How Do Indifferent Voters Decide? The Political Importance of Implicit Attitudes ⬛ ⬢

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Abstract: *A hallmark finding in the study of public opinion is that many citizens approach the political realm with one-sided attitudes that color their judgments, making attitude change difficult. This finding highlights the importance of citizens with weak prior attitudes, since they might represent a segment of the electorate that is more susceptible to influence. The judgment processes of citizens with weak attitudes, however, are poorly understood. Drawing from dual-process models in psychology, I test the idea that citizens with weak explicit attitudes rely on implicit attitudes as they render political judgments. I find support for this conjecture in experimental and observational data. There are two main contributions. First, I show that an important and understudied segment of the electorate arrives at political decisions via automatic (but nonetheless predictable) mental processes. Second, I characterize the conditions under which implicit political attitudes matter more and less.*

Replication Materials: The data, code, and any additional materials required to replicate all analyses in this article are available on the *American Journal of Political Science* Dataverse Network within the Harvard Dataverse Network, at: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/WZV20D.

The everyday give-and-take of politics inundates citizens with a host of competing considerations. They receive conflicting signals about which assertions they should believe, which events they should remember, and which values they should cherish. Citizens do not integrate this flood of information in a particularly organized way. Instead, they tend to accumulate a loose—and potentially inharmonious—hodgepodge of mental associations. A sampling of these associations comes to mind at key moments, and the act of political judgment can largely be understood as an exercise in reconciling them (Feldman and Zaller 1992; Tourangeau and Rasinski 1988; Zaller and Feldman 1992).

A productive line of research focuses on the mental states that citizens experience when confronted with a judgment—in particular, whether the associations that come to mind induce a sense of conflict or not. This approach is profitable because the presence or absence of conflict engages different cognitive strategies for reaching a decision; it helps determine *how* citizens decide. The focal contrast in this literature is between scenarios where mental associations are *one-sided* (they work in harmony) and those where associations induce *ambivalence* (they conflict). As I discuss below, past work has much to say about the different processes by which citizens in a state of one-sidedness versus ambivalence render political judgments.

Researchers also understand that, when confronted with a choice, some citizens are neither one-sided nor ambivalent. They profess to have neither harmonious nor conflicting mental associations. In fact, they do not profess to have much by way of mental associations at all. The literature terms these citizens *indifferent.*[1]

This third category—the indifferent—is perplexing. Indifferent citizens report weak or nonexistent attitudes about parties and candidates, but many of these people are politically active. They speak to friends, family,

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[1] Political scientists have used this threefold classification—citizens are one-sided, ambivalent, or indifferent—since at least Lavine (2001). Psychological use of the categories dates back to Kaplan (1972).

and coworkers. They express opinions when contacted by pollsters. Many vote. One might wonder how, without prior attitudes to serve as a compass, these citizens navigate the political landscape. Indeed, finding regularity in the political decision processes of indifferent citizens has proven difficult. To the extent their opinions have been examined, they seem only haphazard, having a "random character" (Stimson 2015, 151).

Here, I present evidence that judgments made by citizens in a state of indifference are not random. Drawing from dual-processing models in psychology, I hypothesize and find that, although traditional explicit attitude measures poorly prognosticate judgments among the indifferent, new measures of *implicit* attitudes reliably predict their judgments. These measures predict how citizens in a state of indifference evaluate the news, assimilate political information, and decide for whom to vote.

This research has two important takeaways. First, it shows that citizens whose verbal reports attest indifference nonetheless approach the political realm with real psychological attachments—ones that are subtle and perhaps unconscious, but measurable with new techniques. Public opinion researchers have long understood that weakly committed (or "floating") voters play a potentially pivotal—albeit difficult to elucidate—role in democratic politics (Converse 1962; Zaller 2004). The findings herein deepen our understanding of them.

The second takeaway concerns the role of implicit attitudes in politics. In the last two decades, implicit attitudes have come into their own in psychology, but their significance for political judgments is contested.[2] Here, I focus on conditionality: In what circumstances do implicit attitudes exert more and less influence? This is a constructive approach, and it reveals reliable texture; implicit attitudes potently influence judgments when citizens are in a state of indifference. Their influence is more tentative among ambivalent and one-sided citizens.

I begin by discussing the classification of citizens as being one-sided, ambivalent, or indifferent, and why these categories might reveal conditionality in terms of where implicit attitudes affect judgments more and less. The studies that follow test the main hypothesis—that the state of indifference predicts high reliance on implicit attitudes and low reliance on explicit attitudes—on an array of experimental and observational data.

One-sidedness, Ambivalence, and Indifference

The scientific measurement of attitudes started with an assumption that attitudes were bipolar: A person's response to an attitude object could be positive or negative, but it could not simultaneously be both (Thurstone 1928). A wealth of evidence eventually overturned this paradigm, as psychologists demonstrated that individuals could have positive and negative reactions simultaneously (Cacioppo, Gardner, and Berntson 1997). The revelation proved to have a host of implications for understanding public opinion. Previously, researchers assumed that all citizens who lacked a clear preference between two attitude objects (e.g., two candidates) were all the same. Separating positive and negative reactions revealed that people in this group were of two types: Some simply lacked any strong associations, positive or negative (the indifferent). Others had strong associations that were countervailing (the ambivalent).

Identifying ambivalent citizens as a distinctive category generated several insights (for general discussions, see Alvarez and Brehm 2002; Craig and Martinez 2005; Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen 2012). Here, I focus on one: the notion that the mental state of ambivalence is associated with distinct judgment processes—that it "moderate[s] the basic cognitive strategies that voters use to form electoral impressions" (Lavine and Steenbergen 2005, 3). Ambivalence is an unpleasant state, and individuals cope with it by seeking information to reduce the ambivalence (van Harreveld, Van der Pligt, and de Liver 2009). This tendency has political implications. Where citizens who have a one-sided view of political candidates draw substantially on simple character judgments in reaching their choices, ambivalent citizens seek alternative criteria, such as evaluations of issue proximity (Lavine 2001; see also Basinger and Lavine 2005; McGraw, Hasecke, and Conger 2003; Nir and Druckman 2008). Likely because they seek a middle road to balance their conflict, ambivalent citizens are also more likely to split their tickets (Mulligan 2011). In short, knowing that a citizen is in a state of ambivalence illuminates much about how she will approach a political judgment.

Scholars initially assumed that indifference simply represented an intermediate state between one-sidedness and ambivalence. More recently, researchers convincingly demonstrated that indifference merits separate attention (Rudolph 2005; Stoeckel 2013; Thornton 2011, 2013, 2014; Yoo 2010). People who feel indifferent toward the political parties read less news (Thornton 2011), are particularly likely to defect from the parties with which they

affiliate (Thornton 2014), and cast split tickets at high rates (Davis 2015). Candidate-focused indifference is associated with relatively low turnout, though many indifferent individuals do vote (Yoo 2010).

These findings illustrate that the indifferent category is distinct. However, relatively little is known about the actual nature of indifferent citizens' decision processes. It is unclear how one paradigm—that judgments depend on associations at the top of the head (Zaller and Feldman 1992)—should apply when individuals purport to have weak or nonexistent prior attitudes. How do the indifferent reach political judgments? Are their opinions essentially random, as in the Stimson (2015) quote above? Working toward the hypothesis that judgments of the indifferent rely on an alternative set of mental operations, the next section provides background on implicit and explicit attitudes.

Implicit and Explicit Attitudes

Humans make evaluations via a two-stage process.[3] First, when they encounter a stimulus, one set of mental processes draws on associations in memory and generates an immediate affective response: primitive positive or negative feelings. The processes that generate this response are automatic, in the sense that they occur irrespective of concurrent mental tasks—the "mere perception of the attitude object automatically and inescapably evokes an evaluative response" (Olson and Fazio 2008, 21). Second, a set of higher-order "controlled" processes can revise the initial response. These processes serve a corrective role, bringing automatic reactions in line with higher-order mental processes (Olson and Fazio 2008, 26; Payne and Dal Cin 2015). If automatic processes are the gut response, controlled processes are the sober second thought.

Controlled processes supersede automatic processes in the sense that if evaluations from the two conflict, the controlled processes are likely to prevail. However, the corrective influence of controlled processes is contingent on a significant attitude–object association being accessible in memory (Fazio 1995). If object–evaluation associations are weak or nonexistent, then controlled processes are likely to remain dormant, and the automatically activated response likely prevails in determining behavior, though a person often will not be aware of its influence (Olson and Fazio 2008, especially 21).[4]

[3]See Sherman, Gawronski, and Trope (2014) for a review of dual-process models, a voluminous literature in psychology.

[4]See also Strack and Deutsch (2004).

The attitudes governed by automatic versus controlled processes are measured with different tools. Formulating one's mental state into the response to a survey question *is* a higher-order mental process, so traditional self-report measures by definition capture attitudes that have undergone controlled processing (Gawronski and Bodenhausen 2007, especially 691). Psychologists have also developed and validated several tools to measure automatically activated attitudes (Petty, Fazio, and Briñol 2008), and I use two of the most popular in the studies below. As is standard, I label the attitudes captured by self-reports *explicit*, whereas the automatic attitudes captured by the new measures are termed *implicit*.

When measured, implicit and explicit attitudes toward the same object routinely exhibit low or moderate correlations.[5] This dissociation is noteworthy because it opens up the possibility that implicit attitudes elucidate aspects of political judgment not captured by explicit attitudes.

Hypotheses

The preceding discussion provides reason to expect that attending to the states of one-sidedness, ambivalence, and indifference will help characterize when implicit attitudes will exert more and less influence on judgments.

First, consider indifference. In past work, the defining feature of indifference is an "absence of affective political attachments" (Davis 2015, 67). Past work, however, has focused exclusively on *explicit* attachments. Given implicit/explicit attitude dissociation, the possibility remains that citizens with weak explicit attitudes nonetheless have meaningful implicit attitudes. If they do, the dual-process framework discussed above highlights why these attitudes would be influential. If associations in memory are weak, such that controlled processes are unlikely to revise the automatic response, the automatic response is likely to prevail. Thus,

> *H1*: For indifferent citizens, implicit attitudes predict judgments, whereas explicit attitudes predict judgments weakly or not at all.

Ambivalent citizens generate a contrasting expectation. For this group, object–evaluation associations are stronger. Further, previous work finds controlled processing to be one of the main coping strategies people use to deal with the unpleasant feelings associated with ambivalence (van Harreveld, Van der Pligt, and de Liver

[5]Banaji and Heiphetz call implicit/explicit attitude dissociation the "signature result" of research on implicit attitudes (2010, 365).

2009, 52). It follows that ambivalent citizens should draw heavily on explicit attitudes, and less so on implicit attitudes. As for one-sided citizens, they likely have strong and accessible explicit attitudes. They likely also perceive a connection between political symbols and their self-concept, which is one trigger for controlled processing (Baumeister and Leary 1995). More broadly, a robust literature finds explicit attitudes to be strong predictors of motivated reasoning (e.g., Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Redlawsk 2002; Taber and Lodge 2006). Thus,

> *H2*: For one-sided and ambivalent citizens, explicit attitudes predict judgments, whereas implicit attitudes predict judgments weakly or not at all.

The effort to integrate implicit attitudes into the study of public opinion is young, and the conjectures above have not been tested. The largest body of work focuses on implicit *racial* attitudes, where the political effects of implicit attitudes exist but are small in magnitude.[6] More recently, Iyengar and Westwood (2015) demonstrated that implicit attitudes about the left and right in politics are far more divided than implicit racial attitudes, underlining the possibility that these have greater political significance (on a related note, see Theodoridis 2013). Other work hints at this possibility, finding implicit attitudes about parties and candidates influence political judgments above and beyond explicit attitudes, though the findings are mixed.[7]

A Classification Scheme

Testing the hypotheses above requires operationalizing the concepts of one-sidedness, indifference, and ambivalence (OI&A). There are many approaches for doing so (for discussions, see Albertson, Brehm, and Alvarez 2005; Steenbergen and Brewer 2004). This section describes the approach used in the studies below. My intention is not to resolve disagreements about how best to operationalize these concepts in all cases. Rather, I discuss why the current approach is well suited for the hypotheses above. I discuss three important issues.

First, OI&A categories are each "a psychological state experienced in relation to a *specific attitude object*" (Lavine and Steenbergen 2005, 3, emphasis in original). As such, examining the categories requires specifying a referent. (Indifferent *with respect to what?*) Past work examines OI&A in relation to candidates, parties, values, institutions, and more (see the chapters in Craig and Martinez 2005). The tests below focus on OI&A with respect to parties and candidates. However, because the objective is to decompose the influence of implicit and explicit attitudes in a particular judgment context, I require that OI&A states, implicit attitudes, and explicit attitudes all focus on the *same* evaluative dimension (either parties or candidates) within any particular test.[8]

A second issue is whether to identify states via open-ended responses (in past work, a count of specific likes and dislikes registered about a candidate or party) or closed-ended responses (capturing summary liking or disliking of a candidate or party). For present purposes, closed-ended responses are preferable. To predict processing style, a key feature distinguishing ambivalence from indifference is strongly felt internal conflict (Albertson, Brehm, and Alvarez 2005), and as Johnson (2014) notes, the closed-ended measures are more directly affective in nature. They are thus better attuned to capture felt conflict. In contrast, the open-ended measures are more cognitive in focus, and as Albertson, Brehm, and Alvarez discuss, individuals can have simultaneous likes and dislikes without experiencing actual conflict (2005, 18–21; see also Holbrook and Krosnick 2005; Jacoby 2005).

A third issue concerns how to map responses from like/dislike questions onto OI&A categories. Past approaches using closed-ended questions were developed before indifference fully came into focus as a distinctive category, and so require some modification. Here, I describe an approach that is well suited to isolate indifferent citizens.[9] For illustration, I show how I determine OI&A categories related to the 2008 presidential candidates

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[6] See Kinder and Ryan (2017) for a discussion, but see Pérez (2016) for an important investigation of how implicit associations bear on attitudes about immigration, especially among the well educated.

[7] Three published studies reach sharply opposing conclusions about whether implicit attitudes carry more influence for decided or undecided voters (Friese et al. 2012; Galdi, Arcuri, and Gawronski 2008; Lundberg & Payne 2014). Note that decidedness (a metacognition) is a distinct psychological concept from indifference. See Visser et al. (2000, 234) for reservations about relying on metacognitions.

[8] A table in the supporting information (SI) compares how American National Election Studies (ANES) respondents are classified into OI&A categories, depending on whether the attitudinal reference category is candidates or parties. I find that 66.1% of respondents are classified the same, irrespective of the reference category. Thus, the classifications substantially overlap, but a nontrivial proportion of citizens think differently about parties versus candidates. I thank a reviewer for highlighting this result.

[9] I am not the first to note that past approaches accommodate indifferent citizens poorly (see Rudolph 2005, 916). The approach herein is a modification to Rudolph's (2011) approach to render it consistent with Thornton's (2011) finding about ambivalence as a discrete versus continuous state. A section of the SI elaborates on why a direct application of Rudolph's (2011) scheme would be inappropriate.

using the October 2008 wave of the 2008–9 ANES Panel Study—the data source in Study 3 below.

One-sidedness, ambivalence, and indifference are distinguished by two features. First is the presence or absence of intense attitudes. Weak attitudes imply indifference, whereas intense attitudes can imply *either* one-sidedness or ambivalence. Thus, we have the second feature: parity. If positive and negative attitude components are comparable in magnitude, a person is ambivalent; if one component significantly outmatches the other, the person is one-sided (Thompson, Zanna, and Griffin 1995).

To assess whether intensity is present or absent, I first calculate an attitude intensity score, which is a function of subjects' liking of Barack Obama (*O*) and John McCain (*M*), which were reported on a 7-point scale (1 = *Strong disliking*; 4 = *Neither like nor dislike*; 7 = *Strong liking*). The intensity score is

$$Intensity = |4 - M| + |4 - O|.$$

A subject who rated both candidates at the neutral point would receive an intensity score of 0. A subject who had strong feelings about both candidates would receive the maximum score of 6, irrespective of whether she loved both, hated both, or loved one and hated the other. An intensity score of 2 or lower is a sufficient condition to be classified as indifferent.

The remaining subjects can be either one-sided or ambivalent. To differentiate between the two, I calculate the extent to which they like Obama more than McCain: $O - M$. Subjects who rated Obama and McCain more than 2 scale points apart are classified as one-sided; subjects who rated the two candidates within 2 scale points of each other are ambivalent. Figure 1 illustrates how this approach unfolds in the ANES data set. In this nationally representative sample, 50.0% of voters have a one-sided view of the candidates, 36.0% are indifferent, and 14.1% are ambivalent.

Table 1 shows how citizens score on standard measures of political engagement and extremism, depending on their classification. Part of the objective here is validation. If the scheme I employ captures indifference, then subjects coded as indifferent should be notably low in these measures (as in Thornton 2011; Yoo 2010).[10] Indeed, indifferent individuals are lower than one-sided and ambivalent individuals in 21 out of 22 comparisons. Aside from validation, the final line of the table reports the proportion of "floating voters"—defined as those who report having switched their presidential vote from the Republican to the Democrat (or vice versa) from 2004 to 2008. Indifferent and ambivalent citizens both switch sides at a high rate, suggesting that they represent a fertile segment of the electorate from which candidates may garner support.[11]

Studies 1 and 2: Processing Political Messages

Studies 1 and 2 have many similarities, so I discuss them together. Both are randomized experiments that examine how citizens respond to partisan political messages. Both were designed to decompose motivated biases into the components explained by implicit versus explicit affect toward the political parties. Study 1 examines how subjects respond to arguments made on social media, whereas Study 2 examines an effort by elites to frame political news. The two experiments complement each other. Study 1 has a larger sample. Study 2 addresses a limitation of Study 1 and more closely simulates the kind of events that will be examined observationally in Study 3.

Data and Measures

Both studies were conducted at a public university with a diverse student body. Subjects were students (N = 360 in Study 1; N = 156 in Study 2) enrolled in introductory classes who received credit toward the class's research activity requirement for participating. Study 1 was conducted in the fall of 2014. Study 2 was conducted in the spring of 2015.

Subjects began the study by completing an Implicit Association Test (IAT). The IAT is a standard, latency-based measure of implicit attitudes in which subjects are timed on how quickly they can associate a target category of interest to the researcher (e.g., Coke vs. Pepsi, black faces vs. white faces) with positive or negative words. I report full details of the IAT procedure in the SI. Here, I note that my procedure is nearly identical to that used by Iyengar and Westwood (2015), who developed and validated an approach to measure implicit attitudes toward the Democratic and Republican parties. The main result from an IAT is a d-score, which is the average classification latency under one pairing (Democratic symbols paired with positive words) minus latency under the alternative pairing (Republican symbols paired with positive

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[10]Though note that some research finds the effect of OI&A categories to vary cross-nationally (Johnson 2014).

[11]A section of the SI reports low associations between the categories and standard demographic variables.

FIGURE 1 Classifying Respondents in the ANES
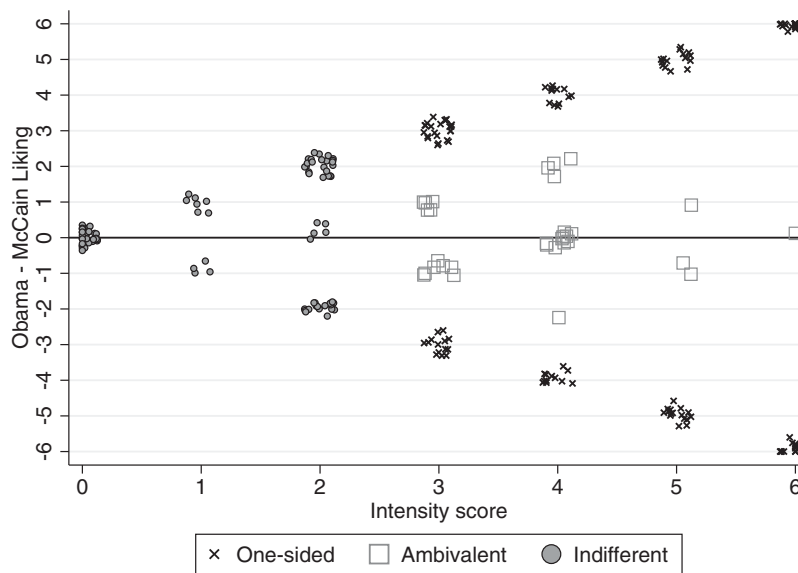
Note: Points represent ANES respondents. The figure shows how they are classified as one-sided, ambivalent, or indifferent, depending on the intensity and parity of their explicit attitudes. To make the figure interpretable, only a randomly selected 10% of respondents are plotted. Points are randomly perturbed to illustrate their density.

words) divided by the pooled latency standard deviation. Most IAT scores fall between −1 and 1 (see Figure 2).

Following the IAT, subjects reported their explicit liking and disliking of each of the American political parties on a 7-point scale. I used responses on these measures to classify subjects as one-sided, ambivalent, or indifferent with respect to the political parties using the approach described above (but with party attitudes substituted for candidate attitudes).

In the next phase of the studies, subjects partook in an experiment to examine processing of partisan political messages. In Study 1, the whole procedure unfolded in one sitting. A possible concern with this approach is that merely measuring explicit attitudes might activate controlled processing, causing explicit attitudes to have an uncharacteristically large effect on the measured judgments. To address this concern, Study 2 subjects were recruited to complete their experiment (ostensibly a separate study) after a delay of several weeks.[12]

Both experiments were designed to induce biased processing that could be decomposed into components explained by implicit, versus explicit, attitudes. In Study 1, subjects considered the quality of the reasoning in a paragraph that either supported or opposed the Obama

administration's new rules for how the government hires contractors.[13] (The SI presents all instrumentation.) The dependent measure is perceived quality of the reasoning in the paragraph. Study 2 focused on partisan "spin." Subjects read a story that reported on economic news. In one version of the story, the news was "disappointing." A Democratic spokesperson attributed the events to the newly Republican Congress, whereas a Republican spokesperson rebutted this attribution, saying President Obama was to blame. In the alternative version, the news was "favorable," and the two spokesperson arguments were swapped. Subjects rated the soundness of each of the two spokesperson arguments: The president bears responsibility for the economy, or Congress does. The main dependent variable is a difference measure— soundness of the idea that the president influences the economy minus soundness of the idea that Congress influences the economy. As in Study 1, there is a clear expectation for how partisan biases should manifest: Citizens who like Democrats should endorse the presidential attribution when the economic news is good and endorse the Congress attribution when the news is bad. As in

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[12]The median lag between waves was 35 days.

[13]The paragraph said little of actual substance. The manipulation was achieved by altering the valence of a few key words, as in "There is no longer any doubt that [Obama's] policies [are succeeding/have failed]."

TABLE 1 Indifferent Citizens Are Less Engaged and Extreme

	One-Sided	Indifferent	Ambivalent
Political Engagement			
Political Knowledge	0.69 (.01)[b]	0.66 (.01)[c]	0.72 (.02)[b,c]
Interest in Politics	0.72 (.01)[a,b]	0.55 (.01)[a,c]	0.66 (.02)[b,c]
Need for Cognition	0.60 (.01)[a]	0.54 (.01)[a,c]	0.62 (.03)[c]
News Consumption	0.54 (.01)[a]	0.46 (.01)[a,c]	0.51 (.02)[c]
Political Efficacy	0.40 (.01)[a]	0.33 (.01)[a,c]	0.39 (.01)[c]
Turnout (Self-Report)	0.89 (.01)[a,b]	0.78 (.02)[a]	0.82 (.03)[b]
Education	0.48 (.01)[a]	0.43 (.02)[a,c]	0.51 (.02)[c]
Political Extremism			
Party ID Strength	0.74 (.01)[a,b]	0.53 (.02)[a]	0.53 (.03)[b]
Ideological Extremity	0.58 (.01)[a,b]	0.40 (.02)[a]	0.45 (.03)[b]
Extremity of Abortion Opinions	0.49 (.02)[a]	0.40 (.02)[a]	0.45 (.03)
Extremity of Environment Opinions	0.39 (.02)[a]	0.33 (.02)[a,c]	0.44 (.03)[c]
Floating Voter	0.09 (.01)[a,b]	0.19 (.02)[a]	0.23 (0.04)[b]
N	1,177	772	336

Note: Data come from the ANES data set described in Study 3. Details on the construction of measures are reported in the SI. Cell entries are survey-weighted means, with standard errors in parentheses. Entries with shared superscripts are significantly different from each other (p < .05). Means are calculated using design-appropriate weights provided by ANES. All measures are scaled to run from 0 to 1.

Study 1, this pattern can be decomposed into the components explained by implicit, versus explicit, attitudes.

Results

As I note above, implicit and explicit attitudes typically exhibit dissociation. Figure 2 confirms this to be the case for attitudes about the parties. Explicit favoritism of the Democratic Party (the x-axis) is plotted against implicit favoritism of the Democratic Party (the y-axis). Each stratum of explicit responses varies substantially in terms of the implicit attitudes exhibited.[14]

Recall from the discussion above that, for each dependent measure, there is a clear expectation for how the random assignment should interact with attitudes toward parties. The analytical approach is to decompose these interactions into their implicit and explicit components. Specifically, I estimate, via ordinary least squares (OLS),

$$\text{Dependent measure}$$
$$= \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{ Treatment} + \beta_2 \text{ Implicit Attitude}$$
$$+ \beta_3 \text{ Treatment} \times \text{Implicit Attitude}$$
$$+ \beta_4 \text{ Explicit Attitude} + \beta_5 \text{ Treatment}$$
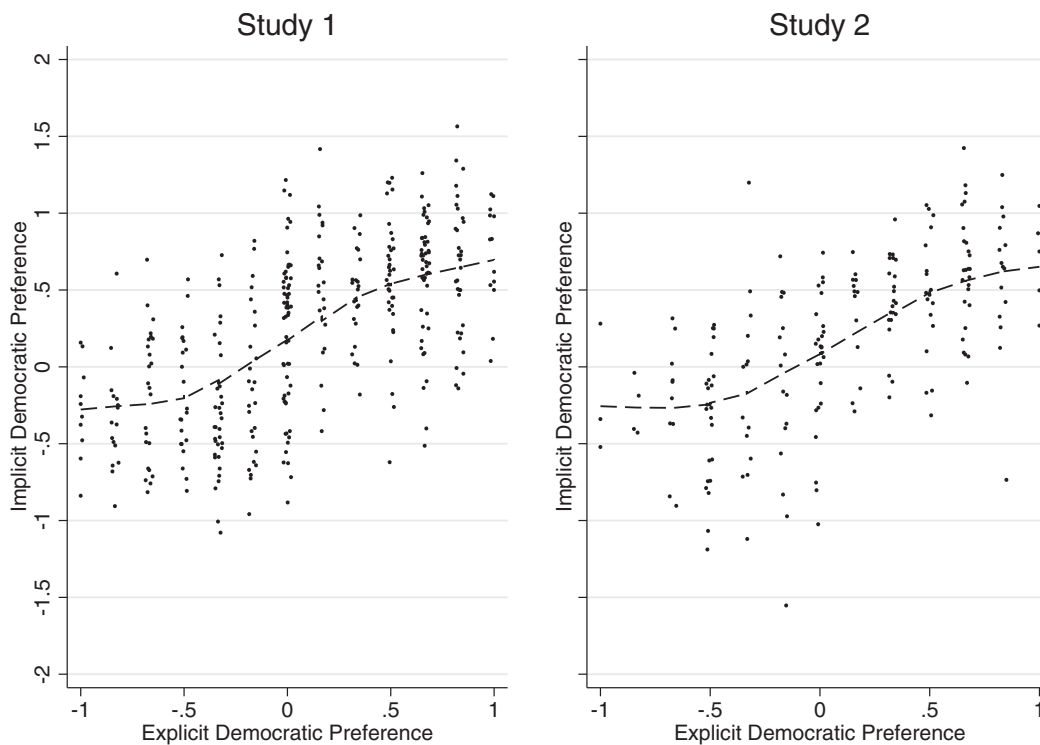$$\times \text{ Explicit Attitude} + \varepsilon,$$

[14]It should be noted that the partisan IAT exhibited good internal consistency (Cronbach's α = .85 in Study 1 and .84 in Study 2, as calculated by the method in Sriram and Greenwald 2009).

and break out results depending on subjects' classification as one-sided, ambivalent, or indifferent. Table 2 shows the results.

The main focus in Table 2 is the interaction terms, which characterize the extent to which treatment effects depend on implicit and explicit attitudes. For one-sided citizens, judgments pivot sharply around explicit attitudes, such that subjects who report liking the Democratic Party make Democratic-favoring judgments, and vice versa. In contrast, Treatment × Implicit interactions are small for one-sided citizens in both studies (p < .51; p < .52). Implicit measures contribute little to understanding judgments made by citizens with one-sided attitudes.

However, implicit attitudes are not always innocuous. Indifferent subjects exhibit much the opposite pattern. Their judgments depend on implicit attitudes (p < .04; p < .01) but not explicit attitudes (p < .72; p < .13). Using the main and interactive effects to calculate predicted values, the magnitude of the relationships (in Study 1) is such that an implicit Republican (d-score of −1) would be expected to rate the same stimulus 0.14 points lower than an implicit Democrat (d-score of 1)—14% of the dependent measure's range. (Study 2 results are comparable.) This is a relationship about half as large as the effect of explicit attitudes among one-sided respondents.

Ambivalent subjects' responses depend on both implicit (p < .03) and explicit (p < .03) attitudes in Study 1.

FIGURE 2 The Relationship between Implicit and Explicit Attitudes

Note: The figure shows the relationship between implicit (IAT) and explicit (party liking) attitudes in Studies 1 and 2. The dashed lines are lowess smoothers. Points are perturbed slightly to show their density more clearly. The figure reveals substantial dissociation between implicit and explicit attitudes (Pearson's r = .62 in Study 1, .59 in Study 2).

Neither kind of attitude is significant for ambivalent subjects in Study 2, though the small sample size here cautions against reading too far into these null results.

Discussion

The experiments largely confirm the hypothesized pattern, revealing stark differences in when implicit attitudes influence judgments, and when not. In particular, implicit attitudes predict judgments of indifferent subjects, where explicit attitudes dominate the responses of one-sided subjects. Results for ambivalent subjects are more difficult to characterize. They are consistent with predictions insofar as explicit attitudes are *more* influential than implicit attitudes, though the significant effect for implicit attitudes in Study 1 suggests that implicit attitudes carry unexpected importance in this subgroup as well.

The next study turns attention to the role that implicit attitudes play in a more naturalistic context.

Study 3: Implicit Attitudes during the Obama Presidency

A virtue of the experimental studies is that random assignment allows confident conclusions about the moderating role of implicit attitudes within subgroups. A limitation is that the lab setting invites questions about how conclusions relate to more naturalistic political judgments. Study 3 takes advantage of a measure of implicit attitudes included on a national panel study to assess whether the same patterns emerge outside the lab.

Measuring Implicit Attitudes toward Presidential Candidates in a National Sample

From January 2008 through September 2009, the American National Election Studies conducted a 21-wave panel study on a large (N = 2,628), nationally representative

TABLE 2 Implicit Attitudes Moderate Treatment Effects among the Indifferent

	Study 1			Study 2		
	One-Sided	**Indifferent**	**Ambivalent**	**One-Sided**	**Indifferent**	**Ambivalent**
Treatment	−0.008	−0.056	−0.227**	0.045	0.058*	0.033
	(0.031)	(0.033)	(0.048)	(0.030)	(0.025)	(0.071)
Implicit Attitude (D)	0.002	−0.063	−0.088	−0.029	−0.030	0.031
	(0.048)	(0.048)	(0.067)	(0.033)	(0.023)	(0.073)
Explicit Attitude (D)	−0.222**	0.112	−0.668**	−0.126**	−0.027	−0.452
	(0.034)	(0.119)	(0.178)	(0.035)	(0.054)	(0.501)
Treatment × Implicit	**−0.046**	**0.135***	**0.224***	**−0.036**	**0.134****	**−0.087**
	(0.069)	**(0.064)**	**(0.092)**	**(0.055)**	**(0.046)**	**(0.121)**
Treatment × Explicit	**0.472****	**−0.057**	**0.714***	**0.343****	**0.208**	**0.929**
	(0.051)	**(0.156)**	**(0.295)**	**(0.060)**	**(0.133)**	**(0.537)**
Constant	0.400**	0.429**	0.472**	0.465**	0.474**	0.524**
	(0.022)	(0.026)	(0.031)	(0.018)	(0.013)	(0.059)
Observations	197	130	33	81	58	15
R-squared	0.445	0.061	0.576	0.437	0.345	0.244

Note: The dependent measures are perceived comment quality (Study 1) or endorsement of the idea that the president is responsible for the economy (Study 2), scaled from 0 to 1. The treatment variable = 0 for the condition expected to increase the dependent measure among Republicans, and 1 for the condition expected to increase the dependent measure among Democrats. Explicit and implicit attitudes are coded as in Figure 2. Robust standard errors are in parentheses.
*p < .05, **p < .01, two-tailed tests.

sample of Americans.[15] Respondents were recruited by telephone using random-digit-dialing methods and completed the instruments online.

The ANES Panel Study measured implicit attitudes about the two major presidential candidates: Barack Obama and John McCain. In the fall of 2008, subjects completed an Affect Misattribution Procedure (AMP) measuring implicit attitudes toward the two candidates.[16,17] The AMP is an alternative measure of implicit attitudes (Payne et al. 2005) and works as follows. Subjects are presented with a series of 48 (presumably uninterpretable) Chinese characters. Each appears on the screen briefly (for 250 milliseconds), and the subject is

asked to classify it as being pleasant or unpleasant. Just before each character appears, Obama's or McCain's face (randomly assigned) appears for an even shorter period of time (75 milliseconds). The logic of the test is that the candidate's face evokes a flash of affect that then spills over onto assessments of the Chinese characters (even though subjects are told to not let any other images they see influence evaluations of the pictograms). The summary implicit attitude measure is a difference score: the proportion of characters rated as pleasant when preceded by Obama's face minus the proportion rated as pleasant when preceded by McCain's. This score ranges from −1 (implicit McCain preference) to 1 (implicit Obama preference).[18,19]

Explicit attitudes are measured using 7-point candidate liking/disliking measures included in the October 2008 wave. These are used to classify subjects as one-sided, ambivalent, or indifferent (as described above), as well as to construct a difference measure (Obama liking minus McCain liking) that serves as a measure of explicit

[15]Detailed methodological details are available at www.electionstudies.org. The N reported is the number of subjects who completed the October 2008 wave, a necessary condition to be included in analysis.

[16]Respondents were randomly assigned to complete the AMP in September or October. I pool the two administrations in the analyses that follow.

[17]The IAT and the AMP were in direct competition for inclusion on the ANES Panel. The AMP was chosen for being much easier to administer on a national sample and because it was feared that the IAT—a more tedious test—would cause attrition (Krosnick and Lupia 2008). According to a meta-analysis, where both measurement approaches have been used to predict the same outcomes, they tend to show similar patterns (Cameron, Brown-Iannuzzi, and Payne 2012).

[18]The AMP exhibited excellent internal consistency (α =.95).

[19]As Kinder and Ryan (2017) discuss, some respondents evade valid AMP measurement by pressing the same key 48 times in a row—resulting in an AMP score of 0. I exclude these respondents (N = 239) from all analyses.

FIGURE 3 Implicit and Explicit Attitudes in the ANES Panel Study
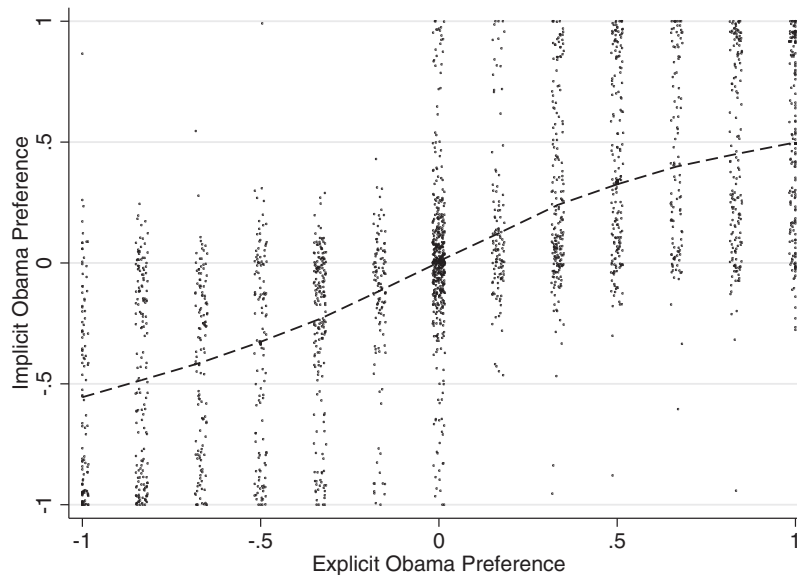
Note: The figure shows the relationship between implicit (AMP) and explicit (candidate liking) attitudes in the ANES. The dashed line is a lowess smoother. Pearson's r = .67.

attitudes. As in Studies 1 and 2, implicit and explicit attitudes exhibit dissociation (Figure 3).

The long-running nature of the ANES Panel Study allows examination of several dependent measures that test how implicit attitudes affect judgments: vote choice in the general election, shifting evaluations of the state of the country, and changing support for President Obama and his performance in office.

Implicit Attitudes and the Vote

The hypotheses above bear on how implicit and explicit attitudes should predict voting behavior: Ambivalent and one-sided citizens should mostly rely on explicit attitudes in making a choice, whereas implicit attitudes might predict the vote choice of indifferent citizens.

It can be seen at a glance that one-sided respondents fit this prediction: Of the 1,109 one-sided voters available for analysis, all but four report casting a vote that is consistent with their explicit attitudes. This is evidence in favor of Hypothesis 2 in the sense that, once explicit attitudes are accounted for, no variance is left for implicit attitudes to explain. (Reasonable statistical models cannot be estimated.)

Indifferent and ambivalent respondents require more attention. To examine how they resolve their more con-

flicted attitudes toward the candidates, I estimate (by weighted probit) a standard model of vote choice.[20] To simplify the analysis, nonvoters and third-party voters are excluded. The model is

$$
\begin{aligned}
\text{Obama Vote} \\
= \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{ Implicit Attitude} + \beta_2 \text{ Explicit Attitude} \\
+ \beta_3 \text{ Ambivalent} + \beta_4 \text{ Implicit} \times \text{Ambivalent} \\
+ \beta_5 \text{ Explicit} \times \text{Ambivalent} + \beta_{6-11} \text{ Partisanship} \\
+ \beta_{12-14} \text{ Region} + \beta_{15-18} \text{ Education} \\
+ \beta_{19} \text{ Gender} + \beta_{20-22} \text{ Race} + \beta_{23} \text{ Income} + \varepsilon.^{21}
\end{aligned}
$$

[20]Weights are the design-appropriate weights provided by the ANES.

[21]The dependent variable is self-reported vote choice, measured on the November 2008 wave. Implicit and explicit attitudes are coded as shown in Figure 3. Ambivalent is a dummy variable that distinguishes indifferent and ambivalent respondents. Partisanship is a series of dummy variables for each level on a 7-point scale ranging from strong Democrat to strong Republican. Region is a series of dummy variables for each of the four main geographical regions. Education is a series of dummy variables for having a high school diploma, some college education, a bachelor's degree, or a graduate degree. Race is a series of dummies for identifying as white, black, or Hispanic. Income is a single variable scaled to run 0–1.

TABLE 3 Implicit Attitudes Influence Vote Choices of the Indifferent

	Indifferent	Ambivalent
Implicit Attitude	0.703**	0.349
	(0.184)	(0.183)
Explicit Attitude	1.151**	1.258*
	(0.191)	(0.604)

Note: Cell entries are the change in the predicted probability of an Obama vote for a one-unit change in the implicit or explicit attitude. Other variables are held at their means. The N for the full model is 838, which comprises 579 indifferent voters and 259 ambivalent voters. Standard errors are in parentheses.
*p < .05, **p < .01, two-tailed tests.

Full results are available in the SI. Table 3 conveys the key results by reporting the change in predicted probability of voting for Obama as a function of implicit and explicit attitudes, holding control variables at their means.[22]

The results are consistent with predictions in that implicit attitudes significantly predict vote choices made by indifferent voters, but carry about half the weight for ambivalent voters (and no weight for one-sided voters). The significant relationship for explicit attitudes among indifferent voters is at odds with the prediction (Hypothesis 1) that explicit attitudes carry little weight among the indifferent, though the close conceptual connection between explicitly liking a candidate and voting for him makes this test particularly easy for explicit attitudes to pass. I turn next to outcomes more conceptually distant from candidate attitudes.

Implicit Attitudes and the Changing Views on the State of the Nation

The start of a new presidential term is an exciting time. Citizens receive a steady flow of media reports about appointments, policy changes, and stirring imagery (e.g., the inauguration) related to the new president taking up the reins of power. This stream of news is likely to influence perceptions of the health of the country: Citizens who like the winner should perceive a country emerging from a long winter, whereas individuals who like the loser will see a nation hurtling toward disaster.[23] Once again,

[22]One might wonder why the change in predicted probability is greater than 1.0 for the explicit measures. This result can occur because a line tangent to a steep sinusoid can have a slope greater than 1.0.

[23]In a timely example, Republicans became substantially less negative about current economic conditions just days after Donald Trump won the 2016 presidential election (McCarthy and Jones 2016).

the approach in this test is to decompose this basic pattern into parts explained by implicit versus explicit attitudes.

Data come from a battery of questions concerning the state of the nation that the ANES administered in September 2008, just 2 months before the election, and again in July 2009, which was 6 months into Obama's presidency. Respondents were asked about the state of the national economy, relations with foreign nations, the nation's moral values, and several other topics—12 in total. I collapse these assessments into summary scales ($\alpha = .84$ in both September and July).

To compare how implicit and explicit attitudes bear on evolving assessments, I estimate (weighted least squares):

JulyEvaluation

$$= \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{ Implicit Attitude} + \beta_2 \text{ Explicit Attitude}$$
$$+ \beta_3 \text{ Prior Evaluation} + \beta_{4,5} \text{ Group Dummies}$$
$$+ \beta_{6,7} \text{ Implicit} \times \text{Group Interactions} + \beta_{8,9} \text{ Explicit}$$
$$\times \text{Group Interactions} + \beta_{10,11} \text{ Prior Evaluation}$$
$$\times \text{Group Interactions} + \beta_{12-29} \text{ Controls} + \varepsilon.$$

This model is similar to the vote model, with two important modifications. First, September 2008 evaluations (Prior Evaluation) are included, making the dependent variable a measure of *change* (Allison 1990). Second, one-sided voters can now be included since they have reasonable variation on the dependent variable. Control variables are identical to the vote model. The dependent variable is scaled to run from 0 to 1, with high values reflecting favorable evaluations.

Table 4, which reports the marginal effects of key measures, uncovers a pattern consistent with previous results: Explicit attitudes shape the perceptions of one-sided and ambivalent citizens, but not indifferent citizens. Implicit attitudes shape the perceptions of indifferent citizens, but not the other two groups. The marginal effect of implicit attitudes among the indifferent is only slightly smaller than the effect of explicit attitudes among one-sided respondents.[24]

Implicit Attitudes and Obama's Agenda

In Study 2, indifferent respondents endorsed or rejected partisan spin, depending on their implicit attitudes. In a more naturalistic context, one could imagine this pattern

[24]Some might wonder whether collapsing evaluations across several policy areas into a summary dependent measure glosses over some complexity. In the SI, I report a parallel analysis for each of the policies, examined one by one.

TABLE 4 **Implicit Attitudes Predict Changing Evaluations of the Country among the Indifferent**

	Effect among...		
	One-Sided	Indifferent	Ambivalent
Marginal Effect of...			
Implicit Attitude	0.022	0.043**	0.023
	(0.012)	(0.013)	(0.026)
Explicit Attitude	0.050**	0.033	0.143*
	(0.011)	(0.023)	(0.058)

Note: Cell entries are the marginal effect of a one-unit change in the independent variable, computed from the full model described in the text and reported in the SI. The dependent variable is a summary measure of July 2009 evaluations of the state of the country, which, given the inclusion of September 2008 evaluations in the model, is a measure of change. The full model includes 947 one-sided, 614 indifferent, and 271 ambivalent respondents. Standard errors are in parentheses.
*p < .05, **p < .01, two-tailed tests.

manifesting in how citizens respond to coverage of the activities that a politician undertakes while in office: Is his leadership bold, or misguided? Are his actions fixing a problem, or aggravating it?

The ANES Panel provides some purchase on such questions by measuring approval of Obama in the early months of his presidency. In May 2009, subjects were asked how much they approved of his handling of several policy areas. They were presented with the same questions again in July 2009 (a 2-month lag, compared to 10 months for the analysis presented in Table 4).

Domestic health care policy was a focal concern at this time. Reform of America's health care system was a cornerstone of Obama's campaign and the top domestic priority during his early months in office. He held town hall meetings—online and in person—on the topic of health reform in June and July. He dedicated a press conference to the subject on June 23. Spurred by the president, congressional committees reported bills, which were discussed in the media—typically with enthusiasm by Democrats and derision from Republicans (Herszenhorn 2009). Coverage of these events saturated political news. Did implicit attitudes moderate how Americans responded?

Table 5 examines shifting opinions of President Obama using the same statistical approach as in Table 4. (May 2009 opinions are used as the measure of prior attitudes.) The results are largely consistent with the other analyses: Explicit attitudes predict change among one-sided and ambivalent citizens, but less so among the indifferent; implicit attitudes only predict change among the indifferent. As in Table 4, the marginal effect of im-

plicit attitudes among the indifferent is smaller than the effect of explicit attitudes among one-sided respondents, but not drastically so. Among the indifferent, implicit attitudes appear to have a substantively significant—not just statistically significant—effect.

As a point of comparison to assess whether this pattern is part of a broad trend, as opposed to reactions to news about Obama's focal policy area, Table 5 repeats the analysis for a *non*focal issue: education policy (a placebo test). Here, judgments are stable over time: For all three groups, only prior attitudes significantly predict them.

Implicit Prejudice: A Confound?

Given that Barack Obama is black, one question that might arise about the results throughout Study 3 is whether implicit attitudes about the two candidates are a mere proxy for implicit racial prejudice. After all, a potential application of implicit attitude measures is to capture attitudes that might otherwise be censored by controlled processes related to self-presentation. Fortunately, the possibility that the candidate-focused AMP merely taps racial animus is testable in the data at hand. Recall that ANES respondents were randomly assigned to complete the candidate-focused AMP in either September or October 2008. The flip side of this random assignment is that in whichever wave a respondent did *not* complete the candidate-focused AMP, she was assigned to complete a racial attitude AMP. When I replicate the analyses above while adding racial implicit attitudes in the models, implicit partisan attitudes remain a significant predictor in every case. I present these analyses in the SI.[25]

Discussion and Conclusion

A signature result in the study of public opinion is that a large proportion of citizens approach the political sphere with strong political leanings. These crystalized political attitudes color how citizens perceive the world (Campbell et al. 1960), exert a dominating influence of vote choice

[25]A separate concern might be that a factor correlated with indifference better explains why implicit attitudes carry greater weight for some individuals than others. Three potential traits that merit attention are (1) education, (2) political knowledge, and (3) the personality trait *need for cognition*, since each of these might increase a person's propensity to engage in controlled processing. The ANES measured all of these traits, but adding Implicit × Trait interactions to the models does not appreciably affect the results above.

TABLE 5 Among the Indifferent, Implicit Attitudes Predict Responses to Obama's Agenda

	Health Care			Education		
	One-Sided	Indifferent	Ambivalent	One-Sided	Indifferent	Ambivalent
Marginal Effect of . . .						
Implicit Attitude	−0.023	0.088**	−0.027	0.020	0.000	0.070
	(0.024)	(0.030)	(0.050)	(0.020)	(0.025)	(0.041)
Explicit Attitude	0.131**	0.113*	0.336**	0.021	0.122	−0.001
	(0.025)	(0.055)	(0.108)	(0.019)	(0.063)	(0.084)

Note: Cell entries are the marginal effect of a one-unit change in the independent variable. The full models are reported in the SI. The dependent variables are July 2009 policy-specific assessments of Obama's performance in office.
Standard errors are in parentheses.
*p < .05, **p < .01, two-tailed tests.

(Bartels 2000; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002), and activate a variety of mental processes that make persuasion unlikely (Taber and Lodge 2006). Such findings serve to highlight the significance of voters with weak prior attitudes. If a large segment of voters can be taken more or less for granted, those who remain "hold the critical 'balance of power,' in the sense that alternations in governing party depend disproportionately on shifts in their sentiment" (Converse 1962, 587).

The studies herein advance understanding of how citizens make judgments in the absence of strong prior leanings. Across a variety of tests, I find that new measures of implicit attitudes reliably characterize the judgments made by indifferent citizens (Hypothesis 1). This finding is more striking because it contrasts with the role that implicit attitudes play among people who are ambivalent or one-sided. Implicit attitudes exhibit less reliable effects for ambivalent citizens, and no discernible influence for one-sided citizens (Hypothesis 2). More than just an empirical regularity, this pattern of results illustrates how the dual-process nature of human cognition—well established in psychology—manifests in politics. Citizens sometimes derive political judgments from systematic, controlled mental processes, but at other times draw on loose, automatically activated affective associations.

The finding that citizens contingently rely on automatic processes calls for more research on how implicit attitudes form and change. Existing research on this topic suggests that the antecedents of implicit attitudes are multifarious: The attitudes can develop in childhood (Rudman, Phelan, and Heppen 2007), but they can also form and change based on experiences in adulthood (Dasgupta and Greenwald 2001; Gregg, Seibt, and Banaji 2006). One finding from psychology, however, might be particularly relevant to implicit *political* attitudes and political persuasion more generally, namely, that implicit and explicit attitudes change via different processes. Explicit

attitudes change via *propositional* processes—deductive reasoning about the true state of the world (Gawronski and Strack 2004). As predicted by cognitive dissonance theory, when two inconsistent ideas are entertained, one is promptly rejected, which allows explicit attitudes to change quickly, but also requires a nontrivial degree of attention and mental investment. In politics, the more sophisticated, discursive aspects of political campaigning—debates, policy statements, interviews with journalists, informational mailers, newspaper op-eds, and long-form speeches—might be instantiations of propositional appeals. These might be most effective at persuading ambivalent citizens, who rely more heavily on controlled processing.

In contrast, implicit attitudes change via *associative* processes—reinforced interconnections between attitude objects and positive or negative feelings (Gawronski and Strack 2004). Cognitive dissonance does not cause a cascading change in mental associations. Instead, associations are updated incrementally, and over a longer time horizon (Gregg, Seibt, and Banaji 2006; Rydell and McConnell 2006). The imperative to change minds via this alternative route might explain why, in tandem with the rationalistic appeals mentioned above, politicians also employ tools that seem tailored to manipulate implicit associations: flamboyant television ads, radio jingles, glitzy billboards, campaign slogans, and Internet memes, for some examples. Rather than simply trying to maximize overall exposure, the two campaigning styles might each be suited to move citizens who form their opinions in very different ways.

Aside from characterizing the judgment processes of indifferent citizens, the research herein contributes to understanding the role that implicit attitudes play in politics. The largest body of political science work on implicit attitudes focuses on implicit *racial* attitudes. It was recently shown that implicit partisan attitudes are far

more divided than implicit racial attitudes (Iyengar and Westwood 2015). It does not necessarily follow that they provide explanatory purchase beyond traditional measures when it comes to important political outcomes—that they explain something new and, to put a point on it, demand attention. Here, I conclude that they do, though I also identify texture in where they matter more and less.

To close, I note that the results herein link up to an old idea. One of the core themes underpinning Madison's vision for the American political system was that, when it comes to evaluating competing political alternatives, genuine dispassion is not just elusive, not just scarce, but perhaps altogether impossible. From that belief stemmed his case for an adversarial government in which competing interests would frustrate each other's baser inclinations. As psychology allows us to more deeply understand human motivations, it continues to remind us just how elusive genuine dispassion really is.

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Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's website:

1 Background on Classification Scheme

2 Instrumentation

    2.1 Instrumentation for Table 1

    2.2 Implicit Association Test

    2.3 Instrumentation for Study 1

    2.4 Instrumentation for Study 2

    2.5 Instrumentation for Study 3

3 Supporting Analyses

    3.1 Respondent Classification in Studies 1 and 2

    3.2 Additional Associations of One-sidedness, Indifference, and Ambivalence

    3.3 Full Results Underlying Table 3

    3.4 Full Results Underlying Table 4

    3.5 Disaggregated National Evaluations

    3.6 Full Results Underlying Table 6

    3.7 Analyses Controlling for Implicit Racial Attitudes