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Election 2012: U.S. Polling Shows Strong Opposition to Current U.S. Trade Agreement Model by Independents, GOP and Democrats Alike

The 2012 U.S. elections featured a bipartisan race to align campaign positions with the U.S. public's opposition to status-quo trade policies. Recent polling indicates that U.S. public opinion has intensified from broad opposition to overwhelming opposition to NAFTA-style trade deals among independents, GOP and Democrats, with deep concern about China trade also uniting Americans across party lines.

The presidential campaigns of Barack Obama and Mitt Romney deployed more than three times as many trade-themed ads as were used in the 2008 presidential race, creating a trade-reform-is-urgently-needed narrative that reinforced the majority view of the U.S. public.¹ A Kantar Media study found that presidential campaigns spent an unprecedented \$68 million – about \$34 million each – in ads attacking more-of-the-same trade policies. Trade-themed presidential ads aired an estimated 83,000 times in 2012, more than twice the number of trade-related airings in 2008. Of the 16 most-targeted media markets for these ads, nine were not located in the free-trade-wary Rust Belt, but in parts of the country that, despite prior support for “free trade,” received a heavy dose of campaigning for trade reform.²

Following the presidential trend, 57 percent of candidates in competitive congressional races also campaigned on trade policy via ads or campaign websites. Out of more than 125 paid ads used by congressional candidates across 30 U.S. states,³ only one indicated support for any trade deals modeled on the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). (It was from GOP candidate Linda Lingle, who lost her bid for Hawaii's Senate seat.) Meanwhile, Senate candidates who employed ads against status quo trade policies won seats in Connecticut, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Wisconsin, increasing the net number of fair-trade members of the Senate by at least six.

Such widespread campaigning against more-of-the-same on trade both reflected and reinforced the U.S. public's broad rejection of the trade status quo enshrined in NAFTA-style “free trade” agreements (FTAs). A May 2012 Angus Reid Public Opinion poll found that U.S. respondents who believe that the United States should “renegotiate” or “leave” NAFTA outnumbered by nearly 4-to-1 those that say the country should “continue to be a member” (53 vs. 15 percent). Support for the “leave” or “renegotiate” positions dominated among Republicans, Democrats, and independents alike. Just 1 in 3 U.S. respondents thought that NAFTA benefitted the overall U.S. economy, and only 1 in 4 saw the pact as having benefitted U.S. workers.⁴

Given such results, it is not surprising that the NAFTA-style FTAs passed by Congress in 2011 with Korea, Panama, and Colombia bring political liability. Immediately after passage, a plurality of U.S. voters expressed opposition to the FTAs in an October 2011 *National Journal* survey, with Republicans and Democrats showing equivalent levels of opposition. Republicans without a college education opposed the FTAs by a nearly 2-to-1 margin and women expressed especially high opposition.⁵

Indeed, polls have consistently shown that Americans believe our trade policy plays a major role in putting our workers behind. In January 2011, most Americans said they believed that the trend towards a global economy was a bad thing for the country, compared with 60 percent who said it was a good thing in 2001.⁶

In 2010, while testing Democratic messages for voter response, Democratic polling firm Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research found that 45 percent of voters were much more likely or somewhat more likely to support a Democratic candidate if he or she were to highlight an opponent's support of the Colombia, Panama and South Korea FTAs.⁷ Of four possible messages, the anti-FTA message was just as powerful in swaying voters as a statement in support of tax cuts for the middle class rather than the rich. The anti-FTA message was more powerful than a message on opposing tax breaks for companies outsourcing American jobs and statements linking the opposing candidate to former President Bush's policies.

Overall, 53 percent of Americans in 2010 believed that FTAs have hurt the United States, up from 30 percent in 1999, with the shift mostly attributable to a change in thinking by upper-income Americans. Only 17 percent in 2010 believed that FTAs have benefited the United States. An NBC News-*Wall Street Journal* poll asking the same question in 2007 found that 46 percent of respondents believed FTAs were harmful compared to 28 percent who believed they were helpful. In other words, sentiment against FTAs shifted from a 3-to-2 margin in 2007 to a 3-to-1 margin in 2010. Among self-identified Tea Party supporters, 61 percent believed FTAs have hurt the United States, while "among those earning \$75,000 or more, 50 percent said free-trade pacts have hurt the U.S., up from 24 percent who said the same in 1999."⁸

Repeated polls have found trade-related outsourcing to be the foremost problem on the minds of U.S. voters. During an election cycle focused on job creation, a July 2012 poll conducted by the Mellman Group and North Star Opinion Research asked voters to name "the single biggest obstacle for creating manufacturing jobs in America today." "Our trade policies encourage outsourcing" was the top response.⁹ Similarly, a September 2010 NBC News-*Wall Street Journal* poll found that the impact of trade and outsourcing was one of the only issues on which Americans of different classes, occupations and political persuasions agree. Eighty-six percent said outsourcing of jobs by U.S. firms to low-wage foreign nations is a top cause of our economic woes – by far the top concern, with deficits and health care costs well behind. Interestingly, the only causes that got a majority of support were related to corporate greed, not excessive regulation. Sixty-nine percent of Americans thought that "free trade agreements between the United States and other countries cost the U.S. jobs" – a new high for "free trade" opposition. Among those surveyed, Republicans were even more concerned than Democrats. Also noteworthy is that those who found no real impact from trade deals overtook those who felt that trade deals have been beneficial.¹⁰

Republicans Want Fair Trade, Just Like Democrats: Republicans at all educational levels are highly skeptical of status quo trade policy. In a May 2011 *National Journal* poll, nearly 60 percent of Republicans at lower educational levels agreed with the statement that "international trade has been bad for the U.S. economy because imports have reduced demand for American-made goods, cost jobs here at home, and produced potentially unsafe products." Only 36 percent agreed with the alternative statement that "international trade has been good for the U.S. economy because demand for U.S. products abroad has resulted in economic growth and jobs for Americans and provided more choices for consumers." This skepticism has moved up the educational scale, with nearly half of college-educated Republicans also preferring the former statement. Most Republicans in both educational groups believed that "decisions by American companies to relocate jobs to other countries" has played "a major role" in "the high unemployment of the past few years;" and that competition from "lower-paid workers" abroad would inevitably lead to slower growth in Americans' income in the future.¹¹

Post-Election Polling Shows Continued Public Demands for Fair Trade: Just after the November 2010 election, Greenberg Quinlan Rosner released the results of a poll¹² they took for Democracy Corps and Campaign for America's Future. Several interesting findings emerged:

- While many pundits have suggested that Americans are primarily upset at the Democratic Party or President Obama, Americans felt even less “warm” about corporations. Among voters, only 29 percent felt warm towards corporations, while the comparable number is only 13 percent among non-voters. The numbers for big banks specifically were even worse in some regards: 12 percent among voters, and 16 percent among non-voters. These were lower ratings than for Obama, the Democrats, the GOP, Sarah Palin, Newt Gingrich, the NRA, labor unions and more. (Only “the state of the economy” garnered lower warm ratings, while "The Tea Party" fared poorly among non-voters.)
- Voters that voted for Democrats cited job offshoring as the most important issue facing the country, and said that the GOP candidate's support for job offshoring was the most important reason to not vote Republican.
- Polling respondents were read four distinct narratives of campaign messages that generic Democratic candidates ran on in 2010, and were asked whether that campaign narrative would make them more or less likely to vote for the candidate. The first reminded voters' of the GOP's role in creating the conditions behind the recession, the second criticized GOP support for job offshoring, the third focused on GOP support for “free trade agreements” and how America should instead give benefits to companies that create jobs in the country, the fourth criticized that Obama promised change but instead Democrats wrecked the economy. The third message did the best among voters, and the second message did the best among non-voters – both obviously dealing with fair trade themes.
- Regardless of how or whether they voted, poll respondents were asked to respond to whether they agreed with a set of statements about the state of the country. The first related to concerns about the size of the national debt, the second to Wall Street rather than Main Street being bailed out, the third about lack of bipartisanship, the fourth on corporate influence in election finance, the fifth on inequality and CEO bonuses, and the sixth and final message focused on job offshoring and the need to “make things in America.” Eighty-nine percent of voters agreed with the sixth message on fair trade – more than any other narrative. Among non-voters, 85 percent agreed with the sixth message – second only to the third narrative about bipartisanship. Moreover, the percentage gap between those that agreed vs. disagreed with the fair trade message was the widest of all the narratives, i.e. it “won” by the largest margin.
- Poll respondents were asked whether they favored a series of two hypothetical policies that the next Congress could take up: upgrading our national infrastructure, or launching a five year fair trade plan that attacks job offshoring. The second plan fared significantly more favorably among both voters and non-voters, and there was also a larger (positive) gap between those that favored versus disapproved of the latter proposal.

So far so good. But then, poll respondents were asked a bizarre trade-related question: would they favor a hypothetical Democratic or hypothetical Republican proposal on trade. These were characterized as:

“On trade and exports, the Democratic leaders say we need to double our exports over the next five years, that requires ending subsidies to corporations that send jobs abroad, passing trade agreements to open markets, enforcing an even playing field for US companies, and working globally to limit trade imbalances.”

OR

“On trade and exports, the Republican leaders say we need to increase our exports, and that requires passing more trade agreements, getting government out of the way. American workers can compete and win with any workers across the world.”

When given these binary alternatives, more voting respondents favored the GOP proposal, while more non-voting respondents favored the Dem proposal. In other words, the only way for Democrats to squander the significant advantage that robust fair trade advocacy brings for them is to start sounding too much like Republicans, blur the line between the parties, and insist on “passing more trade agreements.”

Greenberg and CAF anticipated this argument, and tested an alternative set of messages:

“On trade and exports, the Democratic leaders say, It's time to challenge countries like China that are taking our jobs, end subsidies to corporations that send jobs abroad, stop passing NAFTA-like trade deals until we have a national strategy for making things in America and exporting goods, not jobs.”

OR

“On trade and exports, the Republican leaders say we need to increase our exports, and that requires passing more trade agreements, getting government out of the way. American workers can compete and win with any workers across the world.”

Unsurprisingly, Democrats regain the upper hand when their position is described as blocking more NAFTA-like deals and aggressively creating jobs. A significantly higher percentage of voters and non-voters alike said that they “strongly support” the first statement, while support for the Republican position dropped among both voters and non-voters. And, as Greenberg’s crosstabs show,¹³ the stronger statement helped Democrats especially with swing voters, independents, and their own base – all of whom were relatively more turned off by the blurry message. In other words, as Public Citizen found in an analysis of 182 races in the 2010 election, the best defense is a good fair trade offense.¹⁴

Recent Polling Data Confirm Earlier Findings of U.S. Public Opposition to Status Quo Trade

Mellman Group / North Star Opinion Research, June 28-July 2, 2012

- U.S. voters supported Buy America policies by a 12-to-1 margin. The overwhelming support has grown since prior iterations of the same poll – Buy America received an 11-to-1 margin of support in 2011 and a 5-to-1 margin in 2010.¹⁵
- Buy America enjoyed resounding support across the political spectrum, with 91 percent of Democrats, 87 percent of Republicans, and 87 percent of independents all favoring Buy America provisions.¹⁶

USA Today / Gallup, Nov. 20-22, 2009¹⁷

- Twice as many Americans volunteered that “keeping manufacturing jobs here/stopping sending overseas” and “higher taxes on imports/Buy American” are the best ways to create more U.S. jobs, as compared with other policies (like lowering taxes).

Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, April 28, 2009¹⁸

- Forty percent of Americans – including 42 percent of Republicans and 45 percent of independents – said that “free trade agreements – like NAFTA, and the policies of the World Trade Organization” (WTO) have been “a bad thing” for the United States, while 10-15 percent less of each demographic said they have been a good thing. This is a dramatic reversal from a 2004 poll in which Americans believed that these trade agreements have been a good thing, by a 47-34 margin.

- Only 4 percent of Americans believed that these policies have helped the financial situation of them and their family; and only 11 and 13 percent respectively believed that they have led to higher wages and more jobs. By contrast, 33 percent didn't even believe that these policies lower the price of products that they buy – a key claim of NAFTA-WTO supporters.

Zogby, September 2008¹⁹

- The poll found that NAFTA opposition is the majority position across every demographic. *Hispanics were among the most anti-NAFTA, as were progressives, liberals, Democrats and internationalists.*

Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, September 2008²⁰

- The survey revealed that a majority of voters are cool to NAFTA, regardless of party affiliation, ideology, gender, age, generational cohort, race, educational level, union membership status, marital status, parental status, religion, how they feel about the direction of the country, and which party controls their congressional district. *Catholic, swing and independent voters – among the most sought after constituencies – were among the most anti-NAFTA voting blocs.*

ENDNOTES

¹ For more information, see the Public Citizen news release: “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,” Nov. 7 2012. Available at: <http://www.citizen.org/documents/2012-election-report.pdf>.

² Elizabeth Wilner, “Role of Jobs, Outsourcing and Trade in Select Critical 2012 Contests,” Kantar Media memo, Nov. 13, 2012. Available at: <http://americanmanufacturing.org/files/CMAG%20AAM%20postelext%20analysis%20FINAL.pdf>.

³ To view these trade-themed ads, visit <http://www.citizen.org/2012-election-ad-index>.

⁴ Agnus Reid Public Opinion poll, May 7-8, 2012. Available at: http://www.angus-reid.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/2012.05.17_NAFTA.pdf.

⁵ United Technologies / National Journal Poll, Oct. 13-16, 2011. Available at: <http://www.nationaljournal.com/daily/in-both-parties-a-schism-on-trade-20111017>.

⁶ Washington Post Poll, Jan. 13-17, 2011. Available at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/story/2011/01/28/ST2011012802479.html?sid=ST2011012802479>.

⁷ Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, “Democracy Corps: Frequency Questionnaire,” Oct. 2010. Available at: <http://www.democracycorps.com/wp-content/files/dcor100410fq10.pdf>.

⁸ Sara Murray and Douglas Belkin, “Americans Sour on Trade,” Wall Street Journal, Oct. 4, 2010. Available at: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB20001424052748703466104575529753735783116.html>.

⁹ Mellman Group and North Star Opinion Research Poll, Jun. 28 – Jul. 2, 2012. Available at: <http://americanmanufacturing.org/files/Toplines.pdf>.

¹⁰ NBC News and Wall Street Journal, “Survey: Study #101061,” Hart/McInturff, Sept. Available at: <http://online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/WSJNBCPoll09282010.pdf>.

¹¹ Mathew Cooper, “Trade Gulf,” National Journal, May 26, 2011. Poll conducted by Allstate / National Journal / Heartland Monitor November 29 to December 1, 2010.

¹² Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, “Democracy Corps: Frequency Questionnaire,” Oct. 6, 2010. Available at: <http://www.democracycorps.com/wp-content/files/dcorcaf110310fq14.pdf>.

¹³ Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, “Post-Mortem Survey: The Historic 2010 Election,” Nov. 2-3, 2010, pg. 57- 58. Available at: <http://www.democracycorps.com/wp-content/files/dcor112010-CAFpostelection.FINAL.pdf>.

¹⁴ Todd Tucker, “Election 2010: The Best Defense was a Fair Trade Offense,” Nov. 3, 2010. Available at: http://www.citizen.org/documents/2010_Election_Trade_Report.pdf.

¹⁵ Mellman Group and North Star Opinion Research Poll, Jun. 28 – Jul. 2, 2012, at 2. Available at: <http://americanmanufacturing.org/files/Toplines.pdf>.

¹⁶ Mellman Group and North Star Opinion Research Poll, Jun. 28 – Jul. 2, 2012. Available at <http://americanmanufacturing.org/blog/voters-see-manufacturing-%E2%80%9Creplaceable-core-strong-economy%E2%80%9D>.

¹⁷ Gallup, “American See Protectionism, Tax Cuts as Ways to Create Jobs,” Dec. 2, 2010. Available at: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/124538/Americans-See-Protectionism-Tax-Cuts-Ways-Create-Jobs.aspx>.

¹⁸ Pew Research Center, “Support for Free Trade Recovers Despite Recession,” April 28, 2009. Available at: <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1205/support-for-free-trade-up>.

¹⁹ Zogby International “Zogby Interactive Likely Voters 9/23/08 thru 9/25/08,” Sept. 25, 2008. Available at: <http://www.zogby.com/news/X-IAD.pdf>.

²⁰ Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, “Democracy Corps National/Presidential Battleground Frequency Questionnaire,” September 1-3, 2008. Available at: <http://www.democracycorps.com/wp-content/files/dcor090308fq8.pdf>.