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Trump Swims Against the Tide on Trade

More Americans than ever say free exchange boosts the economy and job creation.



By William A. Galston



When it comes to trade, it is not America's allegedly clueless elites who are out of touch with the American people—it's President Trump.

The evidence is clear. According to a **Chicago Council on Global Affairs survey** released last week, **82% of Americans believe trade is good for the economy, 85% think it's good for consumers, and 67% think it's good for creating jobs in the U.S.**

Mr. Trump has presided over, and may inadvertently have sparked, the most significant shift toward pro-trade sentiment in modern American history. As recently as 2016, the

Chicago Council finds, only 59% of Americans thought trade was good for the economy. In two years this figure has risen by 23 points. Perceptions about the effect of trade on employment have changed even more dramatically. Two years ago, 40% of Americans thought trade was good for job creation. Today, this figure is an astounding 27 points higher.

The president and his advisers might be interested to learn that this shift of opinion has been broad-based. While positive sentiment about the effects of trade on the economy rose 16 points among Democrats, it increased 25 points among independents and 31 points for Republicans. Not surprisingly, 61% of Americans now believe that the U.S. should join the successor to the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the free-trade agreement from which Mr. Trump withdrew early in his administration.

Public opinion on the North American Free Trade Agreement, the current focus of disputes between the U.S. and its trading partners, is more complex. During the past decade overall support for Nafta has soared from 42% to 63%. The surge has been especially strong among Democrats, whose support increased from 41% to 79%, while support among independents rose from 40% to 62%. For Republicans, however, the story has been different: 43% in 2008, 43% today. As the rest of the country has abandoned its reservations about open trade with Mexico and Canada, Republicans have retained theirs.

Here too, the most recent trends are unmistakable—and startling. In just the past year, as Mr. Trump has ramped up his attack, overall public support for Nafta has risen by a broadly based 10 points—8 points among Democrats, 9 for Republicans, 11 for independents.

Mr. Trump should think again, moreover, about focusing his ire on Canada. According to the Pew Research Center, 67% of Americans harbor warm feelings toward Canada, including 59% of his own party. After he spent more than three years whipping up antipathy to Mexico, his supporters may be experiencing whiplash when they are told that the real bad actor is America's neighbor to the north.

Actually, China is the problem. But as the Trump administration prepares to expand tariffs on Chinese imports, it is in danger again of outrunning its political supply lines. Seventy-one percent of Americans, including 56% of Republicans, are concerned that a trade war with China will hurt their local economy. Though the public cares far more about job creation than more choices and lower costs, 80% of Americans believe expanding exports is best for jobs, compared with only 17% who think that restricting imports is the way to go.

Republicans are split on trade. Although Mr. Trump's working-class base supports his tough approach, the rest of the party doesn't. After the November election, Republican officeholders will face a decision: Stand up to Mr. Trump or concede and allow themselves to be branded the antitrade party. Pro-trade Republicans should join forces with Democrats, who have come to doubt the wisdom of conceding so much discretion on trade to a president of either party.

The president will face intensifying pressure to show that his **threat-based negotiating style** can produce more than an escalation of protectionism on all sides. Climbing down from his

ill-advised decision to abandon the TPP would relieve some of this pressure, and he could argue that joining forces with 11 countries on both sides of the Pacific would strengthen his hand in dealing with China.

Democrats now represent a strongly pro-trade coalition. Their challenge is to nominate a presidential candidate who can speak for the national majority on this issue while offering bold new policies to help trade's losers. Public policy must help the victims of offshored jobs and depressed wages rebuild their working lives and enjoy a dignified retirement. While Mr. Trump speaks for the past, Democrats should focus on the future.

This orientation doesn't preclude—indeed, it must include—firm opposition to China's policies on forced technology transfer. Democrats should emphasize the incompatibility between state-subsidized Chinese enterprises and the assumptions built into the World Trade Organization, and they should form the widest possible coalition with U.S. allies in Europe, Asia and the Americas to challenge China's abuses. Going it alone on trade won't work.