



Democrats should be shouting Trump’s trade failures from the rooftops

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Markets crashing, farmers suffering, allies seething, manufacturing workers fretting about their job security.

These were all foreseeable consequences of President Trump’s trade wars, which escalated in the past week after Trump hiked tariffs on Chinese goods ever higher and Beijing announced tit-for-tat retaliatory duties. Such developments reveal the risks of Trump’s protectionist instincts, his fundamental misunderstanding of how both trade and trade negotiations work, and his inability to learn the lessons of the trade war that deepened the Great Depression.

All this should be great ammunition for Trump’s rivals. Why isn’t it being used?

Republicans, of course, are too cowardly to challenge Trump on much of anything. But Democrats, particularly those angling for the presidency, should be shouting from the rooftops. They should be sharing soybean-farmer sob stories and damning stats with any voter still considering following Trump off the protectionist cliff. Especially given academic research finding that “Trump Country” has been hurt most by his trade conflicts.

Instead — with rare exceptions — Democrats have been muted or mealy-mouthed in their criticism. Perhaps this is because, when it comes to trade policy, most of them don’t have a leg to stand on.

This weekend, when asked what she thought of Trump’s trade wars, Sen. Kamala Harris, D-Calif., said Trump “failed to understand that we are stronger when we work with our allies on every issue, China included.”

So far, so good. But when pressed, she said she wouldn’t have voted for the North American Free Trade Agreement, aligning her with Trump’s own negative assessment of the deal.

And if you look back at Harris’s record in the Senate, you’ll find that she, just like Trump, opposed then-President Barack Obama’s strategy to “work with our allies” to keep China in line on trade. That was the 12-country pact known as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which Trump pulled us out of with support from other 2020 Democratic candidates, too, including Rep. Tim Ryan of Ohio, and Democratic leaders such as now-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

Some Democratic presidential candidates, such as Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren, have also offered vague statements of displeasure over Trump's trade actions, then suggested Trump's protectionism doesn't go far enough. Diehard protectionist Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., endorsed Trump's metal tariffs, even if he thought Canada and the European Union should have been exempted.

Rather than rethinking their protectionist instincts after seeing the consequences of Trump's trade policies, some Democrats have doubled down.

Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., cheered on Trump's escalation of tariffs on Chinese goods in a tweet last week. Sanders is trying to use Democratic front-runner and former vice president Joe Biden's past support for the TPP and other trade deals against him.

These are bizarre choices, and not only because economists and historians no longer have to conjure up fuzzy memories of the Great Depression, or reference abstract theories to illustrate why being left out of new free-trade pacts, including the recently reconstituted TPP, puts the United States at a disadvantage.

These are also strange positions to take because they run counter to the views of most Democratic voters.

Democrats, it turns out, have become fiercely free trade, as illustrated by recent polling compiled last fall by Cato Institute adjunct scholar Scott Lincicome.

For instance, the Pew Research Center found that 67 percent of Democrats (vs. 43 percent of Republicans) believe that free-trade agreements have been good for the United States. A separate question found that 77 percent of Democrats (and 18 percent of Republicans) said increased tariffs between the United States and some trading partners will be bad for the country.

To some extent these policy positions — like all policy positions — are influenced by respondents' attitudes toward the polarizing guy in the White House. But even before Trump ran for office, Democratic voters were more positive on trade than the politicians in their own party.

The issue, of course, is that even if most Democratic voters are pro-trade, trade probably isn't the most important issue to them. But smaller constituencies for which trade is especially important, such as organized labor, tend to be trade-skeptical.

“There are probably more voters that are litmus-test protectionist than litmus-test free traders,” Lincicome says.

But pandering to the tiny minority of protectionists is short-sighted, particularly if doing so hurts the economy in the medium term and U.S. alliances in the long term. Democratic voters turn out to be pretty enlightened when it comes to the economic and diplomatic benefits of trade; it's past time that the people chosen to represent them catch up.