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Unfair Trade Deals Becoming Even More Unpopular, U.S. Polling Shows

Recent polling indicates that American public opinion over the past few years has intensified from broad opposition to *overwhelming* opposition to NAFTA-style trade deals.

In 2011, for the first time in history, a majority of Americans believe that China – not the U.S. – is the world’s leading economic power.¹ Eighty percent of Americans believe that the global economy has a great or a fair amount of influence on the way things are going in America, while 63 percent believe America’s ability to compete economically is less than good.²

How did this come to pass? 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 2001.³

A September 2010 NBC News-Wall Street Journal poll found that the impact of trade and outsourcing is 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. companies 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 think that “free trade agreements between the United States and other countries cost the U.S. jobs.” This is a new high. Among those surveyed, Republicans are even more concerned than Democrats. Also noteworthy is that those who find no real impact from trade deals have overtaken those who feel that trade deals have been beneficial.⁴

Fifty-three percent of Americans believe “free trade” agreements (FTAs) have hurt the U.S., up from 30 percent in 1999, with the shift mostly attributable to a change in thinking by upper-income Americans. Only seventeen percent now believe 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. Another notable fact from the September 2010 poll is that 61 percent of self-identified Tea Party supporters believe “free trade” agreements have hurt the U.S., while “among those earning \$75,000 or more, 50% now say free-trade pacts have hurt the U.S., up from 24% who said the same in 1999.”⁵

And the Korea FTA, specifically, has political liability. Polling on strategic messaging for the midterm elections has found that voters respond enthusiastically to candidates’ statements in opposition to NAFTA-style FTAs. In the course of testing Democratic messages for voter response, Democratic polling firm Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research found that 45 percent of voters are 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 Bush-negotiated Colombia, Panama and South Korea FTAs.⁶ 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 rich Americans. 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.

Republicans want fair trade, just like Democrats

Republicans at all educational levels are highly skeptical of status quo trade policy. In a poll released by National Journal in May 2011, 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 is even creeping up the educational scale, with nearly half of college-educated Republicans preferring the former statement as well.

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.⁷

Post-Election Polling Shows Continued Public Demands for Fair Trade

Just after the November 2010 election, Greenberg Quinlan Rosner released the results of a poll⁸ they took for Democracy Corps and Campaign for America's Future. There are several interesting finds:

- While many pundits have suggested that Americans are primarily upset at the Democratic Party or President Obama, Americans feel even less "warm" about corporations. Among voters, only 29 percent fell 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 are lower warm ratings that have 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 likely or less likely to vote for the candidate. The first reminded voters' of the Republican Party'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 was a message about how 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 about 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, eighty-five 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 that were characterized as follows:

“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 say that they “strongly support” the first statement, while support for the Republican position drops among both voters and non-voters. And, as Greenberg’s crosstabs show,⁹ it helps Democrats out especially with swing voters, independents, and their own base – all of whom are relatively more turned off by the blurry message.

In other words, as a post-election analysis of 182 races by Public Citizen found, the best defense is a good fair trade offense.¹⁰

Other Polls Confirm the Public’s Desire for Fair Trade

USA Today / Gallup, Nov. 20-22, 2009

- 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).¹¹

Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, April 28, 2009¹²

- 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” have been “a bad thing” for the United States, while 10-15 percent less of these demographics 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 believe that these policies have helped the financial situation of them and their family; and only 11 and 13 percent respectively believe that they have led to higher wages and more jobs. By contrast, 33 percent don’t even believe that these policies lower the price of products that they buy – a key claim of NAFTA-WTO supporters.

Zogby, September 2008¹³

- NAFTA opposition is the majority position across every demographic. *Hispanics are among the most anti-NAFTA, as are progressives, liberals, Democrats and internationalists.*

Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, September 2008¹⁴

- 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 – are among the most anti-NAFTA voting blocs in the country.*

CNN/Opinion Research Corporation, July 1, 2008¹⁵

- 51 percent of Americans view foreign trade as a threat to the economy, compared to only 35 percent of Americans who felt free trade posed a threat to the economy in 2000.

Rasmussen Reports, June 18, 2008¹⁶

- 56 percent of Americans believe that NAFTA should be renegotiated. Only 16 percent believe it should *not* be renegotiated.
- 71 percent say positions on pacts are important to them in terms of how they will vote. Only 20 percent say it is not important.

ENDNOTES

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¹⁵ Alexander Mooney, "Poll: Majority against free trade," *CNN.com*, July 1, 2008, Available at: http://articles.cnn.com/2008-07-01/politics/cnn.poll_1_free-trade-john-mccain-opinion-research-corporation?_s=PM:POLITICS

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