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# Trade Policy is Back in the News: Will Voters Care?

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**Abstract:** During the 2016 election cycle, both Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders received roars of approval from supporters when discussing plans to roll back decades of trade liberalization and more specifically North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). In the past, protectionist politicians who failed to follow through on promises paid little electoral cost, arguably because NAFTA received relatively little media or political attention after it was passed. Now in the spotlight, could trade policies cost President Trump voters in 2020? I argue that the highly partisan nature of today's trade discourse – a new dimension for trade opinion – creates obstacles for electoral accountability because preferences follow rather than drive partisanship. Drawing on previous research and a 2017 survey experiment fielded before and after Trump's trip to China, I show that the ability of trade messaging to cross party lines has weakened and that Trump's followers strongly react to information cues from Trump but fail to react to information based accusations of flip flopping on his most prominent trade related promise: increased protection against China. The ability of politicians to shape preferences rather than respond to the will of constituents calls into question the electoral connection on critical government policies even when they become salient.

## Introduction

President Trump appears poised to present trade policy as a defining plank of his 2020 re-election campaign. During his 2016 Presidential campaign, trade protection – and specifically increased protection from Chinese manufacturing – comprised a key component of his strategy to “Make American Great Again.” On his first day in office, he used his executive power to withdraw from the Trans Pacific Partnership, a years-in-the-making multilateral trade and investment agreement. Subsequently, he proposed a Border Tax with Mexico, initiated the renegotiation of NAFTA, and started a trade war with China. These among other executive-led

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trade policies have kept trade policy on the front page of the newspaper, raising the salience of trade policy even while highlighting Trump's flip-flopping and mixed success on trade policy. Having made trade a prominent cornerstone of his Presidency, will Trump face positive or negative trade-related judgement from voters on Election Day?

Less than a decade ago, research would have offered a clear "No" because trade would not be a factor considered by a large number of voters. Many voters lacked the necessary information about their own preferences as well as their representatives' voting behavior to hold politicians accountable. Take for example, voter response to the passage of the Central American Free Trade Agreements (CAFTA) – my research (Guisinger 2009) found that fewer than a third of voters could identify their representatives' position on the bill and voters' support for a candidate was not meaningfully influenced by the knowledge that they matched (or not) a candidates position. Subsequent work by the thinktank Public Citizen found that more than 40 percent of the House and Senate incumbents who campaigned on a protectionist platform had in fact voted in favor of free trade more often than not.<sup>1</sup> In *American Opinion on Trade* (2017) I argued the low salience of trade, particularly post-NAFTA, lessened political accountability allowing for a disconnect from legislative claims and legislative actions on trade. In a changing economic environment with weak party differentiation and limited media coverage, the majority of Americans had no strong opinions about the effect of trade on their own economic outcomes, held relatively malleable opinions about the effect of trade on others, and did not prioritize trade policy compared to other social and economic concerns. Having trade policy emerge as one of the primary issues of the 2016 election should have provided the opportunity to test whether voters would vote based on the ability of politicians to keep promises about trade now that the public's perceived importance of trade policy has increased.

Yet, in the case of trade policy, increased political and media attention was not the only important change. Trade policy today is far more partisan – both among elites and in the public – than in recent decades. This partisanship influences the integration of the influx of new information, the very information that voters need to form their own opinions and measure how well-politicians serve them. Guisinger and Saunders (2017) have shown across a variety of foreign policy issues that when the public is relatively uncertain about an issue but partisanship is low, voters accept new information from a wide variety of partisan and non-partisan sources, but when partisanship is high voters are more likely

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<sup>1</sup> Public Citizen, "Obama, Romney and Congressional Candidates Nationwide Used Trade-Themed Ads to Appeal to U.S. Majority Opposing Trade Status Quo, Reinforcing Public Anger and Building Expectations for Reform," November 7, 2012.

to listen only to co-partisan sources of information. For the president – or any politician – to be held accountable on a policy, voters must both deem the policy important but also need to be able to develop their own preferences independently of the party stance. If partisanship rather than standard economic and social predictors influence voter's preferences then even with increased importance, this malleability will undermine their ability to hold the President accountable on trade policy.

To project the potential role of trade policy in the upcoming 2020 Presidential election, I first provide background on trade policy's previous position as a low salience issue for voters. Using data from a 2014 survey experiment, I demonstrate how information (in this case a pro-trade message by Republican presidential candidate John McCain) could move opinion of both supporters and opponents. These and similar findings suggested that greater discussion about trade would have potentially increased politicians' accountability on trade if trade remained a low partisan issue. Instead, the recent increase in trade's salience occurred in conjunction with an increase in partisanship. I discuss the rise of partisan division on trade and its impact on elite messaging. Using data from a two-wave survey fielded to a representative sample of 1000 Americans prior and post President Trump's Fall 2017 trip to China, I test assumptions about the newly partisan nature of beliefs about trade's benefits and the willingness to hold the President accountable for (at the time) trade policies counter to his campaign promises. The extremely partisan reaction to Trump's statements and actions suggest that while trade may continue to play a central role in Trump's messaging, actions on the issue are unlikely to lose him old supporters or gain him new supporters.

## A Little Back Story: Post-NAFTA Trade Opinion and Lack of Accountability

Theories linking constituent preferences to government policies often assume the ability for informed voters to punish politicians for diverging from stated policy platforms (Matthews and Stimson 1975; Bartels 1991; Page and Shapiro 1992; Bianco, Spence, and Wilkerson 1996; Clinton 2006). Holding politicians accountable (i.e. voting them out of office) for a specific policy requires knowledge of one's own preferences, knowledge of politicians' behavior, and high value for the policy relative to other electoral concerns. These requirements create a high bar for foreign policy issues. Today foreign policy issues – particularly economic foreign policy issues – are distant from individuals' day-to-day lives. While conventional arguments assume that voters' preferences are linked

to their economic interests through their role in production,<sup>2</sup> voters this century are more likely than not to say that trade doesn't effect their own employment outcomes and are as likely to express a non-opinion than an opinion (positive and negative combined) on specific trade-related policy. Thus while in the election of 1888, voters nation-wide might have selected their party and preferred president (tariff reformer Grover Cleveland or protectionist Benjamin Harrison) due to their trade platform, and some in 1992 might have considered voting for Ross Perot anti-NAFTA Reform Party, post-NAFTA voters appear to prioritize other issues when voting.

In *American Opinion on Trade*, I argued that economic and political uncertainty – specifically the complexity of the US economy combined with limited and inconsistent information provision by the media and political parties – have left the majority of Americans without strong egocentric preferences for trade policy and malleable sociotropic preferences. Thus, even as trade has increased its relative importance in the broader US economy, it has become paradoxically more difficult for the mass public to assess trade's impact for themselves, others, and the country.

Starting in the 1960s, the bulk of the American workforce shifted from manufacturing-based jobs to service-based jobs in what economist Blinder (2006) has termed the Third Industrial Revolution. To compete in the global marketplace, many domestic manufacturing companies shifted their strategy to incorporate imported components. The labor-intensive manufacturing that had once propelled the US as a global export leader and supported small American towns across the nation diminished in economic importance; regional concentrations of manufacturing industries shrunk in number; and communities became more industrially and economically diverse. Whether imports or constraints on imports were good or bad for communities and industries became less clear cut. For example, when President George W. Bush enacted “temporary safeguards” to protect the steel industry in March 2002, the ensuing tariff debates and congressional testimony pitted AFL-CIO members against each other and created a schism within industrial business coalitions. Unless voters were directly

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<sup>2</sup> Some models focus on the wage effects for skilled labor and capital versus unskilled labor (Stolper and Samuelson 1941; Freeman 1995; Feenstra and Hanson 2001; Kaltenhaler, Gelleny, and Ceccoli 2004). Other models, such as those of Scheve and Slaughter (2001), Beaulieu (2002), Mayda and Rodrik (2005), and Blonigen (2011) incorporate industry affiliation and industry trade exposure to account for sector-specific competition from trade; others incorporate factors affecting an individual's ability to move to where jobs are located, such as homeownership (Scheve and Slaughter 2001).

affected by steel prices – and the few who were had differing opinions whether their industry were producers or consumers of steel – the question of whether a voter's community, identity group, or the country as a whole was better or worse for the tariffs depended on a relatively nuanced understanding of the local, regional, and national economic conditions. The changing international economy environment, shifting characteristics of the US economy, increased regional diversity, and the demise of local and regional news sources creates a higher information burden for voters. A survey undertaken in 2010 showed that the majority of voters didn't link trade agreements to lowered prices, were uncertain about the effect of trade on their communities, and couldn't correctly identify the US main trading partner, which at the time was Canada (Guisinger 2017, chapter 2).

In the absence of knowledge or the willingness to collect information and undertake difficult calculations, many scholars believe that voters turn to elite and party messaging to form opinion (e.g. Zaller 1992; Gilens 2001; Herrmann, Tetlock, and Diascro 2001; Hiscox 2006; Malhotra and Kuo 2008; Berinsky 2009; Bullock 2011; Trager and Vavreck 2011; Levendusky and Horowitz 2012; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013). Yet since the 1960s, three characteristics of US politics have muddled elite messaging on trade. First, the concentration of trade policy decision-making at the executive level in response to the increased complexity of trade policy (particularly due to the demands of bi-lateral and multi-lateral negotiations) has limited local politicians' participation in the process resulting in politicians replacing direct policy details with more general claims of toughness or simple silence. Second, in party platforms and in Congressional voting, overall Republican and Democratic positions converged. Negotiations for the US's largest trade agreement to date – the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) started under Republican President George H.W. and received ratification and began implementation under Democratic President Bill Clinton. My analysis of data from the Manifesto Project Database (Volkens et al. 2014), a compilation of content analyses of parties' electoral programs since 1920 in the US, identifies peaks for party divergence and salience between the trade position of the Republican Party platform and the Democratic Party Platform occurring in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1960s. However, by 2008 there was not only little discourse on trade by the parties, but virtually no find no meaningful distinction in substance (Guisinger 2017, chapter 2). Yet this partisan convergence covers up the third characteristic: a lack of cohesion within parties. As shown by voting records and the content of campaign advertisement, political messaging has varied more by geography and audience than by political party. My analysis of ads from the Wisconsin Advertising Project (Goldstein et al. 2011) found that in 2000, neither

Presidential candidate ran a trade-related ad in a major media market and trade-related ads comprised a relatively small percentage (<2 percent) of all political advertising in the top 100 media markets. In 2004, the percentage doubled to 4 percent. And in the 2008 election, when both parties and Presidential candidates ran pro-protection ads, the average increased slightly to just less than 5% but heavy concentration in a few areas meant that most Americans received little to no trade-related campaign messages. Presidential campaigns can pick and choose their markets. Roughly one-quarter of covered media markets – 56 – saw less than 5 percent of trade-related ads. And an additional 56 saw no trade-related ads, including major markets in Texas and California, such as Dallas, Houston, Los Angeles, San Diego, and San Francisco.

Given these political and economic sources of uncertainty, perhaps it should not be surprising that my analysis of the 2006 election cycle (Guisinger 2009) showed low salience for trade in terms of ranking of importance, knowledge of representative's behavior, and holding representatives accountable for that behavior relative to other policy areas.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to Social Security, Healthcare, Education, Taxes, Terrorism, Immigration, and the Environment, when asked how important an issue was “In determining whom you vote for” the majority of Americans rated trade not important (9%) or only somewhat important (43%) rather than very important (33%) or extremely important (16%).<sup>4</sup> In terms of awareness of their representatives voting behavior on recent roll call votes, far fewer respondents (only 31%) could correctly identify their Senators' position on CAFTA than on other recent roll call votes on Iraq (58%), Stem Cell Research Funding (54%), Abortion (53%), Minimum Wage (54%), Capital Gains Taxes (53%), and Immigration (44%). And when it came to deciding whether to vote for the incumbent, matching on CAFTA was far less predictive than matching on any other of these roll call votes. For example, a voter's stated preference matching

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<sup>3</sup> The data comes from the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Survey pre- and post-US midterm election surveys conducted by Polimetrix. Starting from a pool of more than 150,000 “opt-in” respondents, a panel of 36,501 adults was selected using proximity matching to a stratified subsample 16 drawn from the US Bureau of the Census, the 2004 American Community Study (ACS). 17 A smaller module posed additional questions to a randomly selected subsample of 1000 respondents. The larger sample provides data on respondents' roll call vote knowledge, respondents' roll call position, and respondents' post-election, self-identified voting behavior. The smaller sample provides data on respondents' pre-election ranking of policy issues' importance for their voting choices.

<sup>4</sup> Notably when asked the narrower question “What is the most important problem facing the country today?,” of the 36,501 respondents asked only one offered a specifically trade-oriented answer: “Jobs lost because of free trade agreements.”

(or not matching) the representatives' vote on a timetable for removing the military from Iraq shifted the probability of voting for the incumbent by 30 percentage points whereas the same voter matching the representative on CAFTA shifted the probability of voting for the incumbent by only 5 percent. Perhaps most telling, my model predicted that in contrast with any of the other roll call issues, support for incumbents was higher among uninformed voters whose preferences for trade differed from their Senators' behavior in Congress than informed voters whose preferences matched. Such indifference from voters provides little incentive to incumbents to educate and inform their constituencies on trade policy details and allow for a lack of accountability even when candidates are outspoken. In 2012, Public Citizen identified six Republican incumbents running ads against trade liberalization despite what Public Citizen characterized as a "100 percent track record of support for every single NAFTA-style trade deal arising under their tenure." In addition, they listed 18 Democrats and Republicans who supported the Korea FTA yet still ran ads against offshoring.<sup>5</sup> Lack of salience allows for such slippage but additionally the discrepancies themselves generate inconsistent messaging which can add to the electorates' uncertainty on what position they should take on trade.

The types of information the public receives is particularly important in the case of trade policy because for most Americans trade concerns other people's employment, not their own. As part of the 2006 and 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Surveys (CCES), I asked 1800 survey participants how they thought trade affected their own employment, the employment of friends and family, regional employment, and US employment. More than 70 percent of the respondents stated that trade either made no difference or that they were unaware of the effect of trade on their own employment. In contrast, more than 60 percent believed that trade slightly or greatly hurt US employment. Assuming that voters have less direct knowledge of national economic conditions than their own economic conditions, these national level beliefs should be more responsive to new information. In fact, research prior to the rise of trade discourse found beliefs about the effect of trade and the suitability of limits on trade malleable to information provision. In a series of survey experiments completed between 2008 and 2016 (see Guisinger 2017, chapters 3, 6, and 8), I found that simply correcting respondents' beliefs about the US primary trading partner (at the time

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<sup>5</sup> Public Citizen, "Obama, Romney and Congressional Candidates Nationwide Used Trade Themed Ads to Appeal to U.S. Majority Opposing Trade Status Quo, Reinforcing Public Anger and Building Expectations for Reform," November 7, 2012.

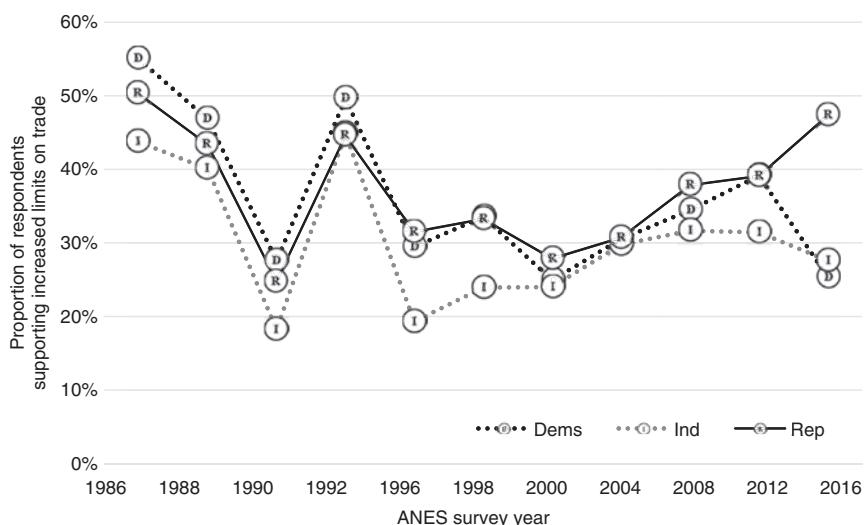


Figure 1: Support for Increasing Limits on Trade by Partisan Identification (ANES, Multiyear).

Canada, not China) served to decrease support for protection in general; changing the depiction of trade protection beneficiaries from White to African American workers lowered White American support for trade protection; providing factual positive information about the rank of the US in the global trade and the role of trade in support domestic jobs decreased support for protection, and that both pro-protection and pro-free trade political campaign ads effectively moved opinion on trade. Notably these messages resonated across party lines although not always gender and racial cleavages.

Although trade policy and partisan identification have been strongly related in the past and now in the present, in post-NAFTA America preferences for trade protection more closely aligned with other characteristics. From when the American National Election Studies (ANES) began tracking American's opinion on trade protection in 1986–2008, the marginal contrast between "Strong" Democrats and "Strong" Republicans on support for increasing limits on imports was smaller than the differences for income, skill, survey year, gender, community characteristics, national economic perception, and union household (see Guisinger 2017, p. 133). Figure 1 presents the proportion of self-identified Republicans, Democrats, and Independents supporting an increase in limit on trade in each year the ANES asked the question. Note that while the proportion varies, Republican and Democratic proportions generally rise and fall together, unlike Independents. In 1998, 2004, and as late as 2012, the proportions of Republican and Democratic supporting an increase are almost indistinguishable.

## Elite Messaging During a Period of Low Salience and Low Partisanship

To reiterate, in the decade prior to 2016 trade policy, by many metrics, could be characterized by its relatively low salience and low partisanship compared to many other economic and social issues. During this period, my research found that elite messaging on trade issues resonated with both Republicans and Democrats. For example, a survey experiment in the 2010 CCES provided a randomly selected half of the respondents factual information about the US rank as the largest trading country, its domination of the international market in service exports, and the proportion of manufacturing jobs dependent on exports. While this positive message increased the divergence of opinion among those classified in skill-based and gender-based groupings, the message increased the convergence between Republicans and Democrat beliefs.

A later study run as part of the 2012 CCES showed that such convergence could occur even when the messenger was cross-partisan. In an attribution study, Elizabeth Saunders and I (Guisinger and Saunders 2017) asked a sample of 2000 respondents<sup>6</sup> whether the US should increase or decrease its use of the World Trade Organization's (WTO) dispute mechanism. All respondents first read a brief description of the US's interactions with the dispute mechanism and then a randomly selected three quarters of the sample received a pro-expansion argument attributed to one of three partisan categories of experts: generic ("Many") trade representatives, Republican trade representatives, or Democratic trade representative. While the influence of the message appeared greater when partisan affiliation matched respondents' own, both self-identified Republicans and Democrats also responded positively to the generic and cross-party messages. In the article (Guisinger and Saunders 2017) we argued that this cross-party influence was conditional on the prior low level of partisanship among the public and showed that where partisanship was high, cross-party messages failed to move partisans in the same direction or created backlash. On other foreign policies which exhibited greater partisan divisions in the control group, cross-partisan messaging failed to move individuals and in one case generated backlash.

No partisan cue could be stronger than that of the party's selected candidate for President. Experts labeled with party affiliation may still be more viewed as neutral information providers, but a campaigning, convention-selected Presidential candidate represents a specific-party. For his 2008 campaign, Republican presidential

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<sup>6</sup> These 2000 respondents were drawn from the 2012 CCES, a 50,000-person national stratified sample survey administered by YouGov/Polimetrix (Anscombebehere and Schaffner 2012).

candidate Senator John McCain had produced (in both English and Spanish) a strong, informative, pro-Colombian free-trade agreement advertisement.<sup>7</sup> The ad never made it off the Internet and onto television, but it offers one of the rare examples of a pro-trade, candidate-created campaign ad and an opportunity to estimate partisan effects when trade policy was not a strongly partisan issue.

McCain's 2008 campaign message not only offered a personal endorsement of free trade but also a rationale for why Americans should support free trade. To measure the effect of such an important party leader endorsement on individuals' beliefs about trade, I constructed an online survey experiment in 2014 that randomly sorted 900 individuals into three groups: those asked to watch the 30 second trade-focused McCain advertisement "Colombia Free Trade" (the positive treatment); those asked to watch a 30 second employment-focused McCain advertisement "Jobs for America" (the placebo treatment); and those provided no initial video (the control group receiving no treatment).<sup>8</sup> The comparison of responses of those who watched the trade-related "Colombia Free Trade" McCain ad to the control group provides an estimate of the effect of John McCain's endorsement of pro-trade liberalization on an average subject's opinion while the comparison of the "Jobs for America" placebo treatment provides a check that the effect is not due to other components of the ad such as John McCain himself or the discussion of the economy.

Each group was asked a series of questions including a set on the employment benefits of trade at the national, regional, and individual level.

The U.S. government continues to expand opportunities to trade through bi-lateral and multi-lateral agreements with foreign countries. What do you believe has been the effect of trade on the following: your employment, employment in your region, and employment in the United States?

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<sup>7</sup> Speaking directly to the camera, John McCain stated "To fuel our economy, we must create more jobs for Americans and for our neighbors to the south. With better jobs, more of them will be able to stay in their country. We can't go back on our word on free trade promises with Mexico, Canada, Central America, or anyone else. We must encourage more trade agreements to create more jobs on both sides of the border. That's why I'm behind the Colombian Free Trade Agreement. I'm John McCain, and I approve this message." (John McCain, Colombia Free Trade. 2008. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V22IMLtlmRI>).

<sup>8</sup> The McCain survey was conducted in June 2014 with 900 voluntary participants via Mechanical Turk. Participants were offered \$0.50 to participate in a "three minute public opinion survey;" they were paid regardless of completion; and the average effective hourly rate was \$12.86. While Mechanical Turk pool of workers has been found to deviate from the general adult population with regards to age and education, they are found to be comparable on other factors (Christensen and Glick 2013) and more representative of the general population than most in-person convenience samples (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012). For detailed discuss about the fielding of the survey and the sample see Guisinger (2017, p. 203–208).

Respondents selected from five choices: “benefit greatly,” “benefit slightly,” “no difference,” “hurt slightly,” and “hurt greatly.” I recoded responses into three groups (“benefits,” “no difference,” and “hurts”).

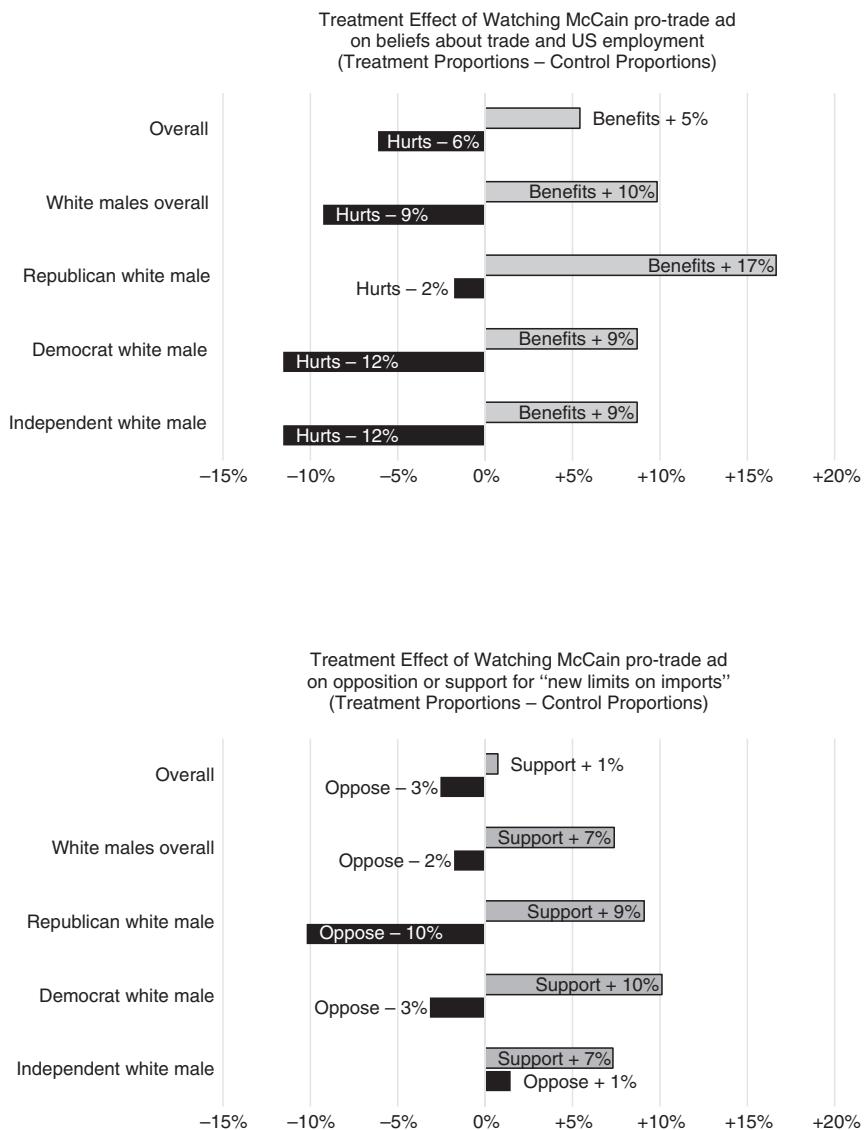
Individuals were additionally asked about their support for trade policy, using the standard American National Election Studies (ANES) question as before: “Some people have suggested placing new limits on foreign imports in order to protect American jobs. Others say that such limits would raise consumer prices and hurt American exports. What do you think?” Participants could select among three responses: “oppose new limits,” “support new limits,” and “haven’t thought much about this.” Additionally, respondents answered a series of questions about themselves including partisanship and voting record, age, gender, race, and employment status.

To calculate the potential effect of the pro-free-trade McCain ad compared to the placebo jobs ad and no treatment, I used logistic analysis to estimate the effect of each treatment as well as the individual characteristics. As I find no meaningful difference between the placebo and control responses, I collapse these treatment categories.<sup>9</sup> Since an individual’s gender and race has conditioned treatment responses in prior analyses, I analyze treatment effects for men and women separately and here focus primarily on comparisons of White men. This further diminishes the potential influence of a disjuncture between an individuals’ race and gender and McCain’s. Figure 2 provides illustrations of the treatment effect of watching the McCain pro-trade ad on the proportions of those surveyed responding that trade helps or hurts US employment (top panel) and responding that one supports or opposes increased limits on trade (bottom panel).

Overall, the proportion who thought that trade benefits US employment was 5 percentage points higher than those who did not (36 percent–30 percent) and the proportion who thought that trade hurts US employment was 6 percentage points lower (49 percent versus 56 percent). That said, among White men the difference was far greater in general and the influence of the McCain ad appears strongest for Republican White men. For this group, the difference in proportion saying that trade helps was 17 percentage points higher in the treatment group than the control group (although note that the decline in hurt was not proportional, most of the change came from the “no difference” category). However,

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<sup>9</sup> This comparison of the placebo group to the control group yields no statistically significant difference between the two groups. Thus, watching the placebo version of McCain’s economic proposal did not appear to influence beliefs about the national benefits of trade and the influence is attributable to the discussion of trade in “Colombian Free Trade Agreement” rather than the other aspects of the advertisement. For more discussion of the placebo treatment see Guisinger (2017, p. 203–208).



**Figure 2:** Cross-Party Elite Messaging Effects in 2014.

despite the greater response by Republican men, note that White male Democrats and White male Independents also appear to respond positively to McCain’s trade message.

To support this interpretation of the raw proportions, Table 1 (left two columns) displays the results of logistic analysis including a series of interactive terms to

**Table 1:** Effect of Watching a Pro-Trade Presidential Campaign Ad on Beliefs about Trade's Effect on US Employment and Support for Increased Trade Protection.

Logistic Analysis of Beliefs and Preferences	Trade's Effect		Increase Limits on Trade	
	Hurts	Benefits	Support	Oppose
Treatment – Watched Pro-Trade	-0.54** (0.24)	0.44* (0.25)	0.50* (0.27)	-0.18 (0.25)
McCain Ad				
Treatment × Women	0.53* (0.31)	-0.65* (0.34)	-0.53 (0.34)	0.08 (0.34)
Treatment × Republican	0.35 (0.48)	0.49 (0.51)	-0.26 (0.50)	0.38 (0.51)
Treatment × Democrat	0.08 (0.32)	-0.02 (0.34)	-0.38 (0.36)	0.17 (0.34)
Republican	-0.09 (0.30)	-0.44 (0.34)	0.58* (0.32)	-0.29 (0.33)
Democrat	-0.16 (0.18)	0.17 (0.20)	0.43** (0.21)	0.22 (0.19)
McCain Voter	-0.60** (0.29)	0.65** (0.31)	0.06 (0.31)	0.57* (0.30)
Romney Voter	0.27 (0.30)	0.03 (0.32)	0.16 (0.32)	0.06 (0.31)
Age	0.02*** (0.01)	-0.03*** (0.01)	0.03*** (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
White	0.21 (0.18)	-0.32* (0.19)	0.45** (0.22)	-0.1 (0.19)
Woman	0.16 (0.18)	-0.17 (0.20)	0.37* (0.20)	-0.87*** (0.21)
Employed Full-Time	-0.19 (0.14)	0.16 (0.15)	-0.07 (0.16)	-0.12 (0.15)
Constant	-0.49* (0.29)	0.18 (0.31)	-2.78*** (0.34)	-0.17 (0.31)
N	886	886	886	886

\*p&lt;0.10, \*\*p&lt;0.05, \*\*\*p&lt;0.01.

account for the potential of heterogenous treatments effect for men and women and for self-identified partisans. Those watching the pro-free-trade McCain ad were significantly less likely to say that trade hurts national employment and more likely to respond that trade benefits national employment than those who watched no ad. The coefficient on “Treatment – Watched Pro-Trade McCain Ad” is negative and significant (-0.54, SE 0.24) for the former and positive and significant for the latter (+0.44, SE 0.25). Furthermore, as expected from prior research, the coefficients for the interaction of treatment and gender “Treatment x Women” are significant and in the opposite direction. Thus, there is an effect, but it differs

by gender: men who have watched the pro-free-trade advertisements are far more likely to believe that trade benefits the nation's employment while women appear unaffected on average. Importantly for the issue of partisan-filtering, the analysis shows no significant differentiation for Democrats or Republicans.

The lack of partisan differentiation holds even on the backlash to McCain's message. While McCain's pro-trade stance swayed respondents towards more positive beliefs about the national benefits of trade, the script may have also reminded voters about potential perils at the individual and community levels. Overall, the difference in response proportions between the control and treatment group (Figure 2, bottom panel) shows a small shift in support towards greater trade protection (-3 percentage point decline in opposition and a +1 percentage point increase in support). The effect on men is sizable and consistent across all partisan types. As shown in Table 1, the coefficient on "Treatment – Watched Pro-Trade McCain Ad" is positive and significant (+0.50, SE 0.27) for support of increased limits on trade and again the treatment effect is not significantly different between Republican, Democratic, and Independent Partisans. In 2014, to the extent that a Republican leader could shift public opinion on the positive national benefits of trade, he did so not just among supporters of his own party but across party lines as well. That said, despite the positive shift in beliefs, the ads' effects were consistent across partisan lines. When considering the negative impact of the pro-trade message, for both Democrats and Republicans, the ad also increased the proportion supporting new limits on trade.

This series of survey experiments run between 2010 and 2014 highlighted the ability for information providers – non-partisan and partisan – to move opinion across party lines. In general, Americans express uncertainty about foreign policies and particularly trade policy (Fordham and Kleinberg 2018), in part because the policies seem distant from their everyday lives but also because of the decline in available information (Guisinger 2017). Active presentation of the potential costs and benefits to changing trade policy should theoretically decrease the costs of Americans informing themselves about this policy and lead to less uncertainty about at least the costs and benefits of trade if not over the policy itself. This information effect should be strongest for beliefs about other's employment benefits because the content of the information provided in national campaigns is generally broader than individuals' own employment circumstances. Pro-trade ads like McCain's ran infrequently before the 2016 election – remember that the ad discussed above never ran on mainstream television – but protectionist ads also comprised a relatively small proportion (<5 percent) of political ads in most of media markets. Greater information provision could create conditions for greater accountability on the issue of trade policy, perhaps perhaps pinning politicians to their pro-protection campaign claims.

## Elite Messaging During a Period of High Salience and High Partisanship

Recently Americans have seen an upsurge in trade policy discussion. After years of faltering coverage (Guisinger 2017), trade policy has re-emerged on the evening news channels, has merited a new Politico morning briefing, been the subject of national ad campaigns by the Koch brothers and the National Retail Foundation, and turned up on fashion and celebrity websites. Starting in the second half of the Obama presidency, trade regained some prominence as members of both parties debated their willingness to ratify the Trans Pacific Partnership and depurate Obama via the Trade Promotion Authority. The TPP was much larger in scope than CAFTA and generated more coverage and debate even before the 2016 campaign. However, debate about the TPP and trade policy in general then became a central theme of the 2016 presidential election. If Americans previously lacked information about the link between trade and their own or others' economic circumstances, the increase in information arising first from the TPP debate and then from the discourse in the 2016 campaign should lead to greater certainty about their own preferences for trade protection and greater ability to hold politicians accountable for trade policy diverging from these preferences.

As was the case in previous Congresses, both parties had pro-trade and pro-protection supporters, but many prior trade liberalizing bills had received bi-partisan support. During the Obama Administration, Republicans heavily criticized a number of Obama's trade objectives, particularly the US Korean Free Trade Agreement and the Trans Pacific Partnership. Some Republicans though balked at the passage of bills which would be seen as an Obama victory creating a more partisan frame for trade than had been the case for previous trade treaties. Additionally, many Republicans refused to support a reinstatement of the Trade Promotion Authority (commonly called Fast Track), a legislative procedure commonly implemented to facilitate the negotiation and ratification of trade agreements. While some might argue their disapproval was aimed at stonewalling the Administration, explanations focused on the dangers of trade, thus highlighting partisan difference on trade.

During the primaries leading into the 2016 Presidential election, both parties included pro and anti-trade voices. Among Republicans, then-candidate Trump was one of only two candidates touting protectionism in the initial announcement and the only one discussing imposing tariffs on China. During the debates, protectionism created a divide between Trump and other front runners such as Bush, Cruz, and Rubio, who all raised concerns about the economic costs of protectionism. During the first Republican candidate debate Cruz notably, and

perhaps to the confusion of many viewers, raised the specter of Smoot-Hawley, a 1930 bill that raised tariffs on 20,000 imported goods and perhaps lengthened the Great Depression. By the end of the Republican primaries Trump as a candidate had firmly positioned himself as against the Trans Pacific Partnership and for higher tariffs, particularly against China. The final two Democratic contenders also split on trade with Bernie Saunders contrasting his own protectionist stance against a more free trade supporting Hilary Clinton. Her role in the negotiation of the Trans Pacific Partnership highlighted the divide that followed even on to the convention floor as Sander's supporters held up "No TPP" signs. Thus with her selection as the Democratic Candidate, trade policy had a stronger, leader driven partisan divide.

Once Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump emerged from their respective conventions, the trade issue became increasingly partisan with Democrat Clinton promoting the benefits of multi-lateral trade agreements and Republican Donald Trump promising to tear down multi-lateral agreements such as the TPP and NAFTA and raise tariffs, particularly against China. In fact, on his first day as President, Donald Trump withdrew from the Trans Pacific Partnership and in the following months floated the possibility of a border tax, called for a renegotiation of NAFTA, and threatened to increase Chinese tariffs as promised during his campaign. Trade became a more frequent topic, but one with clear partisan frames. As an issue becomes observably more partisan, Guisinger and Saunders (2017) argue that the power of elite message will be conditional on partisan identification.

I argue that this newly partisan-led discourse in which trade policy emerged as salient influenced the public's updating of beliefs, creating a partisan bias to these beliefs such that even with greater information availability, failure to follow through on campaign promises would do little to change votes from the Presidents' own supporters and co-partisans. In other words, if voters filter information via their own partisanship, then despite the strongly protectionist campaign of Donald Trump, supporters may be unlikely to hold him accountable directly for changing course on trade policy *per se*.<sup>10</sup>

To test the impact of increased information on accountability, I fielded a two-wave survey to 1000 representative potential US voters in November 2017 immediately prior and post President Trump's first visit to China. During and after his campaign, Trump had repeatedly called for stronger tariff measures against tariffs and voter's responses to this high profiled trip offered one of the first opportunities to test how important Trump's actions towards China were

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**10** Here I make the distinction between the choice of policy and the potential economic consequences in the stock market and other indicators due to policy uncertainty.

for his approval by both supporters and opponents. The first wave of the survey provided a baseline for individuals' beliefs about trade's effect on the employment opportunities for themselves and the nation. The second wave administered two survey experiments designed to estimate the influence of Trump's statements on beliefs about trade and the influence of the outcome of the trip on his approval.

## Survey Experiment on Trade Beliefs

The first survey experiment, like the McCain experiment discussed above, captured the influence of a partisan pro-trade message overall on self-identified Republicans, Democrats, and Independents. In wave one, participants were asked to answer a question about how trade affects their own and the country's employment level. Then in wave 2, all participants were provided a pro-trade introduction with a strong partisan frame before being asked the same questions. The introduction included quotes pulled from the conclusionary section of Trump's speech at the scheduled press conference following his return from Asia:<sup>11</sup>

*In a speech marking his return from a 12-day trip to Asia, President Trump summarized the advancement of trade policy this way:*

*"We have established a new framework for trade that will ensure reciprocity through enforcement actions, reform of international organizations, and new fair trade deals that benefit the United States and our partners.... My fellow citizens: America is back. And the future has never looked brighter."*

While not the length of a 30 second political campaign ad, the phrases capture the same spirit of McCain's pro-trade ad: frameworks for trade are good, the government can ensure fair trade, and that trade is good not only for the country but for allies. To see if such a positive pro-trade stance could move individuals' opinions in 2017 as McCain's ad did in 2014, I compared individuals' responses in wave 2 (after reading Trump's pro-trade statement) with their prior responses to the same question (provided without a potential partisan frame) in wave 1.

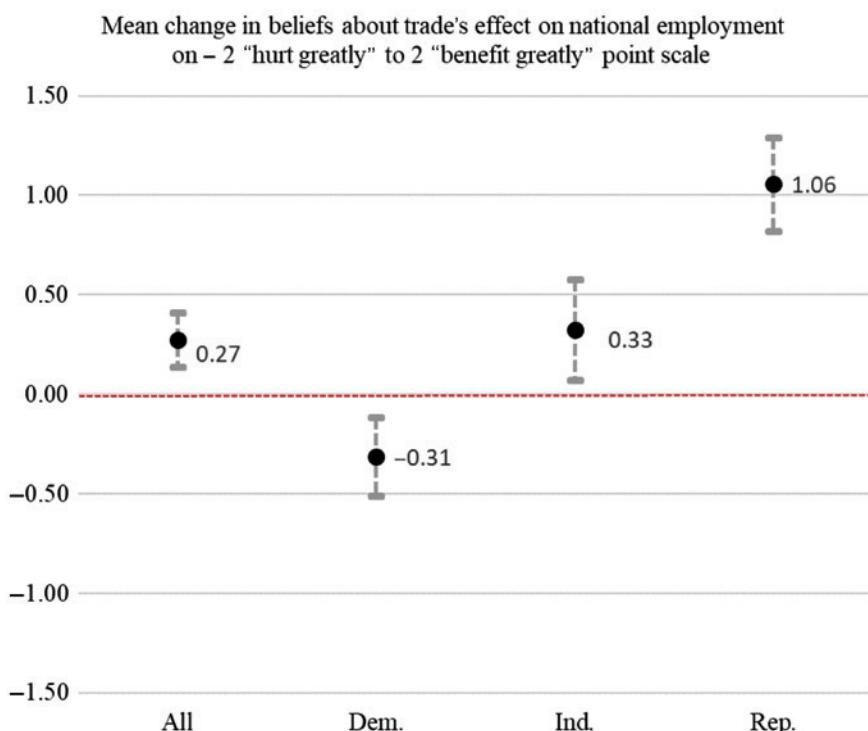
Unlike the earlier McCain experiment, I can directly measure the influence on individuals by comparing an individual's wave 2 response with the same individual's wave 1 responses rather than relying on a comparison of proportions in the treatment and control groups. For simplicity of calculations and display,

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<sup>11</sup> C-SPAN. "President Trump Statement on Asia Trip." <https://www.c-span.org/video/?437396-1/president-trump-delivers-statement-asia-trip>. November 15, 2017.

I recoded the answers a – 2 (“hurt greatly”) to 2 (“benefit greatly”) scale with “Don’t Know” and “No difference” coded in the center as a 0. Then I subtracted individuals’ wave 2 responses from their wave 1 responses to capture the amount of change post-treatment. If individuals’ beliefs did not change between wave 1 and wave 2, the average treatment effect should have been 0. Positive changes suggest the individuals became more positive in the effect of trade on employment outcomes. Figure 3 displays the average mean of the calculated treatment effect on national beliefs about employment.

Remember that those who watched the pro-trade McCain ad held on average more positive beliefs than those who did not and while the effects were stronger for Republicans, the difference was not statistically significant and the positive influence occurred across party lines. In comparison, the shift of opinion generated by the Trump statement had a small influence overall specifically because



**Figure 3:** Effect of a Pro-Trump Trade Statement Conditional on Partisan Affiliation (2017 YouGov Survey).

Mean change (dot) with 95% confidence interval (whiskers).

the statement generated partisan separation. The mean from wave 1 (prior to the treatment) was 0.0 (the equivalent of “Don’t Know” or “No Difference”). After the treatment, the mean was +0.27, a significant (albeit small) shift towards a more positive view. But the treatment effect is much stronger when viewed by partisan groups. Figure 3 displays the average change and the change conditional by partisan self-identifications. Republicans become far more positive – a full point so (+1.06, s.e. 0.12) on a 5-point scale. Independents also shifted in positive direction, but a third less than Republicans (+0.33, s.e. 0.13). In contrast, Democrats became significantly less positive about the national effects of trade (−0.31, s.e. 0.10). Not only is the average influence distinct and significant for each partisan type, but the increased gulf between the Republicans and Democrats is substantial: 1.37 on a 5-point scale. In wave 1, 31 percent of Democrats and 38 percent of Republicans shared the belief that trade benefits national employment. In wave 2, after reading Trump’s message only 18% of Democrats still responded that trade benefitted national employment but now 68 percent of Republicans stated that belief.

The fact that a treatment comprised of only a portion of the President’s full speech can so drastically change Republican’s perception of trade suggests that the President, at least at this moment in time, has the influence to manipulate the basic beliefs by which his supporters would set their own preferences and judge his policies accordingly.

## **Survey Experiment on Trade Policy Choice and Presidential Approval**

The ability for Presidential statements to influence voters’ underlying beliefs is the first step to limiting the ability to hold the President accountable for trade policy. A second step would be for the public not to lower their approval of the President when the President fails to follow through with central campaign promises about policy.

During the 2016 campaign, President Trump repeatedly promised to place tariffs on China. Yet after his first trip to China in the Fall of 2017, the President announced not tariffs but instead increased investment and collaboration between the two countries. Obviously, the President has subsequently placed tariffs on Chinese goods; but at the time, the failure to do so placed in question the credibility of his policy promises on a primary campaign plank. To see whether the President would pay a cost for failing to follow through on this particular foreign policy issue, the second experiment creates a comparison between similar trade-related scenarios to test whether Trump paid any additional costs

in lost approval for reneging on a central campaign plank. Again, prior evidence (Guisinger 2009 discussed above) suggests that incumbent politicians play little if any cost in loss vote share, but the data comes from 2006, a period of low salience when trade was not prominent ranked among voters' concerns and received much less media coverage. In 2017, trade was a major talking point, and many analysts expected Trump to return from his Asia trip with either jointly agreed upon restrictions or the announcement of new unilateral restrictions on trade with China. Trump himself had touted (tweeted) that there would be "Big" trade news.

In the second survey experiment, respondents received one of three possible treatments. Each treatment provided a lead-in to a Presidential approval question. The lead-ins followed the same two paragraph structure: the first highlighted a campaign promise about reigning in imports from an Asian country and the second noted that on his return from his Trump to Asia, Trump announced new investment by the same country. The prompts did not directly attack the President for not following through on the campaign promises but did provide the context in which the new agreements were announced. Each lead in (see Appendix for the full script) provided accurate information about the campaign promise to increase protection and about the post-Asia trip announcement of investment. However, of the three cases randomly provided to respondents (China, Japan, and South Korea) only one had been truly central to Trump's campaign: China.

In his June 16, 2015 announcement of his candidacy, Trump mentioned China 23 times and beating China was arguably his first policy statement of his announcement speech (after saying the other candidates wouldn't be able to defeat ISIS because their announcement rooms paled in comparison to his).<sup>12</sup> Japan was mentioned three times and South Korea not once. During the August 2015 Republican candidate debate moderated by Fox News anchors,<sup>13</sup> Trump pivoted from questions concerning his "disparaging comments about women's looks" to complaining that the US loses to China. He talked about China twice, Japan only once, and South Korea not at all. In his July 2016 convention speech, he mentioned China five times, South Korea once, and Japan not at all.<sup>14</sup> More specifically, in a January 2016 interview with the *New York Times* editorial board, Trump

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<sup>12</sup> "Here's Donald Trump's Presidential Announcement Speech," *Time Magazine*. June 16, 2015. <https://time.com/3923128/donald-trump-announcement-speech/>.

<sup>13</sup> "Transcript: Read the Full Text of the Primetime Republican Debate" August 11, 2015. *Time Magazine* <https://time.com/3988276/republican-debate-primetime-transcript-full-text/>.

<sup>14</sup> "Full Transcript: Donald Trump's 2016 Republican National Convention Speech" By Michele Gorman. *Newsweek*. July 22, 2016. <https://www.newsweek.com/donald-trump-full-transcript-republican-national-convention-hillary-clinton-482945>.

formalized his plan to win against China by asserting that he would impose 45% tariffs on Chinese goods – a claim that he then repeated consistently through the rest of his campaign.<sup>15</sup> After noting his softer tone upon his November 2017 trip, ABC calculated that he had attacked China in over 200 tweets preceding the trip.<sup>16</sup>

The greater salience of Trump's campaign promise to defend US industry with tariffs on Chinese goods and his very public reneging on that promise, provides an opportunity to test whether voters would change their support for him because of this change in policy. One challenge in crafting the experiment is finding a comparable and truthful scenario that focuses on the relevant comparison. A condition without reneging at all or on a different economic foreign policy would inject into the experiment other treatment differences. To keep the focus on whether this particular promise matters, each of the scenarios also included a change in trade policy but varied on whether that change was on a highly covered policy such as trade with China or a less covered change such as trade with Japan and South Korea. Since Trump had campaigned specifically on tariffs towards China, this experiment allows for a tight comparison of backing down on this prominent plank of his campaign versus other similar (but not prominent) cases of backing down.

If coverage provided the necessary information to hold Trump accountable, then significantly higher levels of disapproval should be observed among those who read the China lead-in compared to those who read the Japan or South Korea lead-ins, both among Republicans and among Democrats. However, if voters are following (or reacting against) partisan-based policy cues, then observed accountability should be different among Republicans and Democrats with Republican disapproval conditional on treatment being more subdued and Democratic disapproval conditional on treatment being more prominent.

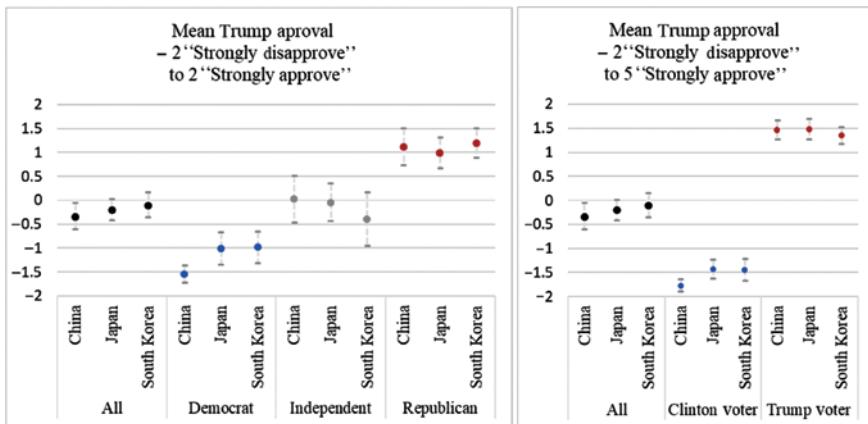
Having read their particular lead-in, participants were asked “Do you approve or disapprove of President Trump's performance in office?” and could select on a 5 point scale of “Strongly Approve,” “Somewhat Approve,” “Not Sure,” “Somewhat Disapprove,” and “Strongly Disapprove.” For display purposes, I recoded these answers to a 2 to -2 scale and calculated the average response.

Figure 4 displays the average approval rate conditional on treatment received (“China”, “Japan”, and “South Korea”). On average, respondents who received

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<sup>15</sup> “Donald Trump Says He Favors Big Tariffs on Chinese Exports,” *The New York Times*. January 7, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2016/01/07/donald-trump-says-he-favors-big-tariffs-on-chinese-exports/>.

<sup>16</sup> “10 times Trump attacked China and its trade relations with the US” by Veronica Stracqualursi. ABC News. Nov 9, 2017. <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/10-times-trump-attacked-china-trade-relations-us/story?id=46572567>.



**Figure 4:** Trump Approval Conditional on Country-Specific Trade Policy Change and Partisanship.

the China treatment answered more negatively ( $-0.33$ ) than those receiving either the Japanese treatment ( $-0.21$ ) or South Korea treatment ( $-0.10$ ) but not significantly so. However, the overall response hides strong partisan divides.

As would be expected, Democrats view the Republican president less favorably than Republicans, but for the purposes of the experiment, the comparison is whether within partisan groupings those receiving the China treatment highlighting the President's reversal of course expressed (or didn't express) a more negative view of him. Response suggest a clear partisan divide: Democrats receiving the China treatment provided on average much lower approval ratings than those who received the Japan or South Korea treatment ( $-1.6$  compared to  $-1.0$  and  $-1.0$  respectively). For Democrats, the difference between the treatments is substantial and significant. Approval across Republicans does not substantially or significantly vary. Nor do Independents, an electorally important set of voters, appear to punish Trump for a highlighted break from his campaign promises. Grouping the data by major candidate vote choice (Clinton or Trump, others excluded) results in similar partisan distinctions. The difference between the China treatment and other treatments among Clinton supporters is smaller than among the broader set of Democrats but still significant.

Both experiments suggest that in 2017, the integration of new information is highly partisan. The specific filtering of information about trade policy may prevent politicians and specifically Donald Trump from facing pushback for failure to follow through on campaign promises. Subsequent to the study, Trump imposed tariffs as promised, but these data collected in the months before his first foray into Chinese tariffs suggests had he not, he would not have lost much

approval among Republicans in general or his supporters specifically. Instead, these partisans and supporters generally followed the script provided by Trump on whether trade was good or bad for the US at any given time and on the correct trade policy toward China. These findings mirror others recent findings such as those by McDonald, Croco, and Turitto (2019) who found Republicans unconcerned about Trump's policy reversals on European Union tariffs. The current administration's ability to pull voters towards the current policy provides little space for the theoretical expectations of accountability supporting a bottom-up model of economic foreign policy.

## Conclusion

Prior to 2016, a large majority of American voters lacked distinct preferences for trade policy and sufficient knowledge of their representative's actions on trade resulting in trade being characterized as a low saliency issue. At the same time, at both the individual and elite level, trade preferences did not strongly correlate with party divisions. Elite messaging on trade could have been effective on moving public opinion or improving accountability of politicians, but messages were unevenly distributed and skewed heavily in support of protection. Trump's 2016 presidential campaign protectionist actions have both increased and diversified political and media discussion of trade. Whereas prior news coverage focused primarily on imports, recent trade wars have highlighted the importance of exports for the US economy. In principle, increased information about trade should increase the ability for American voters to hold politicians accountable on trade policy choices. However, this increased salience came jointly with increased partisanship, changing not one but two characteristics of trade politics. While informational statements by the President move voters, the partisan-nature of the movement suggests that the labeling rather than the content of the message plays a more important role. Thus, in this case, partisanship diminishes the role of information in supporting accountability on the policy itself.

Part of the reason for partisan loyalty trumping preferences over trade policy is that the broad contours of trade politics have not changed. Most voters remain in service related jobs where the effects of trade policy are distant and ambiguous.<sup>17</sup> The lack of direct connection between personal economic situation

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<sup>17</sup> People employed in the agricultural sector are a notable exception to this rule. However, rural Americans are among the staunchest Republican constituencies and unlikely to defect to the Democrats en masse.

and policy means that few voters will decide based on the trade policy successes and failures of the Trump Presidency. Furthermore, most of the elite messages around trade remain stubbornly protectionist with few voices in either party offering full-throated support for free trade. With no counter-balancing political opposition to Trump on trade politics, it is unclear where voters dissatisfied with Trump's performance should turn. The net result of these two facts is that trade is subsumed by attitudes about Trump and remains unlikely to be pivotal to many voters' decisions. In 2020 trade politics will be more discussed than in 2012, but will be no more decisive in the election.

## Appendix A: Survey Questions

### *Beliefs about trade benefits [Grid format]*

The US government continues to expand opportunities to trade through bi-lateral and multi-lateral agreements with foreign countries. What do you believe has been the effect of trade on the following:

Rows:

- Your employment
- Employment in your region
- Employment in the US

Columns:

- <1> Benefit Greatly
- <2> Benefit Slightly
- <3> No Difference
- <4> Hurt Slight
- <5> Hurt Greatly
- <6> Don't know

### *Standard ANES Question*

Some people have suggested placing new limits on foreign imports in order to protect American jobs. Others say that such limits would raise consumer prices and hurt American exports. What do you think? Do you favor or oppose placing new limits on imports – or haven't you thought much about this?

- Favor
- Oppose
- Haven't thought much about this

*Trump Approval Question and Treatment Conditions*

## [China]

During his campaign, President Trump pledged to come down hard on China, promising to increase tariffs on Chinese goods to 45%.

After his return from Asia last Wednesday, President Trump announced stronger economic engagement with China saying “In China, we also announced \$250 billion worth in trade-investment deals that will create jobs in the United States.”

## [Japan]

During his campaign, President Trump pledged to come down hard on Japan, noting “When did we beat Japan at anything? They send their cars over by the millions, and what do we do? When was the last time you saw a Chevrolet in Tokyo?”

After his return from Asia last Wednesday, President Trump announced stronger economic engagement with Japan saying “Japanese manufacturers, Toyota and Mazda, announced that they will be opening a new plant in the United States that will create 4000 jobs.”

## [Or South Korea]

During his campaign, President Trump pledged to come down hard on South Korea, promising to renegotiate the US Korean Free Trade agreement so as to retain the “the tariffs South Korea presently pays us to sell their stuff in our country.”

After his return from Asia last Wednesday, President Trump announced stronger economic engagement with South Korea saying “Last week, 42 South Korean companies announced their intent to invest in projects worth more than \$17 billion dollars in the United States, and 24 companies announced plans to purchase \$58 billion dollars in American goods and services.”

Do you approve or disapprove of President Trump's performance in office?

- <1> Strongly Approve
- <2> Somewhat Approve
- <3> Not Sure
- <4> Somewhat Disapprove
- <5> Strongly Disapprove

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