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Why are free-market conservatives silent on Trump's nominees?

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Many Republican politicians have betrayed their free-market principles in an effort to keep up with the increasingly nativist and nationalistic GOP base. With a finger in the wind and an irrational fear of President-elect Donald Trump, they hardly raise a peep when Trump strong-arms individual companies, threatens a trade war and vows to rip up the North American Free Trade Agreement. *What, however, is the excuse of conservative interest groups that are supposed to operate on principle, not based on partisan loyalty?*

Let's take the case of Robert Lighthizer. [The Wall Street Journal reports:](#)

Robert Lighthizer, president-elect Donald Trump's pick to be the nation's chief trade negotiator, is a veteran trade lawyer with a résumé well-suited for an administration intent on curbing imports it sees as damaging to U.S. businesses.

The shift on trade is part of a bet that a tougher approach to China, Mexico and other trading partners—including by imposing import duties—could boost American firms without kicking off a trade war or raising the price of imported goods.

So where are groups such as the Club for Growth, Heritage Action and FreedomWorks, which are supposed to be free-market proponents, not simply partisan hacks? In 2015, FreedomWorks, for example, put out this: “Conservatives shouldn't be afraid to support free trade, and allowing the president Trade Promotion Authority may yield some good deals in the future—especially if a conservative is elected to the White House in 2016. But Trade Adjustment Assistance is unambiguously bad policy with a proven record of failure, that only continues the practices of corporate cronyism and bailout culture.” And yet the objection to Lighthizer (or Wilbur Ross, the pick for commerce secretary) is oddly missing. Jason Pye, director of public policy, legislative affairs and communications at FreedomWorks, told me: “I'll look into it. Right now, we're focusing on [Scott] Pruitt's confirmation to the EPA.” Well, that's fair. Let's see whether the group finds its principles in time to oppose nominees who oppose central tenets of free-market capitalism.

And the Club for Growth? The pro-business organization did not reply to my query about Lighthizer. Heritage Action — famous for issuing scorecards to ding less-than-resolute conservatives — did not respond either. Hmm. This seems like a pattern.

All three entities nominally continue to support free trade — at least when it does not involve confronting Trump. The Club for Growth forcefully argues on its Web site: “When people are free to buy from, sell to, and invest with one another as they choose, they can achieve far more than when governments attempt to control economic decisions. Widening the circle of people with whom we do business – including across political borders – brings benefits to consumers in the form of lower prices, greater variety, and better quality, and it allows companies to reap the benefits of innovation, specialization, and economies of scale that larger markets bring. Trade freedom is essential to prosperity, and expanding free markets as much as possible enhances that prosperity.” Well, surely the group will make its opposition to Lighthizer known, right? (The Club for Growth has come out strongly in support of nominees for the Environmental Protection Agency and the Energy Department, so it’s not as though the group is shy.)

Daniel Ikenson of the Cato Institute shows how it is done. He writes:

Former Reagan administration deputy U.S. trade representative and longtime trade-remedies attorney, Robert Lighthizer, is President-elect Trump’s choice for United States Trade Representative. Considered in conjunction with the appointments of Peter Navarro to head the newly-created National Trade Council at the White House and Wilbur Ross at the Commerce Department, Lighthizer’s selection seems to confirm fears that U.S. trade policy is descending into darkness. At the very least, it is reasonable to assume that for the foreseeable future trade policy will be overwhelmingly enforcement-oriented, while trade agreements and other forms of liberalization will be relegated to the doghouse. . . .

Lighthizer fancies himself a conservative, although he is more aptly characterized as an economic nationalist with deep disdain for free trade. He has argued that true conservatives throughout American history have been suspicious of free trade and favored protectionism. He proudly notes that Ronald Reagan – often pegged as a free trader – imposed all sorts of protectionist measures against imported cars, motorcycles, steel, textiles, and sugar. And all of these measures were “successful,” he claims.

We eagerly await strong statements from FreedomWorks, Heritage Action and the Club for Growth echoing this free-market objection to Trump’s nominees. We’ll let you know when they speak up. They certainly don’t want to be seen as partisan cheerleaders eager to be in Trump’s good graces, right?