Political Ideology and Attitudinal Ambivalence: Investigating the Role of Ideological Extremity

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Abstract

[…]

**Ideological Extremity and Attitudinal Ambivalence**

Do individuals with opposite political views differ in their feeling and thinking not only when it comes to political issues but also in general and outside the political arena? This question has intrigued scholars for decades and continues to be debated. With respect to *feeling*, the debate has concerned issues such as security needs and sensitivity to threats, the relative importance of different moral intuitions, or disgust sensitivity. With respect to *thinking*, the debate has concerned issues such as epistemic needs and tolerance of ambiguity, thinking style, or intelligence. Recently, bringing together both domains of mental life, scholars have raised the question whether ideology-related differences in information processing entail differences in the structure of attitudes and, more specifically, whether individual differences in political ideology are associated with the extent to which people tend to hold ambivalent attitudes (Jost & Krochik, 2014; Newman & Sargent, 2020; Sargent & Newman, 2020). Interestingly, extant empirical findings of research on this question are inconsistent: While findings by Krochik, Jost, and Nosek (2007; reported in Jost & Krochik, 2014) suggest a stable tendency for more conservative (vs. more liberal) individuals to hold less ambivalent attitudes, findings by Newman and Sargent (2020; Sargent & Newman, 2020) indicate an association in the opposite direction. In the following, after briefly introducing the concept of attitudinal ambivalence, we describe the theoretical explanations for the opposite predictions/findings and propose a third perspective. In the empirical part, we test the predictions that follow from the three perspectives using data of the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) collected during the 2017 and 2013 Federal Election Campaigns in Germany.

**Attitudinal Ambivalence**

Attitudinal ambivalence refers to the simultaneous existence of strong positive *and* negative evaluative reactions toward the same attitude object (e.g., Conner & Sparks, 2002; Haddock & Maio, 2019; Jonas et al., 2000; Thompson et al., 1995; van Harreveld et al., 2015). This definition makes clear that attitudinal ambivalence is conceptually distinct from indifference where an attitude object elicits weak evaluative reactions in general. The present research focuses on *affective ambivalence* as a special form of attitudinal ambivalence where the ambivalence occurs within the affective attitude component rather than between affective, cognitive, and behavioral attitude components (see Cacioppo et al., 1997, on the independence of positive and negative affect).

**The Rigidity of the Right Hypothesis**

According to the ideology as motivated social cognition perspective (Jost et al., 2003, 2009), individuals tend to experience affinities for political views that are compatible with their psychological dispositions. More specifically, the associated rigidity of the right hypothesis holds that strong needs for security (existential needs) and certainty (epistemic needs) facilitate the endorsement of conservative views that can be characterized by two core elements: (a) resistance to change and (b) acceptance of inequality. In line with this hypothesis and focusing on the role of epistemic needs, numerous studies have documented associations between conservatism and measures that reflect a motivation to obtain and stick to clear answers, low tolerance of ambiguity, avoidance of attitude-inconsistent information and cognitive dissonance, low openness for new experiences, and a tendency to rely on intuitive rather than reflective judgments (e.g., Burger et al., 2020; Deppe et al., 2015; Pennycook & Rand, 2019; for overviews, see Hibbing et al., 2014; Jost et al., 2009; Van Hiel et al., 2010). Some authors have concluded from these findings that biased information processing and intolerance are in general on average more prevalent on the right side of the political spectrum than on the left (e.g., Baron & Jost, 2019; Jost, 2017) which has been questioned by others (e.g., Brandt et al., 2014; Ditto et al., 2019; Frimer et al., 2017; Greenberg & Jonas, 2003).

With respect to the issue of attitudinal ambivalence, Jost and Krochik (2014) argued that the characteristic ideology-related pattern of self-reported epistemic preferences and thinking style has implications for the structure of the (political and non-political) attitudes that individuals hold. In an online study using a large convenience sample of US residents and involving 95 political and non-political attitude objects, they found support for the hypotheses that individuals with a more conservative (vs. liberal) orientation tend to endorse attitudes with greater certainty, expect less variability of their attitudes, and experience less ambivalent affective reactions toward attitudinal objects.

**The Conservatism-Ambiguity Hypothesis**

Newman and Sargent (2020) investigated the association of political orientations with (subjective and objective) attitudinal ambivalence among convenience samples US residents in a set of five online-studies where they failed to find support for a negative association of conservatism with attitudinal ambivalence (across attitude objects as well as at the level of individual attitude objects). Instead, their results indicate associations of subjective and objective ambivalence in the opposite direction: conservatism was associated with more rather than less attitudinal ambivalence (across attitude objects as well as at the level of most individual attitude objects). A follow-up study (Sargent & Newman, 2020) replicated this pattern for objective (but not subjective) ambivalence using attitude objects similar to the ones used by Krochik and colleagues (2007) as well as systematically varying the procedure of presenting these objects (paired vs. separate). As a post-hoc explanation for their findings Newman and Sargent (2020) speculate that increased attitudinal ambivalence among conservatives (vs. liberals) might result from conservatism being associated with a tendency to avoid conscious reflection on ambivalent attitude objects which could be a necessary condition for resolving these ambiguities and constructing more consistent attitudes.

**The Ideological Extremity Hypothesis**

According to the ideological extremity hypothesis extreme political orientations on both sides of the political spectrum rather than conservatism specifically are associated with simplistic, dogmatic, and inflexible belief systems and thinking styles (Brandt et al., 2015; Conway et al., 2018; Fernbach et al., 2013; Greenberg & Jonas, 2003; Lammers et al., 2017; Toner et al., 2013; van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019; Zmigrod et al., 2020). In line with this view, ideological extremity on both sides of the ideological spectrum has been demonstrated to be associated with higher scores on behavioral measures of cognitive inflexibility (Zmigrod et al., 2020), more simplistic perceptions of the political domain (Lammers et al., 2017), a tendency to ignore external information in judgments (Brandt et al., 2015), illusions of understanding (Fernbach et al., 2013), the perception of own beliefs as superior (Toner et al., 2013), as well as intolerance (Brandt et al., 2014) and authoritarianism (Conway et al., 2018; for an overview, see van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019). If Jost and Krochik (2014) are right that a rigid cognitive style as well a biased information processing and intolerance decrease the likelihood of holding ambivalent attitudes, it follows from the ideological extremity hypothesis that attitudinal ambivalence should be low at the extremes of both sides of the political spectrum rather than on the right side in particular.

**The Present Study**

[…]

**Study 1**

Study 1 investigates the association of political ideology with the ambivalence of political attitudes using data on attitudes toward the two main candidates for the chancellorship in the 2017 German Federal Elections, Angela Merkel of the Christian conservative party (CDU) and Martin Schulz of the social democratic party (SPD).

**Method**

**Sample.** Study 1 uses data of the Short-term Campaign Panel of the GLES collected during the campaign period of the German Federal Elections in 2017 (GLES, 2019). This study was conducted as an online survey and respondents eligible to vote at the elections were recruited trough quota sampling (age, gender, education) from the frame population of a large online access panel run by a commercial service provider (for details, see official study documentation). All respondents with answers on the relevant variables (see below) were included in the analyses which resulted in a maximal sample of 13,808 respondents (50.60% women, *M*age = 48.84, *SD*age = 14.69).

**Attitudinal ambivalence.** Respondents indicated the strengths of their negative feelings as well as the strength of their positive feelings toward each of the two candidates on five-point scales ranging from 1 (*no negative/positive feelings at all*) to 5 (*very strong*). On the basis of the reported positive and negative feelings, ambivalence scores regarding the two candidates were calculated using a formula proposed by Thompson and colleagues (1995): [[P + N] / 2] – |P – N|, where P and N represent the scores for positive and negative evaluative reactions. As these measures of negative and positive feelings were included in waves 4 and 6 of the campaign panel, average ambivalence scores across waves were calculated (*r* = .55 for Merkel and *r* = .49 for Schulz).

**General attitudes.** Respondents indicated their general attitudes toward the two candidates on scales ranging from -5 (*I do not think much of the politician at all*) to +5 (*I think a great deal of the politician*). This scale was recoded from 1 to 11 and average scores across the waves 4 and 6 of the panel survey were calculated (*r* = .90 for Merkel and *r* = .81 for Schulz).

**Political ideology.** As in the previous studies on ideology and attitudinal ambivalence, a measure of symbolic ideology was used as a measure of the ideological orientation of respondents. Respondents positioned themselves on a scale ranging from 1 (*left*) to 11 (*right*). Average scores across the waves 4 and 6 of the panel survey were calculated (*r* = .84).

**Control variables.** Some analyses reported below include the following control variables: gender (0 = *male*, 1 = *female*), age, education (highest school degree coded as *low*, *medium*, or *high*), and region of residence (0 = *Eastern Germany*, 1 = *Western Germany*), as well as political interest – measured on a recoded scale originally ranging from 1 (*very interested*) to 2 (*somewhat interested*), to 3 (*in between*), to 4 (*not very interested*) to 5 (*not at all interested*) and averaged across waves 4 and 6 (*r* = .87).

**Results**

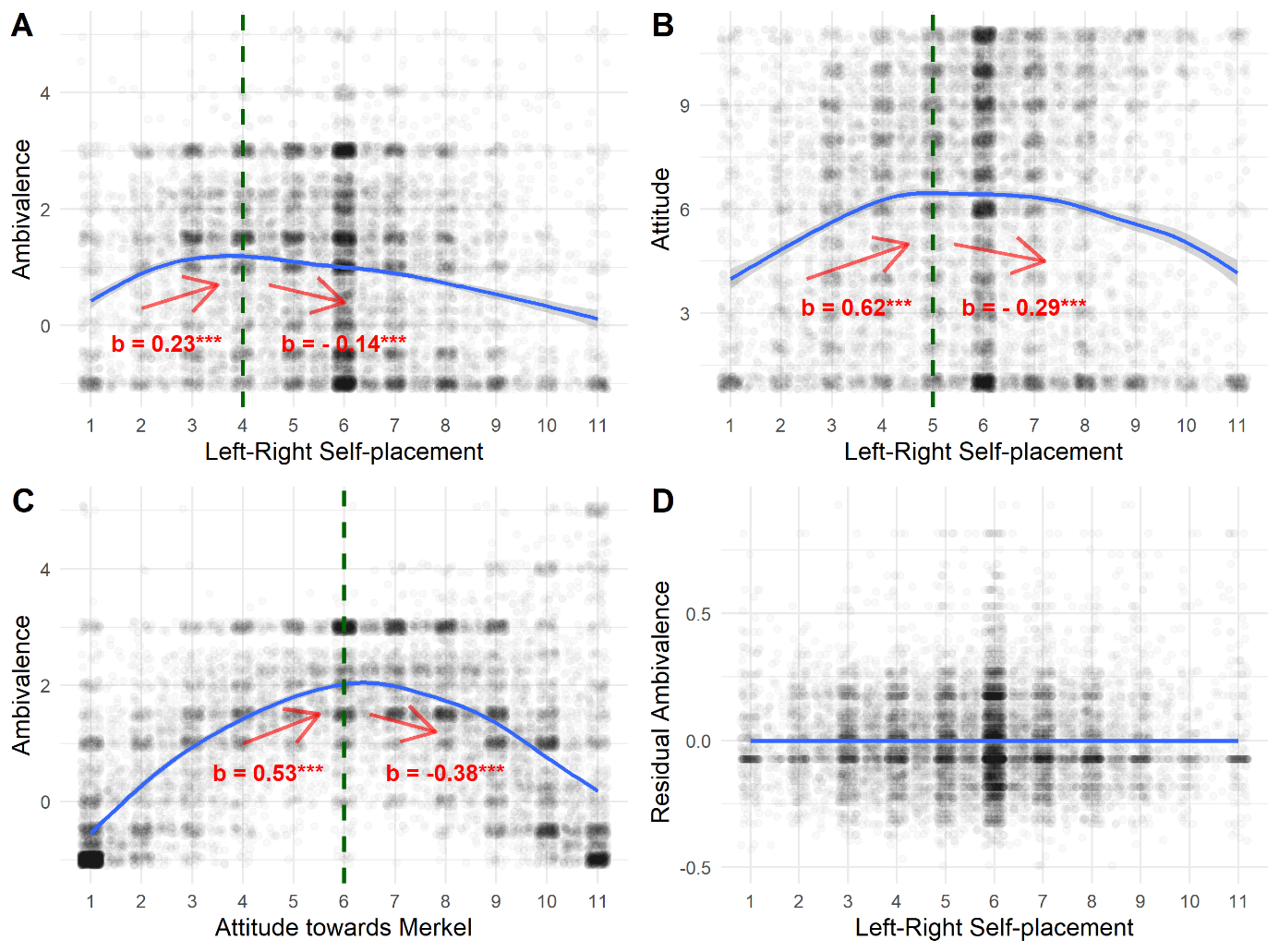
In the data of Study 1, political interest is negatively correlated with political ideology, *r* = -.07, *p* < .001, 95% CI [-.05, -.08], as well as with affective ambivalence toward Merkel, *r* = .09, *p* <.001, 95% CI [-.07, -.10], and Schulz, *r* = -.12, *p* < .001, 95% CI [-.11, -.14].

Political ideology is negatively correlated with affective ambivalence toward Merkel, *r* = -.09, *p* < .001, 95% CI [-.07, -.11], as well as toward Schulz, *r* = -.09, *p* >.001, 95% CI [-.07, -.10]. In linear regression terms, these associations indicate that moving from the leftmost ideological position to the rightmost position is predicted to result in a 10% decrease in affective ambivalence toward Merkel, b = -0.10, SE = 0.01, p < .001, and a 9% decrease in affective ambivalence toward Schulz, b = -.09, SE = 0.01, p < .001. These associations remain stable when the control variables listed above are included in the regression models (see Online Appendix).

As recommended by Simonsohn (2018), the prediction of an inversely u-shaped association between political ideology and attitudinal ambivalence was tested using a two-lines test and using the algorithm proposed by the same author to identify the point where the sign of the linear association of ideology with ambivalence changes. As shown in panel A of *Figure 1* and *Figure 2*, the results of the two-lines tests provide evidence for an inversely u-shaped association between ideology and affective ambivalence toward the two political candidates.

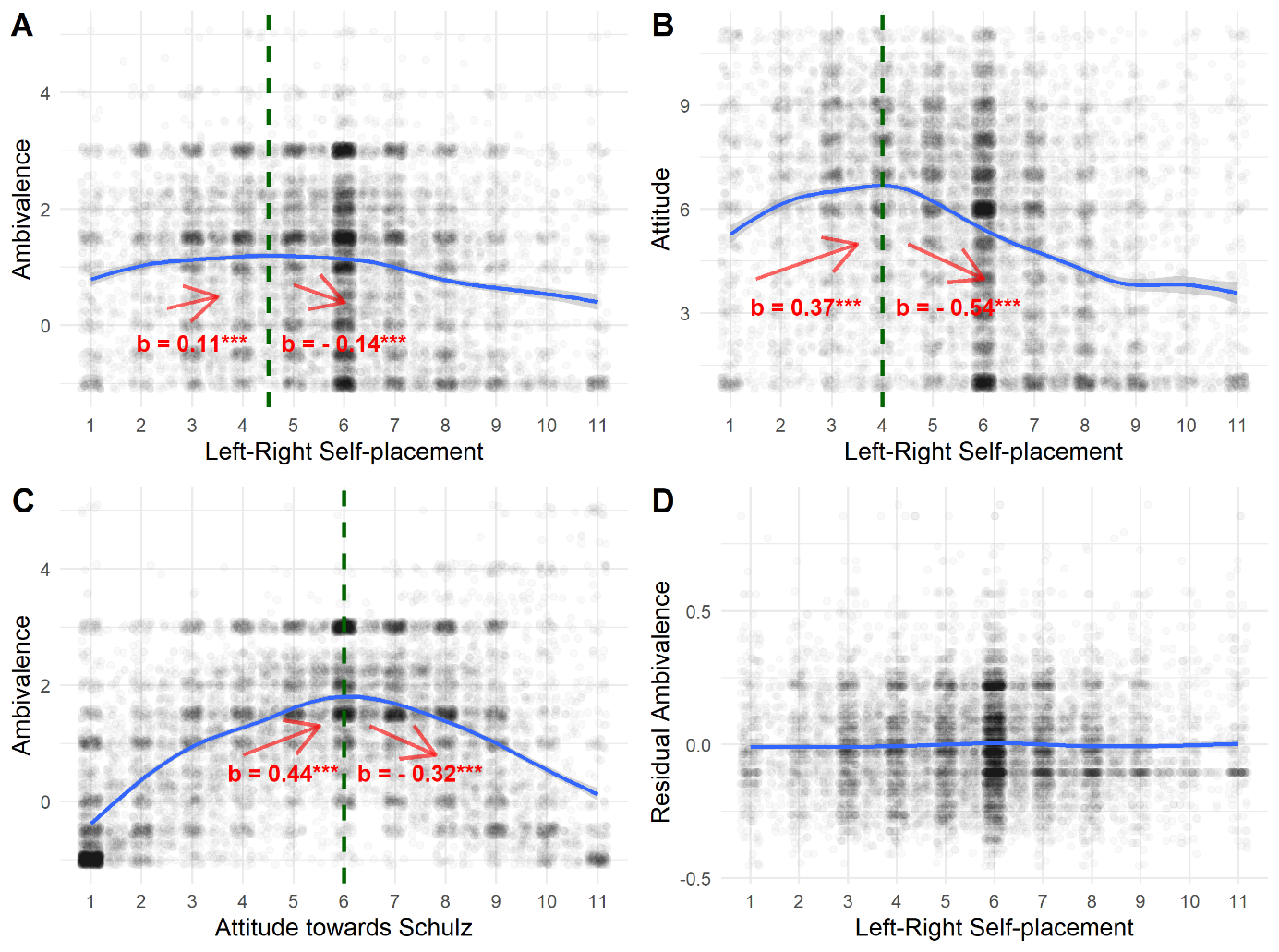
As a next step, analyses aimed at accounting for an expected association of attitudinal ambivalence with the general attitudes toward the two candidates. As *Figure 1* and *Figure 2* show, the association of ideology with the general attitudes toward the candidates (panel B in both figures) as well as the association of the general attitudes with attitudinal ambivalence (panel C in both figures) are clearly inversely u-shaped. To account for the association of affective ambivalence with general attitudes, the two-lines tests were performed with respect to the variance in affective ambivalence not accounted for by general attitudes (regression model including a linear and a quadratic term). As shown in panel D of *Figure 1* and *Figure 2*, the results of these two-lines tests do not provide evidence for an inversely u-shaped association between political ideology and the variance in affective ambivalence not accounted for by general attitudes. Correlations of political ideology with the residual affective ambivalence toward Merkel, *r* = .00, *p* = .82, and Schulz, *r* = .01, *p* = .22, are also non-significant.

*Figure 1.*  
Associations of affective ambivalence and the general attitude toward Angela Merkel with crucial predictors



Note.

*Figure 2.*  
Associations of affective ambivalence and the general attitude toward Martin Schulz with crucial predictors



Note.

**Study 2**

Like Study 1, Study 2 investigates the association of political ideology with the ambivalence of attitudes toward political candidates. In addition to using data on a different election with different political candidates that has been collected using a different interview mode and sampling design and using a different question format to assess positive and negative reactions toward the candidates, Study 2 differs from Study 1 by allowing to distinguish between affective and cognitive ambivalence. Study 2 uses data collected in the context of the German Federal Election in 2021, in which Olaf Scholz of the social democratic party (SPD), Armin Laschet of the Christian conservative party (CDU), and Annalena Baerbock of the green party competed for the chancellorship.

**Method**

**Sample.** Study 2 uses data of the GLES Rolling Cross-Section 2021 (GLES, 2022), which was conducted using computer-assisted telephone interviews. The sample of this study is a probability sample of individuals eligible to vote at the elections that results from landline (60%) and mobile (40%) telephone numbers that are drawn from sampling frames that include all registered as well as generated telephone numbers (for details, see official study documentation). All respondents with answers on the relevant variables (see below) were included in the analyses

**Attitudinal Ambivalence.** The GLES Rolling Cross-Section 2021 included not only measures feelings toward the candidates but also measures of their perceived strengths and weaknesses, which allows to differential between affective and cognitive ambivalence. With respect to feelings, respondents indicated their (dis-)agreement with the statements “[Candidate] triggers negative feelings in me.” and “[Candidate] triggers positive feelings in me.” using a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 2 (*agree*) to 3 (*neither agree nor disagree*), to 4 (*disagree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). With respect to strengths and weaknesses, respondents indicated their (dis-)agreement with the statements “[Candidate] has great weaknesses as a politician.” and “[Candidate] has great strengths as a politician.” using the same scale. The order of asking about feelings or strengths and weaknesses first versus second as well as the order of asking about the positive or the negative reaction first versus second was randomly determined for each respondent. Ambivalence scores were calculated using the same formula as in Study 1.

**Further variables.** General attitudes toward the candidates, political ideology, political interest, and the other control variables were measured as in Study 1.

**Results**

As in Study 1, political interest is negatively correlated with political ideology as well as with attitudinal ambivalence (see *Table 1*). The correlations between the scores for affective and cognitive ambivalence range between *r* = .43 and *r* = .49. The mean scores for cognitive ambivalence (see *Table 1*) are significantly higher than the scores for affective ambivalence for Scholz, *t*(6567) = -27.47, *p* < .001, Laschet, *t*(6444) = -35.30, *p* < .001, and Baerbock, *t*(6519) = -34.82, *p* < .001.

In contrast to Study 1, the direction of the linear association of political ideology with affective ambivalence is inconsistent in Study 2: Political ideology is positively correlated with affective ambivalence toward Scholz and Laschet and negative correlated with affective and ambivalence toward Baerbock. Regarding cognitive ambivalence, political ideology is unrelated to cognitive ambivalence toward Scholz, positively correlated with ambivalence toward Laschet, and negatively correlated with cognitive ambivalence toward Baerbock (see Table 1; see also Tables OA2 to OA4 in the Online Appendix, for the results of regression analyses including control variables).

Two-lines tests provide evidence for an inversely u-shaped association between ideology and affective/cognitive ambivalence in the case of Laschet only (for details, see Figures OA1 to OA6 in the Online Appendix). However, when looking at the variance in ambivalence not explained by the general attitude, there is no evidence for an inversely u-shaped association between political ideology and the residual ambivalence (affective or cognitive) for any of the candidates (see Online Appendix). Correlations of political ideology with the residual affective ambivalence toward Scholz, *r* = -.00, *p* = .75, Laschet, *r* = .02, p = .06, and Baerbock, *r* = .00, *p* = .75, are not statistically significant. However, the correlations of political ideology with the residual cognitive ambivalence toward Scholz, *r* = -.03, *p* =.01, and Baerbock, *r* = -.04, *p* < .01, are statistically significant while the correlation for Laschet is not, *r* = .02, p = .23.

**Study 3**

Study 3 investigates the association of political ideology with attitudinal ambivalence with respect to political parties rather than political candidates as attitude targets. It uses data collected in the context of the German Federal Elections 2013 on attitudes toward the five parties represented in the German Bundestag at that time.

**Method**

**Sample.** Study 3 uses data of the Short-term Campaign Panel of the GLES collected during the campaign period of the German Federal Elections in 2013 (GLES, 2016). This study was conducted as an online survey and respondents eligible to vote at the elections were recruited trough quota sampling (age, gender, education) from the frame population of a large online access panel run by a commercial service provider (for details, see official study documentation). All respondents with answers on the relevant variables (see below) were included in the analyses which resulted in a maximal sample of 4,789 respondents (49.05% women, *M*age = 46.03, *SD*age = 14.76).

**Affective ambivalence.** Positive and negative feelings were measured as in Study 1, however, with political parties instead of political candidates as the attitude targets. An affective ambivalence score for each political party was calculated as described in Study 1. As the measures of negative and positive feelings were included in waves 1, 3, and 6 of the campaign panel, average ambivalence scores across waves were calculated (.86 ≤ *α* ≤ .91).

**Further variables.** General attitudes toward the parties, political ideology, political interest, and the other control variables were measured as in Study 1.

**Results**

As in the previous studies, political interest is negatively correlated with political ideology as well as with attitudinal ambivalence toward the different parties (see *Table 2*).

The direction of the linear association of political ideology with affective ambivalence is inconsistent for the different political parties, ranging from a positive correlation of r = .33 to a negative correlation of r = -.14 (see Table 2, see also Tables OA5 and OA6 in the Online Appendix, for the results of regression analyses including control variables).

Two-lines tests provide evidence for an inversely u-shaped association between ideology and affective ambivalence in the case of all political parties except for the FDP (for details, see Figures OA7 to OA11 in the Online Appendix). However, when looking at the variance in ambivalence not explained by the general attitude toward the respective party, there is no evidence for an inversely u-shaped association between political ideology and the residual ambivalence for any of the parties (see Online Appendix). Correlations of political ideology with the residual affective ambivalence are positive in the case of four of the five parties, ranging from *r* = .03 to *r* = .10 (see Table OA7 in the Online Appendix).

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