align on opposite sides of the issue.

## 2. Expected social benefits of expressing political ambivalence

Highlighting shared identities can reduce dislike between political opponents (i.e., “affective polarization”; Levendusky, 2018). Going into the present work, we considered whether highlighting shared arguments by expressing ambivalence might also be beneficial. In the best case scenario, agreeing with some arguments supporting one’s opponents’ views could reduce affective polarization without undermining how well-liked one is among those on one’s own side. This would put ambivalent people in a position to build relationships with those on all sides of political issues and ultimately, perhaps, to help bridge the attitudinal and interpersonal divides that separate political opponents.

Expressing ambivalence makes intuitive sense as a strategy for social affiliation because it allows for at least partial agreement with more people (Heider, 1958). Additionally, highlighting this partial agreement could help communicate respect for other people’s views (Xu & Petty, 2021), and it might signal other positive attributes, such as competence in having a nuanced perspective on complicated issues (Pillaud, Cavazza, & Butera, 2018) or a lack of bias (Schneider, Novin, van Harreveld,

& Genschow, 2021; Wallace et al., 2020; Wallace, Hinsenkamp, Wegener, & Braun, 2023). These attributes seem especially valuable in the context of political polarization (Finkel et al., 2020). Existing evidence suggests that people often *assume* attitudinal ambivalence is socially valued, particularly for controversial topics. For example, Pillaud et al. (2013) found that participants portrayed themselves as more ambivalent on a relatively controversial topic (genetically modified organisms) when they were randomly assigned to have a self-enhancement goal or were not assigned any impression-management goal, compared to when they were assigned a goal to self-deprecate. The finding that self-enhancement did not differ from the no-goal condition might suggest that people by default express ambivalence out of a desire to be perceived positively. Extending these findings to politically divisive issues (i.e., abortion, free speech), a related study found that participants could be motivated to express different attitudes and ambivalence to match those expressed by a target person, depending on the impression they were assigned to make on that person (Toribio-Flórez et al., 2020). Altogether, people seem to expect expressing ambivalence about controversial political topics to improve the impressions they make on others, especially when those others have some ambivalence themselves.

The current research examines the accuracy of these expectations by assessing people’s actual liking for targets expressing ambivalent (vs. univalent) political opinions. Importantly, we hold constant the overall position taken by those targets—a key difference from prior research on social judgments about ambivalent people. That is, instead of comparing a univalent target who takes a stance for or against the relevant position with an ambivalent target who does not take a stance, we independently manipulated targets’ overall positions for or against as well as their degree of ambivalence about that stance. For example, some targets supported COVID-19 mask mandates in a univalent manner (agreement with pro-mandate arguments and disagreement with all anti-mandate arguments), whereas other targets expressed the same overall degree of support but with more ambivalence (agreeing with pro-mandate arguments but also agreeing somewhat with some anti-mandate arguments). In taking this approach, we ensured that participants were reacting to differences in the amount of *ambivalence* associated with the target’s position, not to differences in whether the target took a position or in the favorability or extremity of their attitudes. That is, by manipulating ambivalence independent of position-taking and attitude extremity, we isolated the effects of expressing ambivalence on social judgment, distinguishing the present examination from prior work on this topic.

## 3. Expressing ambivalence: beneficial or costly?

It seemed plausible that expressing ambivalence might be socially beneficial, perhaps especially when dealing with controversial political issues, but there are also some reasons to doubt this possibility. Before presenting our studies, we first lay out some theoretical considerations suggesting ambivalence expression could be beneficial, then we discuss some reasons to suspect it might be costly.

*Reasons for potential benefits of ambivalence expression.* Expressing ambivalence has promoted socially beneficial perceptions and behaviors (Pillaud et al., 2018; Rothman & Melwani, 2017; Schneider et al., 2021). However, evidence for beneficial perceptions came from situations where the person did not take an ultimate position on a particular political issue, which differs from our focus on situations where people take a position even if they are ambivalent. This latter scenario is common for political opinions (Warner & Gainous, 2020; Zaller & Feldman, 1992). We were therefore unsure whether similar processes would unfold when people judge an ambivalent target who takes a position.

Even so, expressing ambivalence might engender greater liking simply by increasing attitude similarity with more people (Byrne, 1971; Montoya & Horton, 2013). More ambivalent attitudes have more overlap with attitudes on the opposite side of an issue (vs. less ambivalent

attitudes) and still overlap substantially with attitudes on the same side, so they might be more palatable to people with a wide range of opinions (Chien, Wegener, Hsiao, & Petty, 2010; Sherif & Hovland, 1961). More specifically, an attitude similarity perspective predicts a mix of positive and negative effects, depending on whether ambivalence increases or decreases similarity with specific perceivers. From this perspective, more (vs. less) ambivalent targets could be liked more both by perceivers who disagree with their overall stance and by perceivers who agree and are also ambivalent, even if they are liked less by perceivers who agree overall and are low in ambivalence.

Another basis for ambivalence expression being socially beneficial relates to the tendency for partisans to overestimate the extremity of their political opponents' views (Moore-Berg et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 1995), which suggests they might often *underestimate* their opponents' ambivalence. Selective exposure to ideologically congruent information (e.g., via echo chambers; Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015) and media overemphasis on cherry-picked examples of extreme outgroup members ("nutpicking"; Padgett, Dunaway, & Darr, 2019) likely perpetuate these kinds of misperceptions. However, correcting unfounded assumptions about political opponents' attitude extremity can improve intergroup relations (e.g., Mernyk, Pink, Druckman, & Willer, 2022; Susmann, Dixon, Bushman, & Garrett, 2022), so perhaps exposure to others who disagree but are ambivalent would be helpful for similar reasons. Additionally, endorsing a mixed set of arguments about an issue could reveal specific points of agreement with one's opponents, which seems like an especially strong basis for reducing affective polarization. Consistent with this idea, research shows that people are often more receptive to counter-attitudinal messaging when it addresses their moral concerns or values (Baldwin & Lammers, 2016; Feinberg & Willer, 2013; Lammers & Baldwin, 2018) and respectfully acknowledges their views (Xu & Petty, 2021). Thus, expressing ambivalence about political issues might create similar benefits.

*Reasons for potential costs of ambivalence expression.* However, other relevant evidence suggests ambivalence expression could *diminish* social liking. First, research examining how ambivalence affects behavior points to unflattering attributions that perceivers could make about a target's ambivalence, such as indecisiveness (Durso et al., 2016) or bias (i.e., "both-sides-ism," or falsely equating unequally worthy sides, Wallace et al., 2023). People could form negative perceptions of those who are ambivalent about any topic. However, they might especially dislike ambivalence about polarizing or controversial issues because many people view such issues in black-and-white terms (Heiphetz & Young, 2017) and are unwilling to compromise about them (Gutmann & Thompson, 2010; Ryan, 2017). In contrast, people might be more accepting of ambivalence about less polarizing or controversial issues. So, although ambivalence about controversial issues can signal competence if the ambivalent person does not take a side (Pillaud et al., 2018), when ambivalent people do take a side their expressed ambivalence might not be as well received. For example, when people agree with an ambivalent person's overall position, they might think that person's position is not polarized enough, consistent with evidence that people often prefer more extreme ideological ingroup members (vs. less; Goldenberg et al., 2023; Zimmerman, Garbulsky, Ariely, Sigman, & Navajas, 2022).

On the other hand, when targets and perceivers disagree overall, although an attitude similarity perspective suggests that the target's ambivalence could improve liking, this is not assured: Perceivers might not care much about expressed ambivalence in the context of broader disagreement. Consistent with this notion, increasing policy agreement between partisan opponents tends to have limited impact on affective polarization (Dias & Lelkes, 2022; Huddy & Yair, 2021). Such tendencies are also consistent with the broader psychological tendency to view outgroup members as relatively interchangeable but to differentiate more between ingroup members (i.e., the "outgroup homogeneity effect," Hughes et al., 2019; Judd & Park, 1988; Ostrom & Sedikides, 1992). This "outgroup homogeneity" perspective suggests that targets

with whom perceivers disagree might all be viewed with similar disdain regardless of their level of ambivalence, whereas targets with whom perceivers agree might be differentiated based in part on their ambivalence. This dynamic could create a negative asymmetry: Expressing ambivalence might harm social liking in cases of agreement and *still* not be beneficial when people disagree overall. There could also be nuances in that ambivalence might be better received by other ambivalent people than by perceivers who are not ambivalent themselves. Altogether, this theorizing suggests that a three-way interaction could emerge among target-perceiver overall agreement, perceiver ambivalence, and target ambivalence, which our studies test. Further, there could be differences across topics, where ambivalence about less polarizing or controversial topics might be better received than ambivalence about highly polarizing, controversial issues.

#### 4. Overview of studies

To understand these dynamics, we first conducted a pilot study assessing expectations about the social consequences of expressing ambivalence, then conducted four experiments covering different topics examining the *actual* social consequences of expressing ambivalence. We were open to ambivalence having either positive or negative social effects, noting that whether positive or negative effects predominate might depend on the properties of the attitudes held by perceivers. Thus, we examined the effect of a target's expression of ambivalence (vs. univalence) on perceivers' liking for the target as a function of perceivers' own ambivalence and dis/agreement with the target's overall stance. With this 2 (target sidedness)  $\times$  2 (target-perceiver agreement)  $\times$  continuous (perceiver ambivalence) design, we sought to determine whether there are social costs versus benefits to expressing ambivalence about political issues, when such effects emerge, and whether one type of consequence occurs more consistently or has more impact than the other.

The experiments used standard attitude measurement plus person perception procedures (Clark, Wegener, & Fabrigar, 2008; Durso et al., 2021; Sawicki et al., 2013). We measured participants' position and ambivalence on the focal issue, then randomly assigned them to encounter a target who expressed a given overall issue position with either low ambivalence (a one-sided position) or high ambivalence (two-sided). In addition to the target's degree of ambivalence, in Studies 1a-1c, we also varied whether the target generally agreed or disagreed with the participant's overall issue position. In Study 2, the target always agreed with the perceiver's overall stance, but beyond manipulating the target's ambivalence again, we also varied whether the same topic was more or less normatively polarizing. Across studies, we also assessed perceived warmth and competence and interest in meeting the target.

#### 5. Pilot study

To investigate people's expectations about the social effects of endorsing conflicting considerations on political issues, we asked 77 student participants to imagine being "in a new social context where you really want to make new friends and for people to like you," when "a political topic comes up in conversation, such as COVID mask mandates or the United States' immigration policy." The conversation includes "both liberal and conservative people" and "[t]hey want to know what you think." Participants then reported how likely they would be to A) express a preference for one side and disagree completely with the other side and B) express a preference for one side while agreeing with some arguments that support the other side. We used this method because as noted, we thought people would have the intuition that ambivalence expression is *broadly* helpful in relating to those on all sides of political issues. Thus, we intended the pilot to assess people's general expectations about social consequences of expressing ambivalence, mirroring the general expectations and lay theories people hold about many aspects of the social world, which might or might not prove accurate when

they actually experience those situations (as mirrored in our experiments).

Results showed that participants strongly preferred taking two-sided over one-sided positions,  $t(77) = 7.57, p < .001, d = 0.85, 95\% \text{ CI}: [0.59, 1.10]$ . We also assessed this expectation in other ways (as a dichotomous forced choice and by framing the question in general rather than situational terms) and the same conclusion clearly held (see the Online Supplement). Thus, conceptually replicating and extending prior work (Pillaud et al., 2013; Toribio-Flórez et al., 2020), participants conveyed an explicit expectation that expressing ambivalence would confer social benefits in politically mixed settings.

## 6. Study 1a-c: social consequences of expressing ambivalence

Having established its expected social benefits, we conducted three experiments to assess whether expressing ambivalence about polarizing topics is *actually* an effective approach for producing positive impressions. Each experiment was almost identical, except for the focal issue—U.S. immigration (1a), death penalty (1b), and COVID-19 mask mandates (1c)—chosen due to their reputations as polarizing (Gadarian, Goodman, & Pepinsky, 2021; Simons & Green, 2018). Participants judged their liking for a target who differed by random assignment. Specifically, after participants indicated their own individual position and their ambivalence about their position, the target was manipulated to either agree or disagree overall with the participant and to express their position in either a two-sided (ambivalent) or one-sided (univalent) way, in a 2 (target sidedness)  $\times$  2 (target-perceiver agreement) between-subjects design. Assessing participants' ambivalence on the issue allowed us to determine whether this might further qualify interpersonal liking effects (cf. Philipp-Muller, Wallace, Sawicki, Patton, & Wegener, 2020; Sawicki & Wegener, 2018). We report the results both combined across topics to maximize power and effect size precision (Goh, Hall, & Rosenthal, 2016) and separately by topic for completeness.

### 6.1. Method

#### 6.1.1. Participants and procedure

Six-hundred eighteen participants recruited from Mechanical Turk using the CloudResearch platform (Litman, Robinson, & Abberbock, 2017) were available for analysis after excluding those who failed an attention check (12–18% per sample, conclusions held without such exclusions; see Supplement). Participation in the later studies was restricted to those who had not participated in an earlier study. Sample characteristics and descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. Sensitivity analysis using G\*Power (Erdfelder, Faul, & Buchner, 1996) showed the combined sample size would provide 0.80 power to detect a two-way or three-way interaction of  $f^2 = 0.013$  and the smallest individual sample size would provide 0.80 power to detect an effect of  $f^2 = 0.042$ . We report all exclusions, manipulations, and measures used in the research.

Participants first completed an 8-item (Studies 1a-1b) or 4-item (Study 1c, to shorten the study) questionnaire about their own views on the topic, providing a measure of their ambivalence. These were the same questionnaires that we used in our experimental stimuli to convey

targets' responses, detailed below. Half the items on the questionnaire provided reasons to support the topic (e.g., supporting COVID-19 mask mandates) and the other half provided reasons to oppose. To calculate perceiver ambivalence, we computed the mean of participants' agreement with the reasons to support and reasons to oppose, then combined these two values using the similarity-intensity formula (average minus absolute value of the difference; Thompson, Zanna, & Griffin, 1995) with higher values reflecting greater ambivalence. Structural ambivalence scores could thus range from  $-3$  to  $9$  and were moderate on average yet variable within each topic.

Participants then reported their attitudes on the issue (three 9-point semantic differential scales, Bad/Good, Negative/Positive, Dislike/Like), how mixed, conflicted, and indecisive they felt about their attitudes (Priester & Petty, 1996), and their overall dichotomous position (used to randomly assign participants to a dis/agreement condition). The felt ambivalence index correlated with the structural ambivalence measure,  $r(616) = 0.66, p < .001$ .

Participants were then randomly assigned to receive information about a target—ostensibly a prior study participant—who varied in position (either agreeing or disagreeing with the participant based on their overall dichotomous position on the issue) and whether their reasoning was two-sided or one-sided. Participants saw the target's responses to the same questionnaire participants had completed, ensuring that target and perceiver ambivalence were operationalized in the same way. The information was also summarized in bullet format, and finally, they saw a single sentence stating the target's overall attitudinal position (examples are shown in Fig. 1).

Thus, in the one-sided condition, targets endorsed all presented reasons to support (or oppose). In the two-sided condition, targets endorsed some reasons to support (or oppose) and some to oppose (or support), though they always endorsed one side more strongly. We designed the stimuli to hold average position and average position extremity constant across conditions (1.5/4; Abelson, 1995) to ensure that ambivalence was not confounded with either variable (Conner & Sparks, 2002). Of note, prior work on the social impact of expressing ambivalence had not equated position and average extremity across conditions. In all of our studies, each target's position was based on two counter-balanced types of reasons, moral versus practical, to maximize logical coherence (Gebauer, Maio, & Pakizeh, 2013). Specifically, a position expressed in a one-sided way reported both moral and practical considerations supporting one side, whereas a position expressed in a two-sided way involved moral and practical considerations each leading to a different conclusion. For instance, ambivalent support for expanding immigration could involve a strong moral conviction that welcoming new immigrants to the U.S. is the right thing to do coupled with a more moderate belief that it could increase unemployment rates.

Participants then rated how much they liked the target (*How much do you like this person?* 1 = not at all, 7 = very much; combined  $M = 4.18, SD = 1.52$ ), the target's warmth and competence, and their interest in meeting the target. We focus mainly on liking and report the results for perceived warmth, competence, and behavioral interest (which paralleled the results for liking) in the Supplement. Lastly, participants completed a manipulation check (*To what extent does the person whose responses you saw seem to have mixed versus one-sided feelings about [topic]?* 1 = they seem very mixed, 7 = they seem very one-sided).

**Table 1**  
Study 1 descriptive statistics.

Dataset	Participants	% Pro (vs. Anti)	Issue Attitude	Felt Ambivalence	Structural Ambivalence	Liking for the Target
1a	$N = 203, M_{\text{age}} = 37.54, SD_{\text{age}} = 12.09$ ; 105 females, 95 males, 1 non-binary	67%	$M = 6.04, SD = 2.71$	$M = 2.97, SD = 1.82$	$M = 1.40, SD = 3.46$	$M = 4.32, SD = 1.47$
1b	$N = 188, M_{\text{age}} = 35.50, SD_{\text{age}} = 11.78$ ; 94 females, 93 males, 1 non-binary, 4 unreported	52%	$M = 4.67, SD = 2.49$	$M = 3.36, SD = 1.92$	$M = 2.55, SD = 2.66$	$M = 4.18, SD = 1.43$
1c	$N = 227, M_{\text{age}} = 38.55, SD_{\text{age}} = 11.78$ ; 124 females, 102 males, 1 non-binary	80%	$M = 7.16, SD = 2.48$	$M = 2.42, SD = 1.81$	$M = 0.89, SD = 3.39$	$M = 4.06, SD = 1.64$

This individual said that they are overall **in favor of a national requirement to wear a face mask in public.**

- According to their responses (below), their reasons for this position are:
- They agree that face masks prevent sick people from spreading Covid-19 to others
  - They disagree that wearing a mask can create a false sense of security

But they also:

- agree that requiring people to wear masks violates their liberty
- disagree that wearing a mask is a sign of patriotism

So although this person is **in favor of a national face mask requirement** overall, some of these considerations point them toward opposing a national mask requirement.

*reasonstosupp.* Please state whether you agree or disagree with the following reasons to support requiring people to wear face masks in public.

	strongly disagree 1	2	3	4	neither agree nor disagree 5	6	7	8	strongly agree 9
When people who have been infected with Covid-19 wear face masks, they are less likely to spread the virus to others.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
Wearing a mask is a sign of patriotism because it shows you care about fellow Americans.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

*reasonstooopp.* Please state whether you agree or disagree with the following reasons to oppose requiring people to wear face masks in public.

	strongly disagree 1	2	3	4	neither agree nor disagree 5	6	7	8	strongly agree 9
Wearing a face mask can create a false sense of security that ironically makes people more likely to get infected with Covid-19.	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Requiring people to wear face masks is a violation of their liberty.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

(A)

This individual said that they are overall **in favor of a national requirement to wear a face mask when in public.**

- According to their responses (below), their reasons for this position are:
- They agree that face masks prevent sick people from spreading Covid-19 to others
  - They agree that wearing a mask is a sign of patriotism

They also:

- disagree that wearing a mask can create a false sense of security
- disagree that requiring people to wear masks violates their liberty

So this person is **in favor of a national face mask requirement** overall, and all of these considerations point them toward supporting a national mask requirement.

*reasonstosupp.* Please state whether you agree or disagree with the following reasons to support requiring people to wear face masks in public.

	strongly disagree 1	2	3	4	neither agree nor disagree 5	6	7	8	strongly agree 9
When people who have been infected with Covid-19 wear face masks, they are less likely to spread the virus to others.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Wearing a mask is a sign of patriotism because it shows you care about fellow Americans.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

*reasonstooopp.* Please state whether you agree or disagree with the following reasons to oppose requiring people to wear face masks in public.

	strongly disagree 1	2	3	4	neither agree nor disagree 5	6	7	8	strongly agree 9
Wearing a face mask can create a false sense of security that ironically makes people more likely to get infected with Covid-19.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Requiring people to wear face masks is a violation of their liberty.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

(B)

This individual said that they are overall **against a national requirement to wear a face mask in public.**

- According to their responses (below), their reasons for this position are:
- They agree that requiring people to wear masks violates their liberty
  - They disagree that wearing a mask is a sign of patriotism

But they also:

- agree that face masks prevent sick people from spreading Covid-19 to others
- disagree that wearing a mask can create a false sense of security

So although this person is **against a national face mask requirement** overall, some of these considerations point them toward supporting a national mask requirement.

*reasonstosupp.* Please state whether you agree or disagree with the following reasons to support requiring people to wear face masks in public.

	strongly disagree 1	2	3	4	neither agree nor disagree 5	6	7	8	strongly agree 9
When people who have been infected with Covid-19 wear face masks, they are less likely to spread the virus to others.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Wearing a mask is a sign of patriotism because it shows you care about fellow Americans.	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

*reasonstooopp.* Please state whether you agree or disagree with the following reasons to oppose requiring people to wear face masks in public.

	strongly disagree 1	2	3	4	neither agree nor disagree 5	6	7	8	strongly agree 9
Wearing a face mask can create a false sense of security that ironically makes people more likely to get infected with Covid-19.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Requiring people to wear face masks is a violation of their liberty.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>

(C)

This individual said that they are overall **against a national requirement to wear a face mask when in public.**

- According to their responses (below), their reasons for this position are:
- They agree that wearing masks can create a false sense of security
  - They agree that requiring people to wear masks violates their liberty

They also:

- disagree that face masks prevent sick people from spreading Covid-19 to others
- disagree that wearing a mask is a sign of patriotism

So this person is **against a national face mask requirement** overall, and all of these considerations point them toward opposing a national mask requirement.

*reasonstosupp.* Please state whether you agree or disagree with the following reasons to support requiring people to wear face masks in public.

	strongly disagree 1	2	3	4	neither agree nor disagree 5	6	7	8	strongly agree 9
When people who have been infected with Covid-19 wear face masks, they are less likely to spread the virus to others.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Wearing a mask is a sign of patriotism because it shows you care about fellow Americans.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

*reasonstooopp.* Please state whether you agree or disagree with the following reasons to oppose requiring people to wear face masks in public.

	strongly disagree 1	2	3	4	neither agree nor disagree 5	6	7	8	strongly agree 9
Wearing a face mask can create a false sense of security that ironically makes people more likely to get infected with Covid-19.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Requiring people to wear face masks is a violation of their liberty.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

(D)

Fig. 1. Study 1c stimuli: Two-sided support (A), One-sided support (B), Two-sided opposition (C), One-sided opposition (D).

### 6.2. Results and discussion

In each sample, two-sided targets were perceived as more mixed than one-sided targets were ( $t_s > 2.80, p_s < 0.006, d_s > 0.38$ ), indicating that our manipulations were successful. This held both when perceivers agreed with targets' overall positions and when they disagreed (target sidedness  $\times$  target-perceiver agreement interactions:  $p_s > 0.60$ ).

Given our interest in the social consequences of expressing ambivalence, we focused our analyses on effects of target sidedness on liking

under conditions of broader agreement and disagreement, and at different levels of perceivers' ambivalence. Thus, we conducted multiple regression analyses for each topic and combined across topics, with target sidedness ( $-1 =$  one-sided,  $1 =$  two-sided), target-perceiver agreement ( $-1 =$  disagreement,  $1 =$  agreement), and perceivers' measured ambivalence as predictors of liking. We report combined analyses and then topic-specific results (and, in the Supplement, analyses controlling for the discrepancy between targets' and perceivers' responses to the questionnaire, reinforcing the conclusions here).

Perceivers liked those who agreed ( $M = 4.77, SD = 1.29$ ) more than those who disagreed with their position ( $M = 3.58, SD = 1.51$ ),  $b = 0.69, t(610) = 11.87, p < .0001, 95\% \text{ CI: } [0.57, 0.80]$ . There was also a main effect of perceivers' ambivalence,  $b = 0.11, t(610) = 6.89, p < .0001, 95\% \text{ CI: } [0.08, 0.14]$ , where greater ambivalence was associated with more liking across targets. More importantly, the main effect of target sidedness was significant,  $b = -0.17, t(610) = -2.99, p = .003, 95\% \text{ CI: } [-0.29, -0.06]$ . Targets who expressed a two-sided position were liked less overall ( $M = 4.09, SD = 1.44$ ) than targets who provided one-sided rationale ( $M = 4.31, SD = 1.60$ ). These overall tendencies did not hold equally across perceivers or targets, however. That is, three higher-order effects showed that the effect of target sidedness on liking was driven by specific perceivers.

In general, the pattern of results paralleled the "outgroup homogeneity" pattern described earlier: Target sidedness mattered little for disagreeing targets, but it *did* matter for the agreeing targets. That is, the three-way interaction of target disagreement, target sidedness, and perceiver ambivalence was significant,  $b = 0.07, t(610) = 4.28, p < .0001, 95\% \text{ CI: } [0.04, 0.10], f^2 = 0.030$  (Fig. 2). In the disagreement condition, the two-way target-sidedness  $\times$  perceiver ambivalence interaction was not significant,  $b = -0.03, t(610) = -1.25, p = .212$ . Target sidedness did not significantly affect liking among high ambivalence perceivers,  $b = -0.01, t(610) = -0.07, p = .941, 95\% \text{ CI: } [-0.23, 0.21]$ , or low ambivalence perceivers,  $b = 0.18, t(610) = 1.79, p = .074, 95\% \text{ CI: } [-0.02, 0.39]$ . Instead, only a simple main effect of perceiver ambivalence was present,  $b = 0.18, t(610) = 7.73, p < .0001, 95\% \text{ CI: } [0.14, 0.23]$ . In contrast, in the agreement condition, a significant target sidedness  $\times$  perceiver ambivalence interaction emerged,  $b = 0.11, t(610) = 4.92, p < .0001$ . Low ( $-1 \text{ SD}$ ) ambivalence perceivers liked one-sided (vs. two-sided) targets more,  $b = -0.67, t(610) = -6.22, p < .0001, 95\% \text{ CI: } [-0.88, -0.46]$ , whereas high ( $+1 \text{ SD}$ ) ambivalence perceivers showed no preference,  $b = 0.04, t(610) = 0.44, p = .659, 95\% \text{ CI: } [-0.15, 0.24]$ . Viewed differently, two-sided targets were liked more as perceiver ambivalence increased,  $b = 0.14, t(610) = 4.70, p < .0001, 95\% \text{ CI: } [0.08, 0.20]$ , whereas one-sided targets were liked more as perceiver ambivalence decreased,  $b = -0.08, t(610) = -2.35, p = .019, 95\% \text{ CI: } [-0.14, -0.01]$ . The three-way interactions for perceived warmth, perceived competence, and interest in meeting the target were also significant and of the same form (see Supplement). In sum, targets expressing two-sided rationales for their position were liked less than one-sided targets, especially by perceivers who agreed with their overall position but were lower in ambivalence.

This three-way pattern also contained two lower order interactions. First, there was a significant target sidedness  $\times$  agreement interaction,  $b = -0.09, t(610) = -4.99, p < .0001, 95\% \text{ CI: } [-0.12, -0.05], f^2 = 0.039$ . In the agreement condition, two-sided targets were liked significantly less than one-sided targets, whereas no difference emerged in the disagreement condition. This pattern is consistent with outgroup homogeneity and ingroup differentiation, though the three-way

interaction uncovers further nuances to the differentiation. Second, there was a significant target sidedness  $\times$  perceiver ambivalence interaction,  $b = 0.04, t(610) = 2.46, p = .014, 95\% \text{ CI: } [0.01, 0.07], f^2 = 0.010$ , where low ambivalence perceivers liked targets who took two-sided (vs. one-sided) positions significantly less, whereas highly ambivalent perceivers showed no preference.

### 6.3. Interim discussion

Overall, we observed a version of the negative asymmetry described earlier. Perceivers disliked targets who disagreed with them regardless of target sidedness, and ambivalent perceivers liked targets who agreed. However, low-ambivalence perceivers liked two-sided (vs. one-sided) targets less when they agreed with their overall position. The directions of the sidedness main effect were consistent across topics (left column of Table 2), although the pattern was strongest for the mask mandate topic, and perhaps more importantly, the agreement by sidedness interaction and the three-way interaction including perceiver ambivalence were strongest for the immigration and mask mandate topics. Perhaps these topics were more polarizing at the times of these data collections and that enhanced the relevant patterns. Thus, we conducted an additional study to examine potential polarization-related differences more directly.

## 7. Study 2

In Study 2, we manipulated whether the same political topic was framed in a more versus less polarizing way (aspredicted.org/H22\_CKX). When people agree about which overall position to take, expressing ambivalence could be especially socially costly for more polarizing issues because people are often unwilling to compromise regarding such issues (Ryan, 2017). Ambivalent perceivers seem more flexible. As noted above, ambivalence about less polarizing issues might be liked more because people are presumably less rigid on less polarizing issues, which might allow for more tolerance of others' ambivalence. Alternatively, even ambivalence about less polarizing issues could be disliked if it seems insincere (Morris, Larrick, & Su, 1999) or biased (Wallace et al., 2023). And, consistent with the pattern in Fig. 2, people who view a topic in a univalent way might be most likely to perceive ambivalence negatively, regardless of how polarizing the topic is.

To test these ideas, we conducted an experiment manipulating whether a single topic—U.S. immigration reform—was framed to be more polarizing (immigration from Mexico; Al-Kire, Pasek, Tsang, Leman, & Rowatt, 2022) or less polarizing (immigration from Canada; Esses, 2021). All targets in Study 2 espoused an overall position that agreed with the participant's position in a 2 (target sidedness)  $\times$  2 (topic polarization) between-participants design. This design allowed us to independently replicate the findings from Studies 1a–1c that expressed ambivalence does not confer social benefits when a target agrees with

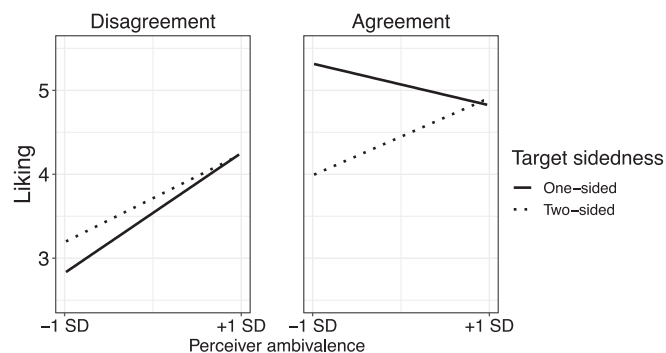


Fig. 2. Three-way interaction of target sidedness, perceiver ambivalence, and target-perceiver agreement on liking.

Table 2

Main effects and interactions between target sidedness and the two moderators by topic.

Topic	Target Sidedness Main Effect	Agreement by Target Sidedness	Three-way interaction
Immigration	$b = -0.08, t(195) = -0.81, p = .420, 95\% \text{ CI: } [-0.26, 0.11]$	$b = -0.36, t(195) = -3.85, p = .0002, 95\% \text{ CI: } [-0.55, -0.18]$	$b = 0.12, t(195) = 4.49, p < .0001, 95\% \text{ CI: } [0.07, 0.17]$
Death penalty	$b = -0.09, t(180) = -0.70, p = .487, 95\% \text{ CI: } [-0.36, 0.17]$	$b = -0.17, t(180) = -1.29, p = .198, 95\% \text{ CI: } [-0.43, 0.09]$	$b = -0.01, t(180) = 0.37, p = .709, 95\% \text{ CI: } [-0.06, 0.08]$
Mask mandate	$b = -0.29, t(219) = -3.14, p = .002, 95\% \text{ CI: } [-0.48, -0.11]$	$b = -0.30, t(219) = -3.19, p = .002, 95\% \text{ CI: } [-0.48, -0.11]$	$b = 0.05, t(219) = 1.95, p = .052, 95\% \text{ CI: } [-0.00, 0.11]$

the perceiver (especially when the perceiver lacks ambivalence) and examine whether such effects occur only for very polarizing (vs. less polarizing) topics.

### 7.1. Method

We conducted two pilot studies to prepare our materials, both detailed in the Supplement. In the first pilot, we examined more versus less polarizing ways in which immigration reform could be framed. Specifically, we assessed how polarizing, divisive, and controversial participants considered the topic of “expanding immigration to the U.S.” to be when the immigration was framed as coming from either Mexico or Canada. As expected, we found that expanding immigration to the U.S. was considered significantly more polarizing ( $t(81) = 3.25, p = .002, d = 0.72$ ), divisive ( $t(81) = 4.17, p < .001, d = 0.91$ ), and controversial ( $t(81) = 3.13, p = .002, d = 0.69$ ) when framed in terms of Mexico (vs. Canada). In the second pilot, we assessed participants’ expectations about the social consequences of expressing ambivalence about these topic framings. As before, people expected others to prefer two-sided (vs. one-sided) positions,  $t(199) = 11.06, p < .0001, d = 0.78$ . Moreover, the expectation that ambivalence would be beneficial did not differ by topic framing,  $t(199) = 0.87, p = .385, d = 0.12$ . This pattern is meaningful: Whereas previous data on lay theories of ambivalence expression focused on relatively controversial topics (e.g., Pillaud et al., 2013), our data show that optimism about expressing ambivalence improving one’s social standing was not confined to more polarizing topics.

#### 7.1.1. Participants and procedure

Five-hundred ninety-four participants ( $M_{age} = 39.54, SD = 13.45$ , 319 females, 261 males, 10 non-binary, 4 other) recruited from Prolific were available after exclusions for failing the preregistered attention check (see Supplement). A sensitivity analysis showed this sample size would provide 0.80 power to detect an interaction of  $f^2 = 0.013$ . The procedure was identical to Study 1a, except all targets in Study 2 now agreed with the participant’s position. Per the pilot, we manipulated whether the topic was framed as more polarizing (expanding U.S. immigration from Mexico) or less so (expanding immigration from Canada), following a 2 (Target: two-sided vs. one-sided)  $\times$  2 (Topic framing: high vs. low polarization) between-participants design. Participants’ overall position and ambivalence toward the topic were measured as additional factors, the former to determine target position and the latter to enter as a predictor in regression analyses.

Participants were randomly assigned to a topic polarization condition and completed the questionnaire on that topic, from which we calculated their ambivalence (Mexico:  $M = 1.15, SD = 2.97$ ; Canada:  $M = 1.43, SD = 2.94$ ), then reported their attitudes toward expanding immigration from the assigned country (9-point scales,  $M = 6.08, SD = 2.29$ ), and their overall position (pro vs. anti; Mexico: 64% pro, Canada: 79% pro). We then randomly assigned them to a target sidedness condition and presented them with the target, for whom they reported their liking (7-point scale,  $M = 4.69, SD = 1.22$ ), their perception of the target’s warmth (4 items, 7-point scales;  $M = 5.01, SD = 1.28$ ) and competence (4 items, 7-point scales;  $M = 5.12, SD = 1.21$ ), and how interested they would be in meeting the target (7-point scale,  $M = 4.20, SD = 1.57$ ). As in Studies 1a–1c, we focus on liking in the main text, but results for the other outcome variables are presented in the Online Supplement (reinforcing the same conclusions). Lastly, participants completed the same manipulation check as in Study 1 (adapted for this topic).

### 7.2. Results and discussion

Mean levels on the sidedness manipulation check differed as expected across conditions ( $t(595) = -14.99, p < .0001, d = 1.22$ ). Ratings of two-sided targets ( $M = 3.29, SD = 1.48$ ) leaned significantly toward

the “mixed” (vs. “one-sided”) end of the scale (vs. the scale midpoint:  $t(296) = -8.30, p < .0001, d = 0.48$ ), whereas ratings of one-sided targets ( $M = 5.00, SD = 1.31$ ) leaned significantly in the “one-sided” (vs. “mixed”) direction (vs. midpoint:  $t(299) = 13.24, p < .0001, d = 0.76$ ).

We regressed liking on target sidedness ( $-1 =$  one-sided,  $1 =$  two-sided), perceiver ambivalence, and topic polarization ( $-1 =$  Canada,  $1 =$  Mexico). As depicted in Fig. 3, the main effect of target sidedness was significant,  $b = -0.32, t(586) = -6.04, p < .0001, 95\% \text{ CI: } [-0.43, -0.22], f^2 = 0.062$ , with two-sided targets liked significantly less overall ( $M = 4.46, SD = 1.25$ ) than one-sided targets ( $M = 4.92, SD = 1.13$ ). There were no main effects of perceiver ambivalence,  $b = 0.01, t(586) = -0.52, p = .601, 95\% \text{ CI: } [-0.02, 0.04]$ , or topic polarization,  $b = -0.01, t(586) = -0.11, p = .912, 95\% \text{ CI: } [-0.11, 0.10]$ . Topic polarization also did not significantly moderate the effect of target sidedness (two-way interaction:  $b = 0.03, t(586) = 0.49, p = .624, 95\% \text{ CI: } [-0.07, 0.13]$ ) or perceiver ambivalence (two-way interaction:  $b = 0.02, t(586) = 1.17, p = .244, 95\% \text{ CI: } [-0.01, 0.05]$ ), and the three-way interaction was not significant,  $b = 0.02, t(586) = 1.00, p = .319, 95\% \text{ CI: } [-0.02, 0.05]$ .

Most importantly, the target sidedness  $\times$  perceiver ambivalence interaction was highly significant,  $b = 0.07, t(586) = 4.27, p < .0001, 95\% \text{ CI: } [0.04, 0.10], f^2 = 0.031$ . Parallel to Studies 1a–1c, two-sided targets were liked less by lower ambivalence perceivers for both the higher polarization topic (Mexico),  $b = -0.44, t(586) = -4.63, p < .0001, 95\% \text{ CI: } [-0.62, -0.25]$ , and lower polarization topic (Canada),  $b = -0.44, t(586) = -4.37, p < .0001, 95\% \text{ CI: } [-0.63, -0.24]$ . Higher ambivalence perceivers liked the target no differently as a function of sidedness for either topic ( $t_s < |1.25|, p_s > 0.21$ ). Also parallel to Studies 1a–1c, two-sided targets were liked more as perceiver ambivalence increased (immigration from Mexico:  $b = 0.12, t(586) = 3.62, p = .0003$ ; immigration from Canada:  $b = 0.04, t(586) = 1.27, p = .206$ ). Conversely, one-sided targets were liked more as perceiver ambivalence decreased (Mexico:  $b = -0.06, t(586) = -1.74, p = .082$ ; Canada:  $b = -0.07, t(586) = -2.02, p = .044$ ). As in Studies 1a–1c, all results held when controlling for target-perceiver attitude discrepancies (see Supplement). Both the main effect of target sidedness ( $p_s < 0.0002$ ) and the target sidedness  $\times$  perceiver ambivalence interaction ( $p_s < 0.038$ ) were significant when the same analysis was repeated for each of the secondary dependent variables (warmth, competence, and behavioral interest; see Online Supplement).

These results reinforce that targets expressing ambivalence face diminished social liking from those who agree with their position, at least when perceivers are not also highly ambivalent. Further, this pattern holds not only when the issue is highly polarizing but even for less polarizing issues. Despite people generally expecting ambivalence expression to be socially beneficial, we find that the opposite can be true when dealing with less ambivalent perceivers. Moreover, regardless of perceivers’ own ambivalence, we find no situation in which two-sided targets are liked more than one-sided targets.

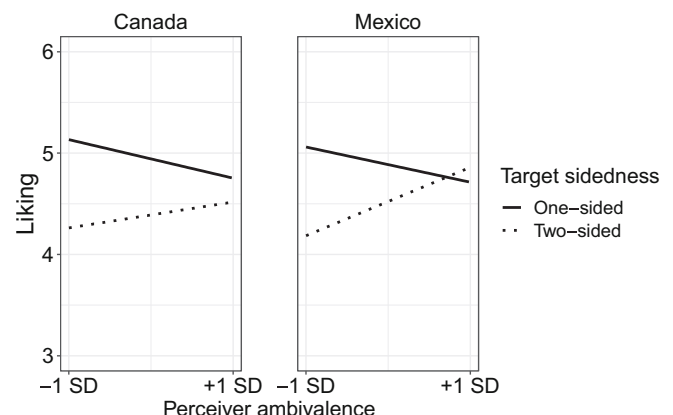


Fig. 3. Liking for two-sided and one-sided targets by perceivers’ ambivalence.

## 8. General discussion

Contrary to lay expectations, we found that expressing ambivalence about political issues can undermine how well a person is liked. Specifically, endorsing a mixture of arguments on both sides of a political issue—even about relatively less polarizing issues—reduced social liking among those sharing the target’s overall issue position (especially when perceivers were low in ambivalence) without increasing liking among those with opposing positions. When people disagreed with the target’s overall position on an issue, they seemed less inclined to differentiate liking judgments based on the target’s ambivalence, whereas they *did* differentiate on ambivalence when they shared the target’s overall position. These tendencies worked to ambivalent targets’ disadvantage overall. The results suggest that what seems sensible as an approach to managing political conflict and navigating discussions about polarizing issues—articulating points of agreement with a variety of people across the political spectrum—might have fewer benefits than anticipated but with clearer social costs.

### 8.1. Relations to prior literature on perceptions of attitudinally ambivalent people

Our findings are compatible with previous evidence that there can be (expected) social benefits for ambivalence expression, but the present research qualifies that past work. Our pilot studies replicated and extended prior research suggesting that people expect expressing more ambivalence to increase how much others like them (Pillaud et al., 2013; Toribio-Flórez et al., 2020). However, for actual social judgments about others, whereas Pillaud et al. (2018) found that targets who expressed ambivalence (vs. univalence) on controversial social issues were viewed as more competent, we found that ambivalent targets were viewed as less competent and likeable. This discrepancy might result from methodological differences between the studies. As noted earlier, Pillaud et al. (2018) found increased competence perceptions for ambivalent (vs. univalent) targets who did *not* take an overall position on the issue, whereas our targets did take an overall position (see also Heltzel & Laurin, 2021). This difference seems critical. When an ambivalent target remains neutral on the broader issue, they are not part of perceivers’ ideological ingroup or outgroup and they would not be expected to work for or against perceivers’ interests, which might make them seem less threatening. Although people expressing politically neutral positions are also often viewed negatively, they can improve how they are perceived by providing strong justifications for their neutrality, which can include being ambivalent (Silver & Shaw, 2022). Thus, expressing both ambivalence and neutrality might often prompt more favorable reactions from others than either form of expression typically does alone.

In contrast, when ambivalent people take sides on a political issue, which they often do (Warner & Gainous, 2020; Zaller & Feldman, 1992), their ambivalence seems to convey something quite different to perceivers. For example, in the context of agreement on the overall issue position, people might view ambivalent targets as undermining their side’s ability to pursue important political goals without compromise. At the same time, ambivalence fails to overcome overall disagreement about the issue. So, it might be that only people who are ambivalent and remain neutral can avoid the full extent of these social costs (Pillaud et al., 2018). More generally, social perception of ambivalent people could differ across contexts. Beyond ambivalence about political issues, inferences about a person’s dispositional ambivalence (Han, Proulx, van Harreveld, & Haddock, 2023) can also affect how others perceive them, as could their ambivalence about non-political topics. Much more research is needed to clarify how different types of ambivalence expression are perceived by different people in different contexts.

### 8.2. Further implications

The present findings offer insight into the interpersonal dynamics of

political polarization, highlighting an underappreciated implication of polarization for people in attitudinally mixed social settings. Our pilot studies show that many people assume expressing ambivalent positions on political issues can help them relate to those holding a variety of different views, and we discussed empirical research that supports this assumption, at least indirectly. For example, prior literature suggests political opponents’ liking for one another might be improved by highlighting shared identities (e.g., Levendusky, 2018), correcting misperceptions (e.g., Moore-Berg, 2020), and conveying open-mindedness (Heltzel & Laurin, 2021) and respect (e.g., Xu & Petty, 2021). Expressing ambivalence seemed like it might have parallel effects, but that idea was ultimately not supported. This could be one reason people sometimes self-censor on political topics (Cowan & Baldassarri, 2018) or simply conform to others’ opinions (Carlson & Settle, 2016). People might initially expect expressing ambivalence to be well-received by others, but those who express ambivalence and then experience social costs might revise their expectations accordingly. This dynamic might deter people from expressing nuanced views on contentious topics, leaving the political arena to more extreme actors on all sides (Siev, Petty, & Briñol, 2022; Siev, Petty, Paredes, & Briñol, 2023).

Although our findings are particularly relevant in the context of political polarization, they also replicated when the issue was framed to be less polarizing, suggesting a potentially broader phenomenon. Had expressing ambivalence reduced liking only for highly polarizing issues, that could have implicated mechanisms related to morality, identity, threat, and other aspects linked to such issues (Finkel et al., 2020; Simons & Green, 2018). The fact that expressed ambivalence was unpopular even when the issue was less polarizing suggests other possibilities. One is that broader perceptions and attributions are at play. For example, people who express ambivalence even about less polarizing topics might face reduced liking due to seeming insincere (Morris et al., 1999; Silver & Shaw, 2022) or incoherent (Gebauer et al., 2013), especially to perceivers who lack ambivalence on the topic. Another, perhaps related possibility, is that univalent perceivers *act as if* it were a more polarized context—perhaps mechanisms related to morality, identity, threat, and the like are regularly brought to bear on judgments by people perceiving the world through a univalent lens, even for seemingly banal topics. Either way, although expressing ambivalence seems like an intuitive way to affiliate with others, we find it can undermine affiliation when the topic is polarizing and even when the topic is not especially polarizing.

The current research also addresses attitude similarity effects on interpersonal liking and other social judgments—we show that targets’ ambivalence plays a role in shaping these effects. That is, perceivers’ overall agreement with the target was much more strongly associated with liking when targets were one-sided (vs. two-sided), especially when perceivers’ attitudes were also low in ambivalence. This extends previous research focused on perceivers’ ambivalence, among other attitude properties like certainty, which found that those properties can moderate associations between attitudes and impressions (Philipp-Muller, Wallace, Sawicki, et al., 2020; Sawicki & Wegener, 2018; Wallace, Wegener, & Petty, 2020). More generally, our studies highlight the impact of sharing attitude properties, beyond sharing overall attitude positions (Byrne, 1971), in promoting a form of attitude similarity-based liking (Pillaud et al., 2013; Toribio-Flórez et al., 2020; Ullrich & Krueger, 2010), and our studies document dis/agreement as a novel moderator of when a target’s attitudinal ambivalence is likely to affect how others evaluate them.

### 8.3. Limitations and future directions

We note several open questions that our findings raise. First, our participants were drawn from online convenience samples of Americans. The results could differ in other populations in the U.S. and around the world. For example, politically ambivalent people might be more

popular in cultures that inculcate virtues associated with ambivalence, such as dialectical thinking (Luttrell, Petty, Chang, & Togans, 2022), or in countries where affective polarization tends to be lower than in the U.S. (Boxell, Gentzkow, & Shapiro, 2024). Our results therefore seem most applicable to the U.S. and other contexts that are comparable in terms of politics and culture. Second, although we examined several topics and did not find that the polarization associated with the topic mattered, we cannot be sure that different political topics or non-political topics would produce the same results. It would be particularly valuable to assess people's liking of those who express ambivalence about topics where most people are ambivalent (e.g., indulgent foods; Durso & Haws, 2020).

Third, there are several aspects of our stimuli that would be interesting to change in future studies, such as the extremity of targets' ratings of the individual arguments, and whether targets still take an overall position. It is important to keep in mind, though, that such changes can introduce confounds. For example, although it might be interesting to examine targets with more extreme responses (i.e., a *more* ambivalent target vs. a *more* univalent target), doing so would confound the target's ambivalence with the extremity of their overall average un/favorability toward the issue proposal. Whereas the univalent target's average attitude position would be extremely favorable or unfavorable, the ambivalent target's conflicting responses would make their position moderate on average, even when their response to each individual survey question is extreme. We were careful to design our stimuli to ensure that we manipulated ambivalence independent of position-taking and attitude extremity. Fourth, although we discussed some specific attributions perceivers might make about a target's ambivalence (e.g., indecision, bias, competence), we did not establish which attributions are driving our results. Thus, future work might examine whether expressing ambivalence leads to specific social perceptions that parallel the personal effects that ambivalence can bring, both positive (like seeming thoughtful and nuanced) and negative (like expressing "both-sides-ism"). Fifth, and finally, although the present research focused on objective (or structural) ambivalence, i.e., simultaneously holding positive and negative evaluations of the attitude object, future work could examine whether manipulating the target's expressions of felt (vs. structural) ambivalence yields any differences. Ultimately, obtaining a complete understanding of how people perceive others with ambivalent attitudes will likely require attention to all these factors and more. Broadly, though, whereas expressing ambivalence might seem like an attractive strategy for getting along with people holding diverse political attitudes, we find it can often end up being socially costly instead.

### Open practices

All data are available with analysis code at [osf.io/3nrm9/?view\\_only=76b0389592c9483bbbd211187908d7f2](https://osf.io/3nrm9/?view_only=76b0389592c9483bbbd211187908d7f2).

### CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Joseph J. Siev:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Aviva Philipp-Muller:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – review & editing. **Geoffrey R.O. Durso:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing. **Duane T. Wegener:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing.

### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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**Joseph J. Siev**, Postdoctoral Fellow in Marketing, University of Virginia.

**Aviva Philipp-Muller**, Assistant Professor of Marketing, Simon Fraser University.

**Geoffrey R. O. Durso**, Assistant Professor of Marketing, DePaul University.

**Duane T. Wegener**, Professor of Psychology, The Ohio State University.