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Trump Seeks ‘American Desk’ for Trade, While Clinton Favors ‘Prosecutor’

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In an election season marked by divisive protectionist rhetoric, President Barack Obama agrees with Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump on one thing—the U.S. trade bureaucracy needs adjusting.

Mr. Trump on Thursday told an Ohio audience he would combine trade-policy functions of the office of the U.S. Trade Representative, the Commerce Department and other agencies. The consolidated “Office of Trade” within the Commerce Department would report to an “American Desk” in the White House.

The Republican nominee offered few details, but one function of the desk is likely to be preventing American manufacturing from moving abroad. “I’ll be checking with those people,” Mr. Trump said. “Because we’re not going to lose our companies anymore.”

Mrs. Clinton earlier this year in Ohio vowed to appoint a “trade prosecutor” to protect U.S. workers from other countries’ unfair trade practices, a proposal she repeated in this week’s debate.

The prosecutor would prioritize cases against trading partners, a role that is split now between the office of U.S. Trade Representative Mike Froman, which initiates cases against other countries at the World Trade Organization, and the trade section of the Commerce Department, which evaluates U.S. companies’ accusations of dumping and subsidies and can impose tariffs in cooperation with yet another agency—the U.S. International Trade Commission.

Mr. Trump isn’t the first to propose merging trade offices, and Mr. Obama has suggested a similar path in annual budget proposals.

Mr. Trump’s campaign and some lawmakers have criticized some Washington trade agencies for being close to the business world or employing former lobbyists. U.S. officials say corporate expertise and experience from the farm industry is helpful as these agencies negotiate complicated deals overseas.

Keeping some offices separate could help Washington pursue tandem goals of prosecuting trade cheats and working diplomatically on new agreements to liberalize trade, says Dan Ikenson, director of the trade-studies center at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank. Congressional approval would probably be needed for some proposed changes.

Much more important than the bureaucratic structure, however, is the president's overall posture on trade, since Congress has delegated numerous powers to the executive, including the ability to impose a wide variety of protective tariffs.

Mr. Trump has said he would use the threat of such tariffs to obtain better trade conditions with Mexico and China, while Mrs. Clinton has warned that such policies risk a trade war that could hurt the economy.

Both would likely go further in challenging other countries' trade practices, even at the risk of retaliation.

“The good news about this election is that there has been a focus on trade enforcement—enforcement of trade agreements and in fully applying U.S. law,” said Sen. Ron Wyden of Oregon, the top Democrat on the Senate committee that oversees trade.