



Now That Trump has Picked Pence, How Will the GOP Handle Trade?

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One of the great challenges for those Republicans who have embraced Donald Trump as the Republican nominee for president is how to reconcile his stances with their long-held beliefs, particularly on issues like international trade. To date, there have been two main approaches:

No. 1: Praise Trump’s potential for leadership, while acknowledging that you won’t agree on every detail. This seems to be the approach House Speaker Paul Ryan has mostly taken.

No. 2: Hope that as Trump moves from the primary phase of the presidential campaign to the general, he will “grow into the role” — i.e., abandon some of his more absurd positions and embrace party orthodoxy.

This week in Cleveland, we’ll get to see how this approach plays out. The testing started last week, first with the negotiation of the GOP party platform, then with the selection of Indiana Governor Mike Pence as Trump’s vice presidential pick. Both Pence and previously held platforms by the party have taken a generally pro-trade stance. Trump on the other hand has repeatedly expressed a strong degree of skepticism.

The early indications on trade suggest a persistent hopefulness that ambiguity and imprecision could help obscure the gap between past and present stances. The party platform reportedly fails to address the North American Free Trade Agreement (signed in 1993 but still controversial!) or the Trans-Pacific Partnership (theoretically eligible for a vote in Congress by year’s end). Instead it calls for better agreements, for enforcement, for putting America first, and for lower trade deficits. The first two are anodyne, the third is innocuous (if one ignores historical echoes), and the last is a non-sequitur (trade deficits are generally determined by macroeconomic factors, like growth and exchange rates, rather than trade policy).

Pence comes to the discussion with a strong pro-trade background. He has voted in favor of trade agreements and recently called for the passage of the TPP. He deflected initial challenges about

the apparent conflict of views by saying in a Fox interview with Sean Hannity, “I think when we elect one of the best negotiators in the world as president of the United States, I’m open to renegotiating these trade agreements.”

Hannity, however, has not distinguished himself as a particularly aggressive interviewer of Trump supporters this season. In a recent talk at the Cato Institute, Ronald Reagan’s former U.S. Trade Representative, Clayton Yeutter, took the press to task for accepting such broad generalities on trade. Reporters should instead press the candidates, he said, on just *how* they would improve these agreements, on which clauses, in particular, they found objectionable. We may not see such grilling in the context of this week’s Republican convention, since in recent years such gatherings are largely pre-packaged entertainment, rather than detailed policy debates. More hostile questioning could come later.

The potential conflict could make for very interesting general election debates, depending on whom Hillary Clinton selects as her running mate. If she selects someone like Sen. Elizabeth Warren (MA) or Sen. Sherrod Brown (OH), you could have a presidential debate in which Republicans attack on trade from the left, and a vice presidential debate in which they attack from the right. That might, at least, serve to befuddle the Democrats.

More seriously, John Dickerson of Face the Nation and the *Slate* Political Gabfest, recently pointed out the particular challenge a Trump running mate will face on the campaign trail. In most such elections, he notes, there is a large campaign policy apparatus that, among other things, works to ensure that the presidential and vice presidential candidates are singing in harmony. The coordination is often difficult because, in a standard campaign, the two candidates atop a ticket are generally working different parts of the country and not huddled together in a hotel room trying to smooth things out. Trump, however, has eschewed elaborate campaign structures, and done so when there is now an unusually high need for reconciliation and coordination.

Trade will be a prime issue to watch for wedges to appear between Trump and Pence. If anything were standard about this election, one might assume that they could coordinate at least for the convention this week in Cleveland, but so far they have found it difficult even to settle on a logo. Once they head off from Ohio, it will be interesting to see whether Trump will moderate, Pence will recant, or they will just go their separate ways.