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Too bad the Portman-Strickland Senate race has turned into a China-bashing free-for-all

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If there's one thing all the remaining 2016 presidential candidates can agree on, it's that China is to blame for America's economic woes. Donald Trump says that "China is killing us" and has proposed a 45 percent tariff on Chinese goods. Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton have also accused China, in different ways, of harming our economy through mutually beneficial exchange.

But the most emphatic China-bashing of 2016 isn't happening in the presidential race. It's happening in the Senate election in Ohio, where both candidates are directly accusing each other of the horrible crime of being "good for China."

It's no surprise that trade policy has become a central part of this particular race. Anti-trade sentiment is being stoked nationwide but especially in Rust Belt states like Ohio, where shifting employment patterns and stagnant labor markets have given politicians an opportunity to blame foreigners for the mythical demise of America's still-thriving manufacturing sector.

Ohio's incumbent Republican senator, Rob Portman, has a pro-trade record that is ripe for criticism in today's political environment. Portman has a strong record in support of free trade during his time as the U.S. trade representative, and in both the U.S. House and Senate.

Portman's challenger, Democratic former Ohio Gov. Ted Strickland, has a nearly opposite record on trade. During his more than 10 years in the House, he voted against all the trade agreements Portman supported, and has been a close friend of the labor movement throughout his time in public office.

An election campaign is hardly the time to confront voters with sophisticated economic policy debates, so candidates need catch phrases and clichés to gain electoral points. Protectionists usually use phrases like "fair trade" or "level the playing field" or "bring back American jobs" as shorthand for raising tariffs on imports. And sometimes, as Strickland has done in Ohio, they pick a foreign country and blame that country for all of their constituents' perceived economic ills.

Strickland has pulled off this strategy with flair. He ran [an ad](#) in which Portman's face is superimposed on the body of a Chinese gymnast performing a "triple-aerial flip-flop." The fake sports announcer notes, "Rob's been practicing it his whole career — supporting one bad trade deal after another, sending hundreds of thousands of jobs to China. Now, in an election

year, he says he is against a trade deal he voted for last year."

It's not clear how free trade agreements with countries like Australia and Morocco could possibly send hundreds of thousands of jobs to China, but it's important to have a bad guy. Strickland has even done a web prank where makingchinagreatagain.com sends you to Portman's official website.

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The gymnast ad ends with a catch phrase Strickland is now regularly using to describe Portman: "the best senator China's ever had."

In a better world, this would be a great opportunity for Portman to take credit for helping lift hundreds of millions of people out of poverty. China has a population of 1.3 billion people who still subsist on a per-capita income roughly one-fourth as high as Americans'. China's amazing economic growth over the past few decades owes a lot to China's increased openness to foreign trade, which the United States helped foster. Portman could show pride in having played some small part in those efforts.

Portman could also point out how trade is a cooperative activity that promotes peace while benefiting Americans and foreigners through better jobs and lower prices. What's good for China can also be good for America — Portman could say — and we should find more and more ways to strive toward mutual benefit and cooperation.

But electoral politics aren't so ideal. Instead of thanking Strickland, Portman's response has been to point back at Strickland and say, "No. You!"

Portman has repeatedly accused Strickland of being "weak on China," as if China is something that needs to be fought against by restricting Americans' right to trade. He's even set up a website of his own — weakonchina.com — to highlight Strickland's "hypocrisy." His campaign is running a [series of ads](#) that point to the two times in his entire career that Strickland could have voted for higher tariffs, but didn't. One ad points to when Ohio, under Strickland's governorship, "gave a \$4 million dollar loan to a company with a Chinese factory." Sen. Portman, the ad says, is the one who will be "protecting Ohio jobs when China cheats."

Portman has run so far away from his record that he even told reporters that he likes what Donald Trump is saying about trade. Remember that one of Trump's main complaints about U.S. trade agreements is that they were negotiated by "political hacks." Presumably, that includes former U.S. trade representative Rob Portman.

Perhaps Ohio's China-bashing is an indictment of Portman's inability to stand up for good economic policy. Perhaps it reflects more on the popular power of Donald Trump's belligerent economic nationalism. Either way, Portman's capitulation could pave the way to higher taxes in the United States, harming consumers and businesses around the world.

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