

> Changing Party Alignments in American Attitudes Toward Trade: Reflections on the Past, Implications for the Future

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Partisan alignments with respect to free trade have changed many times during the course of our nation's history. Nonetheless, for decades, up until just a few years ago, Republicans had been known as the party of free trade. As of 2016, this is clearly no longer the case. So when precisely did rank and file Republicans change their minds?

President Trump's nationalistic slogan, "America First," combined with his strong anti-trade rhetoric, has led many observers to believe that he is the source of an abrupt Republican flip-flop on international trade. As recently as the previous presidential election in 2012, international trade was part of the official Republican platform. In contrast, public opinion data suggest that while Trump may have accelerated this change in 2016, the trend toward conservative and Republican opposition to globalization started well before Trump arrived on the political scene.

The seeds of discontent with globalization among rank and file Republicans were sown at least a decade before Trump. Many Republicans and conservatives hold a variety of views that make it unsurprising that they would become the protectionist party at the level of mass public opinion. From the perspective of mass opinion, what is notable about this shift is that it suggests the elite pro-trade consensus did not keep Republican party members in line.

Drawing on trend data using cross-sectional samples from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs (CCGA), as well as a panel study gathered by the Institute for the Study of Citizens and Politics (ISCAP) at the University of Pennsylvania, I examine changes in conservative/liberal and Republican/Democratic attitudes toward trade over time. The successive cross-sectional samples from the CCGA show the relation between a person's political alignment and their attitudes toward trade and

globalization. The ISCAP panel data allow me to examine whether this represents a compositional shift; in other words, did the anti-trade public shift into the Republican fold, or did Republicans simply become more anti-trade?

By using people's initial partisan and ideological self-identifications from the beginning of the ISCAP panel study, it becomes clear that this change in party alignment is not a change in who counts themselves as Republican. In other words, it is not that people who were anti-trade came to support the Republican party, or came to identify more conservatively than before. Instead, those who already identified as Republican and/or conservative changed their minds about globalization. Given the long and well-documented history of elite-driven, top-down opinion change among the American public, particularly when it comes to highly complex issues, this is an unusual occurrence.

Trump's role in this change was to elevate globalization to the status of a partisan political issue, rather than a consensus elite issue. By moving the perceived position of the Republican candidate in the protectionist direction, where most Republicans already were, Trump capitalized on existing public opposition. He took advantage of opinions that were latent only in the sense that they were not widely publicly identified with the Republican party. As we will see from the opinion trends over time, this opinion shifted predated Trump among rank and file Republicans.

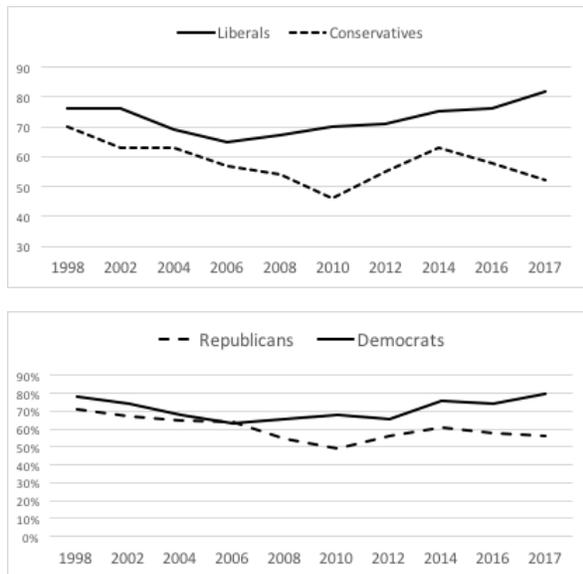
CHANGING ATTITUDES TOWARD TRADE

Survey questions about trade are notoriously sensitive to variations in question wording. For this reason, whenever possible, one must rely on multiple questions as well as multiple surveys to examine when liberals/Democrats became the party of globalization. In this

summary, I focus on those items explicitly mentioning trade agreements or globalization of the American economy.

When asked whether globalization is mostly good or mostly bad for the United States economy, the Chicago Council surveys suggest that liberals have been more supportive of globalization than conservatives at least as far back as 2002. As shown in Figure 1, in 1998, a larger percent of liberals said trade was mostly good for the country, but these two percentages were statistically indistinguishable. By 2002, however, liberals were significantly more pro-globalization than conservatives. Likewise, Figure 1 also shows a Republican-Democrat divergence on globalization before 2016. Given that pro-globalization was already the more liberal and Democratic issue position by the early 2000s, it is difficult to blame Trump for the conservative shift toward disaffection with globalization. Notably the majority of both liberals and conservatives perceive globalization as good for the country, but this has increasingly become more of a liberal viewpoint than a conservative one.

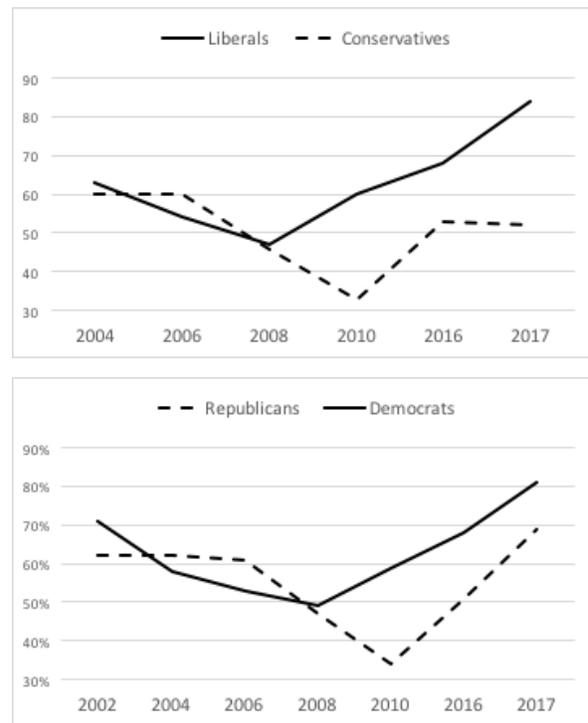
Figure 1. Favorability toward Globalization, by Ideology & by Party
Note: Percentages refer to the proportion of conservatives/liberals of Republicans/Democrats who said globalization was “mostly good” for the U.S.



In Figure 2, liberal and conservative views on whether trade is good for the U.S. economy depict a similar pattern over time. In this case, the ascendance of trade as a liberal issue position appears to have occurred later, around 2008

to 2010. But from then onward, those identifying as liberal are consistently more pro-trade than those identifying as conservative. The same basic pattern occurs among Republicans and Democrat, with Democrats perceiving trade more favorably than Republicans.

Figure 2. Favorability Toward More Free Trade Agreements, by Ideology and by Party



Using completely independent surveys involving panel data in which people self-identified by party and ideology in 2007, I hold their party allegiances constant and examine individual-level change over time in trade support. Based on a question asking people whether favor or oppose the federal government negotiating more trade agreements like NAFTA, Figure 3 shows the growing rift between conservatives and liberals in support for international trade.

Not surprisingly, Republicans and Democrats show this same pattern of increasing divergence. As shown in Figure 4, Democrats have been more pro-trade than Republicans since 2006. This timing makes it increasingly difficult to pin this change on Trump. Moreover, because these are the same individuals followed over time, we know that conservatives and Republicans changed their views, not their ideological or party preferences.

Figure 3. Favorability toward Negotiating More Free Trade Agreements, by Ideology

Note: Respondents were asked, “Do you favor or oppose the federal government in Washington negotiating more free trade agreements like NAFTA?” (Strongly oppose (1) to Strongly favor (4)).

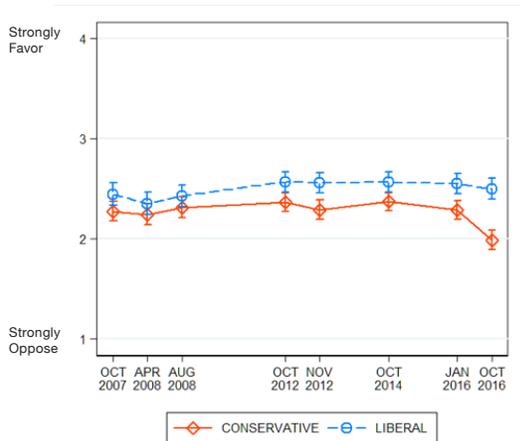
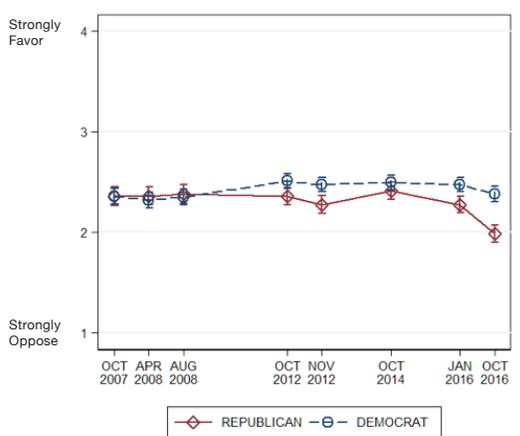


Figure 4. Favorability toward Negotiating More Free Trade Agreements, by Party

Note: Respondents were asked, “Do you favor or oppose the federal government in Washington negotiating more free trade agreements like NAFTA?” (Strongly oppose (1) to Strongly favor (4)).



Using another measure of trade support, these respondents also were asked whether they thought trade helped or hurt the American economy. Again, these differences by party identification and by ideology clearly precede Trump. Figure 5 shows that a significant difference between conservatives and liberals existed at least as early as 2012, and potentially even before then. Likewise, Figure 6 shows that Republicans were more negative about trade even in 2012. Overall, these trends tell us that trade opposition among members of the Republican mass public predated Trump. Although he

may have exacerbated this trend, it stems from Republican predispositions that are not altogether new.

Figure 5. Perception that Trade Helps versus Hurts the U.S. Economy, by Ideology

Note: Respondents were asked, “Do you think the increasing amount of trade between the U.S. and other countries helped the U.S. economy, hurt the U.S. economy, or has it not affected the U.S. economy?” (Ranges from “Hurt the economy a lot” (1) to “Helped the economy a lot” (5)).

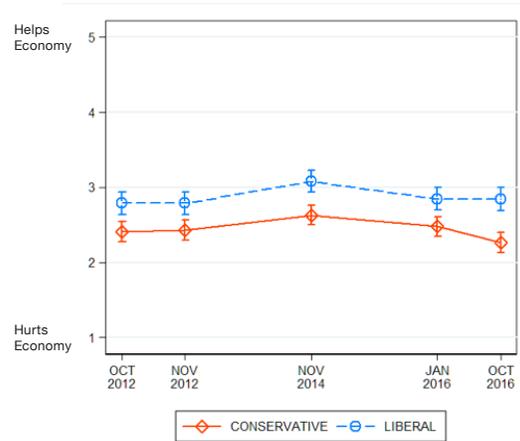
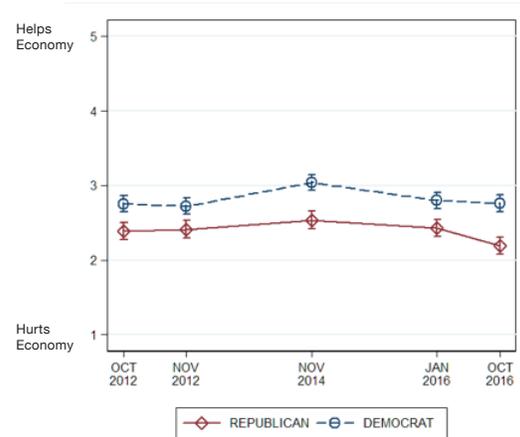


Figure 6. Perception that Trade Helps versus Hurts the U.S. Economy, by Party

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THE ROOTS OF REPUBLICAN DISCONTENT

Rising conservative opposition to trade seems unsurprising given what recent research has indicated about several major causes of trade opposition. Republican demographics, personal attitudes and political attitudes all point in this same direction. In terms of demographics, Republicans are, on average,

much older than Democrats, and younger people find globalization far more palatable than older people. Likewise, minorities skew heavily Democratic, and their views on globalization also are significantly more supportive than those of whites (Mutz, Mansfield and Kim). Education levels are likewise key predictors of trade support, and Republicans are currently significantly less educated than Democrats.

The social and political attitudes of Republicans make it even less plausible that they will support economic globalization. First, nationalism is well-established as a predictor of trade opposition (Mayda and Rodrik). The more Americans view their country chauvinistically, that is, as superior to all other countries, the more they oppose trade. Conservatives have long held higher levels of perceived national superiority than liberals, thus making them an unlikely source of mass support for international trade.

In addition, negative racial attitudes also predict of negative attitudes toward trade and globalization. While racial prejudice certainly exists to some degree regardless of party affiliation, the generally higher levels of racial antipathy among Republicans and conservatives relative to Democrats and liberals lead them toward more anti-trade views (Sabet, Mansfield and Mutz).

Republicans are also consistently higher on a central personality trait known as social dominance orientation (Jost). This a preference for hierarchy over equality; high social dominance orientation indicates that people view it as appropriate that some groups (or countries) dominate others. Thus those high in social dominance tend to oppose even “win-win” trade with other countries. Because Republicans are more likely to view trade in zero-sum, winner-loser terms, rather than as mutually beneficial, they oppose trade unless we are the winners and others the losers (Mutz and Kim). Fair trade is simply not enough for those who feel the need to dominate other countries.

In addition to demographics and social attitudes that will make trade support a hard sell for Republicans, their other policy attitudes make this difficult as well. In particular, Republicans dislike programs that involve social welfare safety nets. This predilection makes it difficult for Republican politicians to offer plans to offset the negative effects of trade on workers by implementing programs that help them make the transition to new occupations. Interestingly, even though ordinary Republicans are more likely to believe that workers are hurt by trade, they nonetheless oppose government

money being spent on assisting these workers. Thus Republican leaders are in a Catch-22 with respect to trade. Easing the effects of trade dislocation would require government interventions that rank and file Republicans typically would not support.

THE FUTURE OF MASS SUPPORT FOR TRADE

As of the 2016 election, neither party has been willing to champion the cause of international trade and the value of a global economy. To my mind, having neither party take on this leadership role is the worst of all possible options. Elite leadership is needed lest the rank and file of both parties become more negative toward international involvement. Americans of all political stripes will suffer as a consequence of withdrawal from the world economy. Without these ties, the world is likely to be a more dangerous place as well.

The 2016 presidential election marked the emergence of trade as a partisan issue, and this new high profile status seems unlikely to diminish. In the past, both parties have engaged in trade-bashing at election time as a means of whipping up mass support, but elites soon returned to business as usual under a pro-trade elite consensus. As a result, in the past politicians have paid little attention to how the public forms opinions on trade.

As a result of these underlying attitudes and trends, Democrats are in a much better position to become globalization’s advocates than are Republicans. Republicans remain more supportive of free markets in many other domains, such as school choice, for example. But it is not the “trade” part of foreign trade that is problematic for this constituency. It is the “foreign” part. The idea that international trade involves foreigners is obvious. How globalization benefits people and their countries’ economic well being is a far more complex story.

Even after Trump is no longer in office, Democrats will be better positioned to make this case than Republicans. These attitudes did not start with Trump and they are unlikely to go away when he is no longer in office. Moreover, the constituencies making up the Democratic party are increasingly those whose views are systematically more pro-trade. As the United States moves inexorably toward becoming a majority-minority nation, Democrats will be better positioned to make this case than Republicans. Republicans constitute the older, whiter, and less educated party as of 2016. All three of these characteristics—age, non-minority status and less education—lead people toward less trade-supportive views.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that Democratic candidates hit the campaign trail giving lectures on comparative advantage or why trade deficits don't tell us much about the strength of our national economy. This kind of approach is highly unlikely to succeed because the roots of mass attitudes toward globalization are not rooted in economic considerations. Telling citizens that this will save them money on consumer goods is nowhere near as compelling as the anti-trade argument that American global dominance is at stake if we allow other countries to "steal" from us.

Instead of economics, a simple narrative must be constructed to counter the one suggesting that foreigners are simply stealing our jobs. Such rhetoric fans the flames of racism and xenophobia (Silver and Mutz), creating still more social problems. I am not suggesting that trade would be an easy sell to the mass public by any means. But Republicans are unlikely to lead the charge given the nature of their mass constituencies. Moreover, Democrats have the capacity to do so while simultaneously setting up an appropriate safety net for those negatively affected by international trade.