

# Bloomberg Opinion

## Republicans Rejected Free Trade for No Good Reason

Michael R. Strain

November 29, 2018

Donald Trump's election in 2016 was taken as clear evidence that Americans were fed up with globalization. Though elites and economists supported free trade, the silent majority of Americans, left to live with its effects, did not. Protectionist sentiment was resurgent. Economic nationalism and “America First” have since become the order of the day, the consequences of a bottom-up reaction from the people.

The problem with this new conventional wisdom about trade is that it may be wrong, according to a new study based on polling data from a variety of organizations.

The author, Scott Lincicome, an international trade lawyer and adjunct scholar at the Cato Institute, found that the solid majority of Americans support trade and globalization. A March 2018 Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll, for example, finds that “Americans overwhelmingly think trade is more of an opportunity to boost the economy than it is a threat to it”; the margin was 66 percent to 20 percent.

In the same month, Gallup found that 70 percent of U.S. adults “see foreign trade as an opportunity for U.S. economic growth through increased exports,” while only 25 percent see trade as a “threat to the economy” due to foreign imports.

Lincicome contrasts the central role trade played in the 2016 campaign with evidence that the issue simply wasn't a priority even then for most Americans. He highlights a poll taken after the Republican National Convention in July 2016 nominated Trump for president. This poll found that half of respondents had no opinion on “rolling back free-trade agreements” like the North American Free Trade Agreement. (Out of the 12 issues polled, the second-highest “no opinion” score, on Medicare vouchers, was 29 percent.)

Overall, two-thirds of respondents were largely disinterested — either indifferent, weakly supportive or weakly opposed to curtailing free-trade agreements.

These results jibe with more recent surveys. Lincicome highlights a January 2018 Pew poll in which respondents ranked global trade last among issues that should be a top priority for the federal government. Pew noted that, historically, “dealing with global trade issues has been among the lowest-ranked priorities over the past two decades.” In June 2018, a Gallup poll found that only 1 percent of Americans think “foreign trade/trade deficit” is “the most important problem facing the country today.”

Importantly, Lincicome's paper documents shifts in attitudes that correlate with the state of the economy and with politics. Support for trade fell during the Great Recession and rebounded during the recovery.

During President George W. Bush's second term, Republicans' views on trade were more positive, and Democrats' views more negative. "During the later Obama years (when he was pushing the Trans-Pacific Partnership) and the Trump campaign," Lincicome writes, "these views flipped, with Democrats embracing trade and Republicans becoming trade skeptic."

These findings should give comfort to supporters of free trade. As Lincicome notes, Americans seem, on average, to recognize that free trade benefits them personally as well as the broader economy. In the public debate, free traders are starting on the 80-yard line.

In addition, the finding that support for protectionism is sensitive to actual examples of its effects — for example, increases in the prices of consumer goods — suggests that opponents of Trump's posture toward trade and tariffs should discuss those effects in more specific terms, and more often.

These findings make the Republicans' turn away from free trade all the more dispiriting. Trump's own views on trade, however incorrect, are long held and appear genuine. But many elected officials have adopted the Trumpian stance, thinking in part that they are representing the views of a majority of their constituents. It may be that they aren't.

Lincicome's findings are also instructive to conservative analysts and writers, some of whom are attempting to conform their policy agendas to what they perceive to be the realities of the Trump era. For example, downplaying the importance of economic growth — the subject of my last column — becomes easier if there is a bottom-up revolt against globalization, free trade and the boost to growth they bring. Lincicome argues that there is no such revolt.

But if he is right, how to explain the conventional wisdom about trade that he refutes? In my view, trade may have become a symbol.

When the president rails against trade, it may be that some voters hear him supporting them, even if they don't care much at all about it as an issue in and of itself. "Bad trade deals" could be heard by many as "a policy, and a governing class, uninterested in your broader needs and concerns."

It could be a focal point for frustration with economic and cultural change. In this sense, the conventional wisdom about trade might be evidence that public policy needs to create more real on-ramps to economic opportunity for lower-income and working-class Americans.

Such an agenda — and the deflating effect it could have on public figures who try to stir up protectionist sentiment — might make Americans' true views about trade much more apparent.