

# Emotion

## **When a Lack of Passion Intertwines With Thought and Action: Neutral Feelings About COVID-19 Are Associated With U.S. Presidential Candidate Attitudes and Voting Behavior**

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## BRIEF REPORT

# When a Lack of Passion Intertwines With Thought and Action: Neutral Feelings About COVID-19 Are Associated With U.S. Presidential Candidate Attitudes and Voting Behavior

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Researchers might assume that neutrality does not shape thought and action because it signals that nothing in the environment needs attention, hence a person has little need to alter their behavior. However, feeling neutral about an issue might be consequential. The COVID-19 pandemic was a major issue during the 2020 U.S. presidential election. We examined whether feeling neutral about COVID-19 was associated with attitudes about the top 2 presidential candidates (Trump vs. Biden) and behavior (i.e., whether a person voted and who they voted for). Data were collected at 2 critical time points: Study 1 was conducted immediately after the U.S. presidential election and Study 2 was conducted prior to the second Senate impeachment trial of Trump. Because feeling neutral about COVID-19 might indicate that a person views the issue as unworthy of attention, a perspective more aligned with Trump's approach, we hypothesized that feeling neutral about COVID-19 would be associated with more pro-Trump attitudes and behaviors. Even after accounting for other affects about COVID-19, in both studies, neutrality was associated with more favorable attitudes toward Trump, less favorable attitudes toward Biden, being less likely to vote, and if a person did vote, being more likely to vote for Trump. In Study 2, neutrality was associated with less support for impeaching Trump. Overall, in contrast to the view that neutral affect exerts little influence, neutrality can be critically intertwined with thought and action.

*Keywords:* neutrality, COVID-19, affect, attitudes, and behavior

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Affective states can provide people with information about their environment that alters thoughts and behaviors (for a review, see Gasper & Spencer, 2018). For example, affect shapes not only how people process information about political candidates (Parker & Isbell, 2010), but also their voting behavior (for a review, see Isbell et al., 2006). While some people are passionate about politics, others are not (Gao, 2014). This lack of involvement could arise because some people feel

neutral about political issues. Neutrality arises when a person lacks a strong preference, and it signals indifference (Gasper et al., 2021). Unlike other affects that are in the foreground of people's minds and can direct thoughts and behaviors (Simon, 1967), neutral states are often viewed as being in the background (Russell, 2003), signaling little need to alter action. Thus, neutral states are often assumed to exert little influence on thoughts and behaviors (Gasper, 2018).

In this article, we question this view and argue that a lack of passion can shape thought and action. Specifically, neutral states indicate that something is unworthy of attention, and this information can alter thoughts and behaviors. We tested this hypothesis during the 2020 U.S. presidential election. At this time, the world was experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly influenced the presidential campaign (Baccini et al., 2021). We hypothesized that just as positive and negative feelings about COVID-19 might be linked to political attitudes and behaviors, so too might neutral feelings about COVID-19. The more neutral people felt about COVID-19, the more they should think COVID-19 is unworthy of attention. This view should be associated with being less likely to vote, because why vote if you do not care about a major election issue. If they did vote, neutrality should

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The study materials, data, and syntax for all analyses are available at <https://osf.io/y9q5n/>.

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be associated with more (vs. less) favorable attitudes toward Trump (vs. Biden) and being more likely to vote for Trump (vs. Biden), because Trump's approach to COVID-19 was more aligned with their views. Furthermore, we examined whether these associations would extend to a non-COVID-19 relevant issue — opposing Trump's second impeachment.

### Neutral Affect: Why a Lack of Passion Intertwines With Thought and Action

Researchers tend *not* to consider how neutral states influence thoughts and behaviors, even though people spend 25.43% of their time in a neutral mood (Fordyce, 1988). Researchers might have ignored neutrality because, unlike other affects that spark action, neutral states signal nothing in the environment requires attention (Gasper et al., 2019). Yet even the signal that nothing is noteworthy could influence behavior, in that it might shape action by indicating what actions are not needed. Gasper and Danube (2016) found that neutral, not negative, attitudes about certain behaviors (e.g., getting a flu vaccination) were associated with failing to engage in them. In the political arena, people who felt indifferent (vs. positive, negative, or ambivalent) toward the political parties/candidates read less news (Thornton, 2011) and were less likely to vote (Yoo, 2010). Thus, neutrality about certain topics has been associated with failing to attend to or act on them.

However, it is unclear whether neutral feelings about events pertinent to the election are associated with people's political thoughts and behaviors over and above other relevant affects. We hypothesized that feeling neutral about COVID-19, even after considering other affects, would result in people demonstrating attitudes and behaviors that reflect downplaying the importance of COVID-19, such as holding more (vs. less) favorable attitudes toward Trump (vs. Biden), being less likely to vote, and, if they voted, to vote for Trump, and to oppose impeaching Trump.

### Method

Studies 1 (S1) and 2 (S2) used similar methods and were approved by The Pennsylvania State University. We collected data for S1 on election day (November 3, 2020) and sixteen days afterward. We collected data for S2 on February 1, 2021, following the vote to impeach Donald Trump, but eight days before the Senate impeachment trial.

### Participants

Respondents in S1 and S2 were university students and Prolific participants, respectively. We dropped non-U.S. citizens ( $n_{S1} = 26$ ;  $n_{S2} = 2$ ) and people who did not complete the primary measures ( $n_{S1} = 8$ ). The final sample sizes were 320 (S1) and 448 (S2; see online supplemental materials for demographics and demographic comparisons between samples at <https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0001051.supp>). In S1, we aimed to recruit at least 200 participants and were able to obtain 320, which sensitivity power analyses revealed could detect  $\eta_p^2 = .02$  (alpha .05, power .80). In S2, we preregistered to collect at least 387 participants (to detect  $\eta_p^2 = .02$ , which was the

smallest neutrality effect in S1) and oversampled to account for potential exclusions.

### Materials and Procedure

The measures discussed in S1 were part of a larger study investigating how neutral feelings influenced thoughts and behaviors during the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> S2 was conducted to conceptually replicate S1 (preregistration at <https://aspredicted.org/g3574.pdf>). We preregistered analyses that controlled for other affects and relevant attitudes about COVID-19. In hindsight, including these attitudinal measures obfuscated the information we were interested in—how *feelings*, not attitudes, shape thought and behavior. Thus, we reported these preregistered analyses in online supplemental materials along with descriptive statistics of all variables. The study materials, data, and syntax for all analyses are available (<https://osf.io/y9q5n/>). Measures below are discussed in the same order that they were displayed to participants.

### Feelings About COVID-19

Participants were asked: “When I think about the coronavirus pandemic, I personally feel \_\_\_\_.” 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*. They rated the following states which were aggregated prior to analyses: neutrality (neutral, indifferent;  $\alpha_{S1} = .67$ ,  $\alpha_{S2} = .74$ ), negative affect (anxious, fearful, depressed, sad, tired, fatigued;  $\alpha_{S1} = .87$ ,  $\alpha_{S2} = .88$ ), hope (hopeful, optimistic;  $\alpha_{S1} = .82$ ,  $\alpha_{S2} = .83$ ), calmness (calm, relaxed;  $\alpha_{S1} = .81$ ,  $\alpha_{S2} = .81$ ), and ambivalence (mixed feelings, conflicted;  $\alpha_{S1} = .61$ ,  $\alpha_{S2} = .72$ ).<sup>2</sup>

### Attitudes Toward Trump and Biden

Participants rated their affective attitudes (henceforth called attitudes) toward Trump and Biden separately, 0 = *very cold or unfavorable feeling* to 100 = *very warm or favorable feeling*.

### Voting

Participants indicated who they voted for in the 2020 U.S. presidential election by selecting *Donald Trump*, *Joe Biden*, or “*I did not vote*.” We coded whether participants voted (1 = voted, 0 = did not vote), and for whom they voted (1 = Trump, 0 = Biden). These data are presented as odds ratios (*OR*). Numbers greater (vs. smaller) than 1 indicate greater odds of voting (vs. not voting) and voting for Trump (vs. Biden).

### Impeachment

In S2, to examine whether feelings about COVID-19 would be associated with views about Trump's impeachment trial, we averaged together participants' responses to: “*To what extent do you*

<sup>1</sup> After respondents reported feelings about COVID-19 in S1, they underwent a neutral mood manipulation for another purpose. This mood manipulation was used to determine our initial sample size of at least 200 respondents to detect an effect size of  $d \sim .35$ . Controlling for this manipulation did not alter the pattern and significance of S1 results.

<sup>2</sup> Hope and calmness were separated because they were more reliable when treated as two discrete states (reliabilities when combined;  $\alpha_{S1} = .79$ ,  $\alpha_{S21} = .78$ ), whereas negative states were more reliable when treated as one factor (reliabilities of negative emotions when separated; anxious/fearful,  $\alpha_{S1} = .81$ ,  $\alpha_{S21} = .84$ ; depressed/sad,  $\alpha_{S1} = .82$ ,  $\alpha_{S21} = .80$ ; tired/fatigued,  $\alpha_{S1} = .85$ ,  $\alpha_{S21} = .86$ ).

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**Table 1**  
*Association Between Feeling Toward COVID-19 and Attitudes Toward Political Figures*

Variable	Dependent variable											
	Attitudes toward Trump					Attitudes toward Biden						
	Study 1		Study 2			Study 1		Study 2				
	b [95% CI]	t	$\eta_p^2$	p	b [95% CI]	t	$\eta_p^2$	p	b [95% CI]	t	$\eta_p^2$	p
Intercept	29.93*** [21.85, 38.01]	7.29	0.15	<.001	25.12*** [19.66, 30.57]	9.05	0.16	<.001	48.69*** [41.53, 55.86]	13.37	0.36	<.001
Neutral	5.90** [2.12, 9.67]	3.07	0.03	0.002	5.99*** [3.04, 8.94]	3.99	0.04	<.001	-3.73* [-7.08, -0.38]	-2.19	0.02	.03
Negative Affect	-9.39*** [-13.63, -5.15]	-4.36	0.06	<.001	-5.18** [-8.26, -2.10]	-3.31	0.02	.001	5.13** [1.37, 8.89]	2.68	0.02	.01
Hope	4.34* [0.67, 8.01]	2.32	0.02	.02	1.59 [-1.14, 4.32]	1.15	0.003	.25	-3.46* [-6.72, -0.20]	-2.09	0.01	.04
Calm	3.39 [-1.06, 7.85]	1.50	0.01	.14	4.00* [0.70, 7.30]	2.38	0.01	.02	-3.33 [-7.28, 0.61]	-1.66	0.01	.10
Ambivalence	-4.08* [-7.79, -0.38]	-2.17	0.02	.03	0.45 [-2.29, 3.20]	0.33	<.001	.75	2.09 [-1.20, 5.37]	1.25	0.01	.21
Whether Voted <sup>a</sup>	3.08 [-5.83, 11.98]	0.68	0.001	.50	-6.81* [-12.99, -0.63]	-2.16	0.01	.03	5.77 [-2.13, 13.66]	1.44	0.01	.15
N		320				448				320		
R <sup>2</sup>		0.26***				0.21***				0.18***		

Note. All affective states are standardized.  
<sup>a</sup>Not voted = 0, Voted = 1.  
 \*  $p \leq .05$ . \*\*  $p \leq .01$ . \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ .

support the House of Representatives impeaching President Donald Trump?” and “To what extent are you in favor of the Senate finding President Donald Trump to be guilty during his impeachment trial?” ( $\alpha = .95$ ), 1 = not at all to 7 = extremely.

**Results**

To examine our hypothesis, we conducted analyses in which the five feelings about COVID-19 simultaneously predicted attitudes toward presidential candidates, voting behavior, and support for impeachment. We controlled for whether participants voted in all analyses, except for analyses predicting who they voted for.<sup>3</sup>

**Neutrality**

Supporting the hypothesis that feeling neutral about COVID-19 would be linked to more pro-Trump patterns (see Tables 1 and 2), neutrality was associated with more favorable attitudes toward Trump, less favorable attitudes toward Biden, being less likely to vote, and if they did vote, voting for Trump. Neutrality also was associated with being less supportive of impeaching Trump. Importantly, because all affects were entered into the regression, neutrality exerted these effects over and above other affective predictors.

**Negative Affect**

The more negative participants felt about COVID-19, the less they liked Trump, the more they liked Biden (in S1, but marginally significant in S2), the more likely they were to vote (in S1, not S2), and if they did vote, to vote for Biden, and to support impeaching Trump.

**Positive Affects: Hope and Calmness**

The effects of hope and calmness depended on the study. In S1, hope, but not calmness, was associated with more favorable attitudes toward Trump, less favorable attitudes toward Biden, and a greater likelihood of voting for Trump. In S2, this pattern reversed. Calmness, but not hope, was associated with more favorable attitudes toward Trump, less favorable attitudes toward Biden, a greater likelihood of voting for Trump, and less support for impeaching Trump. Moreover, hope now was associated with more favorable attitudes toward Biden.

These changes could be due to shifts in the political climate and pandemic. When S1 was conducted, there were no vaccines. During this time of uncertainty, hope might have reflected trust in Trump’s claims that vaccines were coming. When S2 was conducted, vaccines were available and, especially among Trump supporters, perhaps calmness, but not hope, was associated with the perception that the promises of vaccines were being fulfilled. In S2, when Biden was president, hope was now associated with more favorable attitudes toward Biden, perhaps because people felt hopeful due to Biden’s different approach to the pandemic.

**Ambivalence**

Only in S1 was ambivalence associated with less favorable attitudes toward Trump and a lower likelihood of voting for Trump.

<sup>3</sup> Results did not vary when this control variable was removed.



should not ignore neutral feelings when aiming to understand the political landscape. Clearly, a lack of passion can be highly intertwined with thought and action.

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