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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Abstract

Researchers might assume that neutrality does not shape thought and action because it signals that nothing in the environment needs attention, hence there is little need to alter one's 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 two presidential candidates (Trump vs. Biden) and behavior (i.e., whether one voted and who one voted for). Data were collected at two 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 one 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 one 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.

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

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 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 paper, 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 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 pertinent 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.

Methods

Studies 1 (S1) and 2 (S2) used similar methods and were IRB approved. We collected

data for S1 on election day (November 4, 2020) and sixteen days afterwards. 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 Supplementary

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 η_p^2 = .019

(alpha .05, power .80). In S2, we pre-registered to collect at least 387 participants (to detect η_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.[1] S2 was conducted to

conceptually replicate S1 (pre-registration at https://aspredicted.org/g3574.pdf). We pre-

registered 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

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[1] 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 and effect size *of d* ~ .35. Controlling for this manipulation did not alter the pattern and significance of S1
results.

– how *feelings*, not attitudes, shape thought and behavior. Thus, we reported these pre-registered analyses in Supplementary 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; α_{S1} = .67, α_{S2} = .74) , negative affect (anxious, fearful, depressed, sad, tired, fatigued; α_{S1} = .87, α_{S2} = .88), hope (hopeful, optimistic; α_{S1} = .82, α_{S2} = .83), calmness (calm, relaxed; α_{S1} = .81, α_{S2} = .81), and ambivalence (mixed feelings, conflicted; α_{S1} = .61, α_{S2} = .72).[2]

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; see Table 2). Numbers greater (vs. smaller) than 1 indicate greater odds of voting (vs. not voting) and voting for Trump (vs. Biden).

Impeachment

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[2] Hope and calmness were separated because they were more reliable when treated as two discrete states (reliabilities when combined; α_{S1} = .79, α_{S2} = .78), whereas negative states were more reliable when treated as one factor (reliabilities of negative emotions when separated; anxious/fearful, α_{S1} = .81, α_{S2} = .84; depressed/sad, α_{S1} = .82, α_{S2} = .80; tired/fatigued, α_{S1} = .85, α_{S2} = .86).

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 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.[3]

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

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[3] Results did not vary when this control variable was removed.

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 these 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. These links might have arisen because holding liberal attitudes was correlated with greater ambivalence in S1, $r = -.16$, but not in, S2, $r = .05$ (see Supplementary Materials for more discussion). Thus, who felt ambivalent about COVID-19 changed across the studies, perhaps creating a different pattern of results.

Discussion

We investigated the hypothesis that rather than being a background state with little influence on thought and action, neutral feelings about COVID-19 would be associated with more pro-Trump political attitudes and behaviors. Across two studies, over and above other

affective states, feeling neutral about COVID-19 was linked to more favorable attitudes toward Trump, less favorable attitudes toward Biden, being less supportive of impeaching Trump, and being less likely to vote, and if they did vote, voting for Trump. Feeling neutral also exhibited similar, if not larger, effect sizes compared to the other affects (see Tables 1 and 2).

Why were neutral feelings about COVID-19 associated with more pro-Trump patterns? Feeling neutral about COVID-19 might have reflected downplaying the importance of the disease, which could lead to favorable attitudes toward Trump and not voting at all. Because this work is correlational, it is also possible that people's pro-Trump views contributed to their neutral feelings about COVID-19, in that people might have shared Trump's view that "It (COVID-19) affects virtually nobody (Thrush, 2020)." This possibility is in line with research indicating that attitudes toward political parties or candidates can shape attitudes toward specific issues (Bolsen et al., 2014). Yet, if it were the case that neutrality about COVID-19 stemmed solely from people's pro-Trump views, then it would be unexpected that feelings of neutrality also predict failing to vote in such an important election. Regardless of how this link manifested, the key point is that feeling neutral about COVID-19 was associated with political attitudes and behaviors.

Other affective states, including negative feelings, hope, calmness, and ambivalence, also were associated with political attitudes and behaviors, but unlike neutrality, the nature of these associations depended on when data were collected. Across both studies, people who felt negative about COVID-19 reported less pro-Trump attitudes and behaviors, perhaps reflecting their concerns about Trump's handling of the pandemic. The link between negativity and liking Biden, however, appeared in S1, but was marginal in S2. It might be that when Trump was president, people who felt negative about the pandemic expected Biden to make things better, but

when Biden was president, their view that he could help lessened. The links between hope, calmness, and ambivalence with attitudes and voting also changed, perhaps reflecting how context can shape the meaning of people's affective reactions. Unfortunately, because we did not inquire about why people felt these emotions in response to COVID-19, our explanations for these changes are speculations.

These data challenge the assumption that neutral affect are not associated with thought and action. The results indicate that neutral feelings about COVID-19, which signal that the disease is not worthy of attention, were associated with not voting, and more pro-Trump attitudes and behaviors. These results reveal that researchers 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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Table 1
Association Between Feeling Toward COVID-19 and Attitudes Toward Political Figures

	Dependent Variable															
	Attitudes Toward Trump								Attitudes Toward Biden							
	S1				S2				S1				S2			
Variable	b (95% CI)	t	η_p^2	p	b (95% CI)	t	η_p^2	p	b (95% CI)	t	η_p^2	p	b (95% CI)	t	η_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	53.50*** (48.05, 58.94)	19.32	0.46	<.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	0.03	-3.66* (-6.60, -0.71)	-2.44	0.01	0.02
Negative Affect	-9.39*** (-13.63, -5.15)	-4.36	0.06	<.001	-5.18** (-8.26, -2.10)	-3.31	0.02	0.001	5.13** (1.37, 8.89)	2.68	0.02	0.01	2.95 (-0.13, 6.02)	1.89	0.01	0.06
Hope	4.34* (0.67, 8.01)	2.32	0.02	0.02	1.59 (-1.14, 4.32)	1.15	0.003	0.25	-3.46* (-6.72, -0.20)	-2.09	0.01	0.04	3.62** (0.90, 6.35)	2.62	0.02	0.01
Calm	3.39 (-1.06, 7.85)	1.50	0.01	0.14	4.00* (0.70, 7.30)	2.38	0.01	0.02	-3.33 (-7.28, 0.61)	-1.66	0.01	0.10	-5.70*** (-8.99, -2.40)	-3.40	0.03	0.001
Ambivalence	-4.08* (-7.79, -0.38)	-2.17	0.02	0.03	0.45 (-2.29, 3.20)	0.33	<.001	0.75	2.09 (-1.20, 5.37)	1.25	0.01	0.21	0.33 (-2.42, 3.07)	0.23	<.001	0.82
Whether Voted[1]	3.08 (-5.83, 11.98)	0.68	0.001	0.50	-6.81* (-12.99, -0.63)	-2.16	0.01	0.03	5.77 (-2.13, 13.66)	1.44	0.01	0.15	9.44** (3.27, 15.61)	3.01	0.02	0.003
N	320				448				320				448			
R^2	0.26***				0.21***				0.18***				0.14***			

Note. All affective states are standardized. [1]Not voted = 0, Voted =1
*$p \leq .05$. **$p \leq .01$. ***$p \leq .001$.

Table 2

Association Between Feeling Toward COVID-19 and Voting Behaviors and Support Toward Impeachment

	Dependent Variable														
	Whether Voted[1]						Who Voted For[2]						Supports Toward Impeachment			
	S1			S2			S1			S2			S2			
Variable	OR (95% CI)	z	p	OR (95% CI)	z	p	OR (95% CI)	z	p	OR (95% CI)	z	p	b (95% CI)	t	η_p^2	p
Intercept	5.57*** (4.09, 7.82)	10.43	<.001	4.10*** (3.23, 5.28)	11.25	<.001	0.41*** (0.30, 0.56)	-5.56	<.001	0.14*** (0.10, 0.20)	-10.18	<.001	4.66*** (4.26, 5.07)	22.58	0.54	<.001
Neutral	0.70* (0.50, 0.98)	-2.06	0.04	0.73* (0.56, 0.95)	-2.35	0.02	1.95*** (1.36, 2.84)	3.58	<.001	1.60** (1.15, 2.24)	2.77	0.006	-0.41*** (-0.63, -0.19)	-3.64	0.03	<.001
Negative Affect	1.54* (1.04, 2.29)	2.14	0.03	1.31 (0.97, 1.76)	1.77	0.08	0.53** (0.36, 0.79)	-3.12	0.002	0.61* (0.41, 0.90)	-2.47	0.01	0.44*** (0.21, 0.67)	3.75	0.03	<.001
Hope	0.96 (0.68, 1.36)	-0.25	0.80	1.03 (0.80, 1.34)	0.23	0.82	1.59** (1.14, 2.24)	2.69	0.007	0.82 (0.57, 1.15)	-1.14	0.26	0.10 (-0.11, 0.30)	0.93	0.002	0.353
Calm	1.11 (0.75, 1.66)	0.52	0.61	0.83 (0.61, 1.12)	-1.23	0.22	1.07 (0.71, 1.59)	0.32	0.75	2.16*** (1.49, 3.23)	3.91	<.001	-0.40** (-0.64, -0.15)	-3.17	0.02	0.002
Ambivalence	1.15 (0.80, 1.65)	0.77	0.44	0.89 (0.68, 1.17)	-0.82	0.41	0.68* (0.46, 0.99)	-2.00	0.05	1.05 (0.72, 1.54)	0.26	0.79	-0.10 (-0.30, 0.11)	-0.94	0.002	0.35
Whether Voted[2]													0.71** (0.25, 1.17)	3.03	0.02	0.003
N	320			448			266			353			448			
	Nagelkerke(*pseudo*) R^2 = 0.09**			Nagelkerke(*pseudo*) R^2 = 0.09***			Nagelkerke(*pseudo*) R^2 = 0.34***			Nagelkerke(*pseudo*) R^2 = 0.31***			R^2 = 0.22***			

Note. All affective states are standardized. For odd ratios (OR), numbers greater (vs. smaller) than 1 indicate greater odds of voting (vs. not voting) and voting for Trump (vs. Biden). [1] Not voted = 0, Voted =1. [2] Biden = 0, Trump =1.

*$p \le .05$. **$p \le .01$. ***$p \le .001$.