March 2014 Trade Polling Analysis

New Polls Reveal that U.S. Public Supports Trade in General, while Opposing Current “Trade” Policy Agenda

Surveys Show Opposition to Fast Track and the TPP despite Support for “Trade,” while Corporate-Commissioned Polls Are Invalidated By Use of Biased Questions

Six new trade-related polls released in late 2013 and early 2014 have been generating headlines, some misleading, on the views of the U.S. public toward trade and “trade” policies. The surveys fall into three groups:

- Pew Research Center, Gallup and NBC/Wall Street Journal polls pose general questions about trade but not about the current trade policy agenda. These surveys replicate past findings that Americans broadly support the general concept of international trade.¹

- A poll commissioned by a business group, an environmental group and a union, conducted by Democratic Hart Research and GOP Chesapeake Beach Consulting, gauges U.S. public opinion on the current trade policy agenda after presenting both sides of the debate. It reveals more than two-to-one public opposition to the Obama administration’s bid for Fast Track authority to push through Congress the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).²

- Two recent corporate-commissioned polls pose questions blatantly biased in favor of the current trade policy agenda. Not surprisingly, questions that only present one side of the debate find support for that side. Given that the polls invite strong response bias, the findings shed little light on American public opinion.

As the only poll posing pro and con arguments before asking questions about the specific trade policy matters now before Congress, the Hart/Chesapeake survey is the most instructive with respect to American voters’ views of these issues in the run-up to the 2014 congressional elections.

U.S. Public Opposes Fast Track Two-to-One after Hearing Both Sides’ Arguments

The Hart/Chesapeake poll finds that 62 percent of respondents oppose giving Fast Track authority to the Obama administration for the TPP, while 28 percent support it. Among those with strong opinions, Fast Track opponents outnumber proponents by more than three to one (43 percent strongly opposing versus 12 percent strongly favoring). The poll reveals majority opposition to Fast Track across all age groups, income brackets and geographic regions, while finding greater opposition among Republicans than among Democrats.³ While commissioned by
groups opposed to Fast Track, the poll minimized bias by presenting respondents with strong arguments on both sides of the Fast Track debate, after which respondents still expressed more than two-to-one opposition to Fast Track. In addition, respondents were given competing arguments such as “Fast-track authority allows the president to negotiate agreements while preserving Congress’s crucial role in reviewing and ratifying agreements, just as the Constitution calls for,” and “Congress should meet its responsibility, review the agreement carefully, and make sure it is in the best interests of American workers and consumers.” Sixty-eight percent of respondents identify with the latter, anti-Fast Track argument while 27 percent identify with the pro-Fast Track argument. 4

The poll also asks respondents to assess the relative strength of a series of common arguments for and against Fast Track. While 50 percent or more of the respondents found eight anti-Fast Track arguments convincing (e.g. it gives the President too much power), none of the pro-Fast Track arguments (e.g. free trade supports 38 million jobs) were ranked as convincing by a majority of respondents. Finally, just 11 percent of respondents say they would be more likely to vote for a congressional candidate in the next election if she or he voted in favor of Fast Track, while 43 percent of respondents state they would be less likely to vote for the candidate. 5

Corporate-Commissioned NAM and BRT Polls Use One-Sided Arguments, Inaccurate Premises and Leading Questions to Skew Results in Favor of Current Trade Policy Agenda

In contrast to the Hart/Chesapeake poll, two recent polls commissioned by corporate alliances – the Business Roundtable (BRT) and the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) – use biased questions on Fast Track and proposed trade deals, framed by one-sided and oft-errant arguments that blatantly support the current trade policy agenda.

For example, one of the questions from the March 2014 BRT poll straightforwardly states that Fast Track “needs to be updated and passed again” immediately before asking respondents whether they “favor or oppose Congressional action to update and pass” Fast Track. 6 Such plain bias negates the validity of the polls’ results. In other questions, the polls start with a speculative premise that the TPP and the proposed Trans-Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (TAFTA) are geared toward “creating[] opportunities to sell more American-made goods and services” and “creating[] a fair and level playing field” before asking whether respondents support such agreements. 7 The responses to such questions gauge whether respondents support the goals of increased exports and “fair” trade, which they unsurprisingly do. The questions do not effectively gauge whether respondents believe the TPP and TAFTA will achieve those goals, since that link is simply assumed.

Corporate Polls Ask Respondents to Assume Counterfactual Premise that Pacts Boost Exports

In repeatedly conveying to respondents that the TPP and TAFTA will boost exports, the BRT and NAM polls contradict the evidence presented by the results of free trade agreements (FTAs) serving as the templates for the TPP and TAFTA. Take, for example, one of the questions in the February 2014 NAM poll:
Nearly half of U.S. manufactured goods are exported to the 20 countries with which the United States has free trade agreements. Do you support America seeking more trade agreements with additional countries to spur U.S. exports and grow manufacturing?9

The question’s implicit premise – that U.S. FTAs increase U.S. exports – is not supported by the official government trade data. Overall growth of U.S. exports to nations that are not FTA partners has actually exceeded combined U.S. export growth to U.S. FTA partners by 30 percent over the past decade.10 Under the Korea FTA – the most recent U.S. pact, which served as the U.S. opening offer for many chapters of the TPP – U.S. average monthly exports to Korea have actually fallen 11 percent (including a 5 percent fall in manufacturing exports).11 And while the poll states that nearly half of U.S. manufactured goods are exported to FTA partners, it omits the fact that since enactment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), annual growth in U.S. manufacturing exports to Canada and Mexico has fallen 62 percent below the annual rate seen in the years before NAFTA.12

Thus, the question, like several others in the BRT and NAM polls, posits an unsubstantiated premise that proposed trade agreements will achieve the widely-supported goal of increased exports, and then asks respondents to assume that premise in stating whether they would support such agreements. Given such framing, the question does more to assess public support for U.S. export growth than for the TPP or TAFTA. If anything is surprising about the results – 76 percent indicating support – it is that public backing for U.S. export promotion is not higher.13

Only one question in either the BRT or NAM polls asks respondents to actually assess the FTA-exports link assumed by the polls’ questions. The final question in the BRT poll asks, “Do you believe or not believe this statement: trade agreements have a proven record of opening markets for U.S. products.”14 However, by the time a respondent received this question, they had already heard the poll assert in every single prior question that trade agreements do in fact open markets for U.S. products. The prior four questions conveyed this link five times:

- The United States is “negotiating trade agreements to open foreign markets for American-made goods and services;”
- The United States is “negotiating trade agreements to create opportunities to sell more American-made goods and services to 11 other countries in the Asia-Pacific region and to European countries;”
- Current trade negotiations are “to open these foreign markets to U.S. goods and services;”
- Congress has authorized prior presidents to “negotiate trade agreements that open foreign markets for U.S. goods and services;” and
- The objective of Fast Track is to help Congress and the President negotiate “trade agreements that open foreign markets.”15

After this barrage of assertions that trade agreements open foreign markets, it is not surprising that a majority of respondents then answered in the affirmative when asked if trade agreements have opened markets for U.S. products. Such comprehensive bias makes it difficult to attach significance to the poll’s results.
While the BRT and NAM polls exploit the U.S. public’s interest in increasing U.S. exports by indicating, despite the evidence, that pending trade agreements would fulfill that goal, their one-sided framing does not address the U.S. public’s even stronger fears that the pending pacts could repeat the negative impacts of past deals.

When the Hart/Chesapeake poll asked respondents to pick the two most important goals for U.S. trade agreements, the goal of “opening foreign markets to U.S. exports” garnered votes from just 15 percent of respondents. In contrast, 49 percent of respondents picked the goal of “preventing U.S. jobs from moving overseas” as a top priority. The goals of “preventing unfair competition that lowers U.S. workers’ wages,” “ensuring the safety of imported products/foods,” and “preventing harm to the environment” were also ranked as higher priorities for U.S. trade deals than boosting exports.16

Past FTAs have repeatedly violated these goals by offering extraordinary foreign investor privileges to U.S. companies that offshore U.S. jobs, pitting U.S. workers against low-wage workers abroad, restricting U.S. inspections of imported meat and seafood, and empowering foreign corporations to attack environmental safeguards before international tribunals.17 The BRT and NAM polls do not mention any of these as potential outcomes of new trade agreements, despite the fact that they have been the result of prior FTAs, opting instead to highlight a hypothetical boost to export growth not seen under past FTAs.

Even if the suggestion that the TPP and TAFTA would increase export growth were substantiated by past deals, a balanced poll would have stated the potential for increased exports (or jobs, lower prices, or other common FTA promises) alongside the potential for increased offshoring, wage stagnation, unsafe food, and environmental harm. Given that the U.S. public places higher priority on avoiding the latter FTA threats than achieving the former FTA promises (according to the results of the Hart/Chesapeake poll), this more balanced survey question likely would have resulted in opposition to further FTAs.

Corporate Polls Offer Respondents False Depictions and Open Support for Fast Track

The BRT and NAM polls exhibit even clearer bias in their questions about Fast Track. The BRT poll states:

From the 1930s through 2007, Congress has authorized every President to negotiate trade agreements that open foreign markets for U.S. goods and services, but that authority – called Trade Promotion Authority – expired in 2007 and needs to be updated and passed again. Do you favor or oppose Congressional action to update and pass Trade Promotion Authority legislation?18

First, the statement preceding the question is factually wrong. “Trade Promotion Authority” is a rebranding of Fast Track, which was only proposed by President Nixon in 1973 and enacted in 1975. From 1967 until 1975, there was no delegated trade authority. From 1934 until 1967, the president’s trade authority came from the Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act, which fundamentally differed from Fast Track in that it only gave the President the authority to
negotiate and enter into agreements affecting tariffs and quotas. Fast Track was novel in that it
granted the president the sweeping authority to negotiate pacts and send them to Congress for an
expedited, no-amendment, limited-debate vote even if those pacts required changes to a wide
swath of non-trade domestic policies, as has been the case with Fast-Tracking FTAs.¹⁹

Further, the question omits the fact that presidents have repeatedly found it impossible to obtain
Fast Track authority from Congress, given its controversial nature. As a result, Fast Track has
only been in effect for five of the 20 years since NAFTA was enacted. By inaccurately framing
Fast Track as a consistent gift to presidents since the 1930s, the question glosses over Fast
Track’s controversial history, thereby misleading respondents.

Second, the statement preceding BRT’s Fast Track question bluntly tells respondents how to
answer the question. Just before asking whether Congress should act to “update and pass” Fast
Track, the question states that Fast Track “needs to be updated and passed.”²⁰ It is difficult to
envisage more straightforward bias. If BRT wanted respondents to hear arguments before
answering the question, it should have instructed the polling firm to provide respondents with
arguments for and against reviving Fast Track, letting them pick the more convincing argument.
When the Hart/Chesapeake poll did just that, respondents favored the anti-Fast Track argument
by more than two to one. Given that the BRT question openly argues for one side of the debate,
its results cannot be taken as valid.

In its second Fast Track question, the BRT poll once again uses misleading information to prod
respondents to take a pro-Fast Track position:

*By passing Trade Promotion Authority legislation, Congress can set goals for trade
agreements and require the President to consult with it during their negotiation.
Congress must then approve each final trade agreement. Do you support passage of
Trade Promotion Authority to help Congress and the President put in place trade
agreements that open foreign markets?*²¹

The question neglects to mention that the goals that Congress could set under Fast Track, called
“negotiating objectives,” were non-binding – a president could, and repeatedly did, ignore the
objectives, signing the pact and locking in its contents before Congress got a vote.²² Further, the
question implies that Congress needs Fast Track in order to set goals for trade agreements. But
under a proposed replacement for Fast Track in which Congress would have to approve a pact’s
contents before the president could sign it, Congress would not only set goals for a pact, but
would have greater assurance that executive branch negotiators would respect those goals (in
order to garner the requisite congressional pre-approval).²³ The question also implies that Fast
Track is needed to enact trade agreements. Yet, literally hundreds of U.S. tariff-cutting and other
trade agreements have been enacted without resort to Fast Track.²⁴

In addition, while the question notes that Congress got a vote on already-signed trade pacts under
Fast Track, it fails to mention the extraordinary procedures that distinguished Fast Tracked pacts
from regular bills: there was no normal committee procedure to review the implementing
legislation that the White House wrote for a signed pact, Congress could not amend the
legislation (which changed domestic laws to conform to the pact’s terms), debate was strictly
limited, and the vote had to occur on an expedited timeline. Any question gauging public opinion toward Fast Track would be remiss to not mention these core features that define Fast Track. When the Hart/Chesapeake poll mentioned the procedural changes, respondents expressed overwhelming Fast Track opposition. By omitting Fast Track’s defining characteristics while including the misleading implications above, the BRT poll’s question offers respondents a distorted picture of Fast Track that can only produce distorted responses.

Meanwhile, the depiction of trade authority in NAM’s poll is so far removed from the reality of Fast Track that it is not clear that the poll is actually asking about Fast Track:

*The President has Constitutional authority to negotiate international agreements and Congress has Constitutional authority to regulate trade with foreign nations. Do you believe that Congress and the President should work together so that America can negotiate and put in place trade agreements that eliminate barriers and level the playing field?*

Few are likely to oppose the notion that Congress and the president should “work together” (particularly given widespread frustration with the current level of polarization in the federal government). But while most would likely support a general disposition toward cooperation, it is unclear to what policy of collaboration, if any, the poll is referring. Certainly “working together” is not an apt description for Fast Track, which empowered the president to ignore congressional goals for a trade pact, sign a deal that contravened those goals, and then send it to Congress for an expedited, limited-debate, up-or-down vote on a timeline of the president’s choosing.

However, NAM chooses to use the poll’s result, showing unsurprisingly broad support for “working together,” as a reason to revive Fast Track. In its press release announcing the poll, NAM states, “Americans from across the political spectrum believe that the President and Congress should work together to seek out new trade agreements, according to new polling data. The most effective way to ensure this collaboration is through swift passage of Trade Promotion Authority…” The poll reveals that the U.S. public supports collaboration, not a trade authority mechanism that would inhibit collaboration.

### General Polls Reveal Public Support for Trade, Not More-of-the-Same “Trade” Policies

While the corporate-commissioned polls offer little information on U.S. public opinion toward the current trade policy agenda due to their biased results, several other recent trade-related polls offer little insight because they do not ask about that agenda. These surveys, conducted by Pew Research Center, Gallup and NBC in conjunction with *The Wall Street Journal*, demonstrate majority U.S. support for “the growing trade and business ties between the U.S. and other countries,” as Pew worded it. Support for trade is not surprising. Past polls, including ones by these same polling groups, have found majority support for trade but majority opposition for U.S. FTAs modeled after NAFTA. The recent series of polls do not ask about NAFTA-style deals such as the TPP or TAFTA, nor about Fast Track or any other specific trade policies.

This fact has not stopped corporate groups from misusing the polls’ results as backing for Fast Track, TPP and TAFTA. The Chamber of Commerce, for example, noted that the Pew poll’s
results “show that a majority of Americans, both Democrats and Republicans, recognize the benefits of trade,” and then stated that Fast Track “is the key to unlock the benefits of America’s ambitious trade agenda.” But without asking anything about Fast Track or that ambitious agenda, the polls present no reason to doubt the Hart/Chesapeake poll’s finding of broad opposition to Fast Track, nor prior polls’ finding of public opposition to FTAs alongside public support of trade.

The findings of the recent Pew poll do not get more specific than the aforementioned U.S. public support for “trade and business ties.” The December 2013 survey also finds that respondents generally think positively of “greater U.S. involvement in the global economy,” which is even less connected to particular trade policies. However, Pew did inquire about specific policies in a November 2010 poll, asking “do you think that free trade agreements like NAFTA and the policies of the World Trade Organization have been a good thing or a bad thing for the United States?” A plurality of respondents stated that the pacts had been bad for the country (44 percent for “bad” versus 35 percent for “good”). But in the same poll, when asked if “increased trade” with a series of countries “would be good for the United States, or not,” a majority of respondents supported increased trade with each named country, except for South Korea and China.

The results – broad public support for trade, but broad opposition to FTAs – are not contradictory when considering the increasing degree to which FTAs have implicated non-trade domestic policy arenas, including healthcare reform, environmental protection, immigration, food safety, zoning and land use, financial regulation and data privacy. Pew’s December 2013 poll confirms the wide support for trade, while not providing any evidence to suggest that wide opposition to FTAs has changed. If anything, the poll’s additional finding that nearly three out of every four respondents oppose the offshoring of U.S. jobs would indicate continued public rejection of agreements modeled after deals like NAFTA that have incentivized offshoring.

A February 2014 Gallup poll finds similarly broad support for the general goal of trade, with a majority seeing it as “an opportunity for economic growth through increased U.S. exports” rather than “a threat to the economy from foreign imports.” When asking the same question in earlier years, Gallup has often found similar results, though in some years those seeing trade as a threat have outweighed those seeing it as an opportunity. Gallup does not attribute these shifts to changes in public perceptions of FTAs or any other trade policies. Instead, Gallup notes that as respondents have become more optimistic about the economic outlook, they have tended to view trade more positively.

A March 2014 NBC/Wall Street Journal poll confirms broad U.S. public support for trade without mentioning specific trade policies. The poll asks whether respondents would be more or less likely to vote for a congressional candidate who “favors new trade agreements with other countries” and finds that a plurality of respondents would be more likely to vote for such a candidate. While “trade agreements” may be more specific than “trade ties,” the question still does not specify the type of agreement. Specification matters because trade agreements can differ vastly, from deals that actually primarily concern trade to sweeping deals like the TPP, which has chapters threatening access to medicines, Wall Street reform, environmental safeguards, food safety and Internet freedom.
While the recent *NBC/Wall Street Journal* poll makes no mention of the TPP, nor specifies the form the “new trade agreements” would take, a September 2010 *NBC/Wall Street Journal* poll suggests that the U.S. public does not want new agreements to be more of the same FTAs of the past. Fifty-three percent of the respondents in that poll stated that “free trade agreements between the United States and foreign countries…have hurt the United States,” while only 17 percent said that FTAs had helped the country.\(^36\) Given this data, it would be interesting to know how respondents would have answered the newer *NBC/Wall Street Journal* survey if the question had been about support for a candidate who “favors new trade agreements similar to NAFTA and the recent Korea FTA.” Absent such a question, the poll’s results again are more indicative of public support for trade, not more-of-the-same “trade” pacts.

ENDNOTES


3. Hart/Chesapeake memo, at 1.

4. Hart/Chesapeake memo, at 3.


7. BRT memo, at 1.


11. This is an inflation-adjusted comparison between the average monthly export levels from the year before the FTA’s implementation and from the 22 post-implementation months for which data are available. Manufactured goods are defined as NAICS 31, 32 and 33. U.S. International Trade Commission, “Interactive Tariff and Trade DataWeb,” accessed March 10, 2014. Available at: [http://dataweb.usitc.gov/](http://dataweb.usitc.gov/).


14. BRT memo, at 2.

15. BRT memo, at 1-2.


BRT memo, at 1.


BRT memo, at 2.


NAM memo, at 2.


Pew 2013 poll, at 40.

Pew 2010 poll, at 1.

Pew 2010 poll, at 5.

Pew 2013 poll, at 8.


